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Matisse, Great Master of Twentieth-Century Art

When we speak of Renaissance art, we cannot omit Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. When we speak of seventeenth-century painting, we cannot leave Rembrandt van Rijn out. If the topic is twentieth-century art, then Henri Matisse is a name that certainly cannot be ignored.

This year is the centenary of Matisse’s birth.1 France organised a special celebration in Paris. From April to September (1970), a large-scale posthumous exhibition was held. There were 250 works, including 200 paintings and 28 sculptures and paper cuts. 20 of the paintings were borrowed from the USSR. Some were being exhibited in Western Europe for the first time since 1910. Hence, it is not unexpected that this exhibition attracted 800,000 art enthusiasts. It would have been perfect if the organisers had been able to assemble over a hundred more paintings that are in the United States and Denmark. The exhibition venue, the Grand Palais, is an imposing palace in the city centre. Exactly 70 years ago, Matisse — then a young man of 30 — and Raoul Dufy were earning a living by working on renovations within this very building.

Matisse was the forerunner of modern art; he was the leader of the Fauvist movement and the mediator of Eastern and Western art. He established a colourful world and is known as the poet of colour. He created elegant rhythms and is also known as the philosopher of line. He negated the saying that Western painting must rely on light, transparency and technique, and proved that two-dimensional paintings can also exhibit an appealing sense of simplicity and elegance. He extended themes to the entire canvas of the painting so that they no longer congregated on one small focal point. He boldly applied the idea of decoration to a pure painting without losing the essential qualities of the latter. His art appears wild and heroic, but in essence contains a deep and eternal tenderness. Matisse brings an extraordinary perspective to his paintings, configuring daily scenes and objects into an innocent childlike world, enticing all of God’s children to enter paradise. In short, Matisse’s contribution to art is multi-directional, like the roads to the Arc de Triomphe in Paris — a dot as a landmark, the lines from which radiate in all directions.

Matisse and Pablo Picasso were the great artists of this century: their influence is as deep as their artistic achievements are great. Their shadows are reflected in almost every corner of the world, especially in the young artists who, as they make fervent pursuit, form a new spirit. Both artists, apart from painting, were involved in the creation and design of sculptures, ceramics, woodblock prints, carpets, stained glass, stage sets and paper cuts. With so many genres of art and such a wide scope, their influence is deep and widespread.

Nevertheless, their personalities and styles were obviously different. Picasso was more imaginative and possessed the spirit of an anarchist. He often made sudden and extreme changes, sometimes using art as a weapon of battle, sometimes incorporating myths as subject matter to criticise social ills, and at other times painting for personal relaxation. Fundamentally, his paintings did not deviate from already existing forms but his representation techniques were numerous, easily confusing people into thinking that he was working in an abstract style. In short, Picasso’s paintings are anchored in layers which emphasise the materialism of objects. On the contrary, Matisse took a serious view of established and traditional values, but revolutionised them rapidly. He kept the original discipline and spirit as much as possible, but was relentless in developing new looks. From the viewpoint of visual art, his works have been somewhat mistaken as abstract art. His objective in painting was for art to be “an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as for the man of the letters, for example, a smoothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.” Hence, his paintings are bright, cheerful and full of dazzling colours. Matisse once said that he and Picasso are like the north and south poles.

The Fauvist movement led by Matisse and the Cubist movement led by Picasso were the two major forces of modern art in France, and were often regarded as the twin of the Expressionist movement in Germany. In theory, Cubism and Fauvism can be traced to the individual subjective expression of Paul Cézanne, the mastermind of Neo-Impressionism. In terms of technique, Cubism is truly a continuation of Cézanne’s legacy. The Fauvists, however, were nurtured and inspired by Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin. Maurice de Vlaminck once said, “I love van Gogh more madly than I love my father.” It is not difficult to see how wild this group of “beasts” was then.
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Actually, the term Fauvist was not coined according to a theory but by chance. In 1905, Matisse and his fellow artists were exhibiting at the Salon d’Automne for the first time. Their strong colours and spirited brushstrokes created a stir among Parisians. While he was at the exhibition, the art critic Louis Vauxcelles remarked, “les fauves.” Listeners agreed with the speaker’s mockery and hence, this term has become famous in art history.

Fauvism is a movement in art. Naturally, there was a cause for its rise. Essentially, it arose from the increasing decay of modern life and was the consequence of a result-oriented society. At that time, all techniques of expression worshipped delicacy and fineness. The themes selected were repetitive, indecisive and empty. Original and pure sentiment, as well as vitality and life, were all gone. If this persisted, the consequences would have been unimaginable. Hence, there was a need for new life and a fresh spirit in order to return to the original state of freedom and purity. When the Fauvists created art, they used strong and contrasting colours with spontaneous brushstrokes. The lines no longer served the purpose of contouring but turned and moved in order to match the rhythm of movement. In drawing, the accurate representation of objects was no longer an emphasis. Rather, it was configured to play a better role. The arrangement of various shapes was not necessarily based on distance or size. The composition of the entire painting could be reversed or moved. In truth, these theories and practices had been previously voiced and observed by masters like Cézanne, van Gogh and Gauguin. The Fauvist movement merely moved their aspirations forward.

Matisse leapt and climbed the fastest. In his 1908 essay, “Notes of a Painter,” he clearly explained his stand on art and his experiences in painting. Let us look at some selections.

Expression, for me, does not reside in passions glowing in a human face or manifested by violent movement. The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive: the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything has its share. Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter’s command to express his feelings. In a picture every part will be visible and will play its appointed role, whether it be principal or secondary. Everything that is not useful in the picture is, it follows, harmful. A work of art must be harmonious in its entirety: any superfluous detail would replace some other essential detail in the mind of the spectator.

What interests me most is neither still life nor landscape, but the human figure. It is that which best permits me to express my almost religious awe towards life. I do not insist upon all the details of the face, on setting them down one-by-one with anatomical exactitude.

I cannot copy nature in a servile way; I am forced to interpret nature and submit it to the spirit of the picture. From the relationship I have found in all the tones there must result a living harmony of colours, a harmony analogous to that of a musical composition.

A distinction is made between painters who work directly from nature and those who work purely from imagination. Personally, I think neither of these methods must be preferred to the exclusion of the other. Both may be used in turn by the same individual, either because he needs contact with objects in order to receive sensations that will excite his creative faculty, or his sensations are already organised. In either case he will be able to arrive at that totality which constitutes a picture.

As Matisse received tertiary education, his writing and knowledge was well grounded. His noble ideas and truths were well received by the arts community. Here, I include excerpts of his 1948 letter to Henry Clifford [then curator of the Philadelphia Museum of Art], which I have translated and summarised, for study by young artists.

I hope that my exhibition may be worthy of all the work it is making for you; your efforts touch me deeply.

I have always tried to hide my own efforts and wanted my work to have the lightness and joyousness of a springtime which never lets anyone suspect the labours that it has cost. So I am afraid that the young, seeing in my work only the apparent facility and negligence in the drawing, will use this as an excuse for dispensing with certain efforts which I believe necessary.

The few exhibitions that I have had the opportunity of seeing during these last years make me
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The few exhibitions that I have had the opportunity of seeing during these last years make me
fear that young painters may avoid the slow and painful preparation which is necessary for the training of any contemporary painter who claims to construct with colour alone.

This slow and painful work is indispensable. Indeed, if gardens were not dug over at the proper time, they would soon be good for nothing. Do we not first have to clear and then to cultivate the soil in season?

... When an artist has not known how to prepare for his time for flowering, by work which bears little resemblance to the final result, he has a short future before him; or when an artist who has “arrived” no longer feels the necessity of getting back to the soil from time to time, he ends up going around in circles, repeating himself until, by this very repetition, his curiosity is extinguished.

... I believe study by means of drawing to be essential... That is what I want to cry aloud, when I see the work of young people for whom painting is not an adventure, and whose only goal is their impending first exhibition which is to start them on the road to fame.

... I do not claim to teach; I only want my exhibition not to suggest false interpretations to those who have their own way to make.¹

Matisse was eagerly hoping that young artists would strive truthfully. What about himself? Let us read a section of his self-narrative.³

For over fifty years I have not stopped working for an instant. From nine o’clock to noon, first sitting, I have lunch. Then I have a little nap and take up my brushes again at two in the afternoon until the evening. You won’t believe me. On Sundays, I have to tell all sorts of tales to the models. I promise them that it’s the last time I will ever beg them to come and pose on that day. Naturally I pay them double.

... Put yourself in my place: when I was living in the Hôtel de la Méditerranée, the Battle of the Flowers was almost a torture for me. All that music, the floats and the laughter on the Promenade! They [the models] were no longer with me, so I installed them by the window and painted them from behind.

Matisse is commonly acknowledged as a great genius. However, without his passion for his art and hard work, his genius would not have had any substance. Even during his later years when illness hampered his movement, he would lie in bed or sit in his wheelchair and continue to create art using scissors and coloured paper. How can we not admire him!

Matisse achieved in art a unique style that lasted throughout his entire life. While there were many changes throughout his artistic career, on the whole he can be credited for pushing Western art towards a simpler and more absolute path of modernity. He eliminated the mechanical techniques associated with perspective, the rules of colour theory, and the concept of chiaroscuro. As for proportion, the difference between indoor and outdoor representations no longer stood. Matisse had hoped for his works to display vitality and warmth, and for all people to be able to benefit from them. On the whole, his paintings can be classified into four main types.

The first type focuses on the rhythm of strength, be it in the composure of human subjects or the flow of lines. The use of the brush and the coordination of colours produce feelings of an undeniable force seeping out from the back of the painting. The viewer’s spirit cannot help but be stirred. His representative works such as Blue Nude (1907), Self Portrait (1906), The Red Studio (1911), and The Painter and His Model (1917) were mostly created before he was 50.

The second type is primitive and simple. The painting, apart from the main subject, has no accompanying objects. Matisse used simple lines to shape tall postures and faces. The sombre and thick colours, as well as the mature and subtle brushstrokes, are serene and relaxing. Representative works such as Luxe I (1907), Music (1910) and Dance (1910) were acquired by collectors in the Soviet Union. They have been loaned for this exhibition for the people of Western Europe.

The third type is paintings with decorative styles. Matisse used compositional styles of Arabian folk carpets and placed the main subject, accompanying objects and the background as equals on the canvas. There is no focal point, near or far, light or heavy.
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Matisse started to learn sculpting when he was 30. Initially, he imitated the techniques of the nineteenth-century French Romantic sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye. However, it was the great modern artist Auguste Rodin who influenced him most. Rodin earnestly imparted to Matisse his most sincere instruction, and Matisse did not disappoint. He used rugged external form as longitude and inner determination as latitude to produce many of this century's most representative works. Although there are only 70 pieces from Matisse's entire life, their artistic value is no less than that of his oil paintings. Matisse's sculptures commonly sport the same themes and styles as his sketches and oil paintings without subtracting from the uniqueness of the sculpture. Matisse often used his works as experiments for change or reformation to achieve purification and excellence of artistic form. Sometimes, a sculpture could be re-sculpted more than ten times and take more than ten summers to complete. It may be seen how serious and meticulous Matisse was. At the same time, this explains the reason for his success. If this happened to his three-dimensional works, what more may be said of his two-dimensional art?

The Basilica of the Sacred Heart, The Red Studio, Pink Nude and The Rumanian Blouse (1940), for example, were repainted and altered until he was satisfied.

In 1932, Matisse accepted the invitation of the Barnes Foundation Museum in the United States to paint murals for its exhibition hall. Dance was the subject matter. He took an entire year to complete it. Just when the mural was about to be installed, Matisse discovered that the earlier measurements were different from the actual ones. Hence, he had to start anew. This time, despite the challenging theme, Matisse did not take the easy way out by copying from the original draft. Rather, he took this as if he were receiving a new commission — all the dance movements, structures and colours were distinctly different from the earlier mural. This was another kind of attitude he had towards art. Matisse once said that he would not copy nature. Now, even his own works were on his list of things which could not be copied.
However, the relationship between each object is compact because the entire painting is a focal point. Thus, every part of the painting is equally important. The artist emits energy from the centre to the surroundings. The viewer receives warmth from the fringe to the core. The colours are at their most brilliant, but are not flashy. Many of Matisse’s colours, such as purple, pink and green, are colours that others would not dare to use. Through Matisse’s effective combination, they seem exceptionally harmonious and rhythmic. Or take for example the colour black, which, although is synonymous with bleakness, appears cheerful and genial when it is used in Matisse’s paintings. This is the exemplification of Matisse’s art at its apex. It brings to people a sense of sophistication, alluring care, and love. At the same time, it signals that humankind has a bright future. Outstanding works such as Odalisque with Raised Arms (1923), Nude, Spanish Carpet (1919), Pink Nude (1935) and The Egyptian Curtain (1948) were mostly produced when he was between 50 and 80.

The fourth type is paper cut-out collages. Matisse, from when he was 80 till his death at 85, was immobilised by illness. He switched to simple paper cuts to satisfy his desire for creating art. All the papers were selected according to the colours he liked. They were painted in gouache. From the perspective of technique, the entire cut-out represents a contour and consists of a colour. It can be considered more straightforward than oil painting and can create a more abstract picture. However, for abstract art, one must be gifted and be able to create unique compositions. In this aspect, Matisse had not reached the right moment. It is partially due to constraints in the materials used that they appear ostentatious and insubstantial. Thus, Matisse’s coloured paper cut-outs pale in comparison to his oil paintings. Yet, the series of blue female nudes features lifelike and wonderful poses, and is worthy of appreciation.

Although artists in the past focused heavily on sketching, they considered it only as a tool in foundational training or a draft for an oil painting. Sketching, in Matisse’s hands, became an independent form of art with eternal value. His early sketches were firm and real, and could stand alongside those of past masters like Ingres. In fact, the gracefulness displayed in his sketches surpass that depicted by the past masters. His later sketches are natural, unrestrained and appealing, and on par with his oil paintings. The lines that race on the white canvas immediately flesh out complex images that are filled with real and rich emotions. Rationality and spirituality are both evident, and the sketches have become unprecedented artistic wonders.

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France’s Watteau, Fragonard, Boucher, Poussin, Chardin and Champaigne were his favourites. These artists shared a commonality: they focused on the charms of beauty, rich rhythm, and a happy atmosphere. They are, very apparently, the source of inspiration for Matisse’s subsequent iconic creations.

At the time when Fauvism just started, Derain, Braque, Rouault, Manguin and Friesz were all under 30. They were young, strong, bold and energetic, having been nurtured under the cheerful outlook of Gustave Moreau, their teacher. Moreau had wanted each of them to display his own personality. They were influenced by the radicals: Cézanne, van Gogh and Gauguin. Owing to many factors, the Fauvist movement developed, with Matisse as its leader. Their bravery was undeniable. In truth, Fauvism did not have a complete theory that could be followed. Braque subsequently left the group to become a key member of Cubism, and Derain gradually receded from active participation. Thus, it is only natural that there is a significant artistic gap between Matisse’s early and later works.

From the viewpoint of an Oriental, the works by Matisse may not seem unusual. This is because we do not emphasise light and perspective. We have always relied on lines to draw images and do not care about the likeness or shape of the object. We treasure artistic concepts that are ancient and distant, pure and elegant. Matisse had been brought up in a Western culture and trained in traditional European art. That he could break free from this, come into contact with other excellent cultures, absorb their goodness and create a new form of art, is indeed a sign of his greatness.

Les Fauves is French for “the wild beasts.”

This excerpt is taken from Jack D. Flam, “Notes of a Painter, 1908,” in Matisse on Art (UK: Phaidon Press Limited, 1973), 37-39. The intention has been to stay as faithful as possible to the original text by Matisse.

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Liu Kang was in fact quoting from the French author Francis Carco’s conversation with Matisse. This excerpt is taken from Jack D. Flam, “Carco: Conversation with Matisse, 1941,” in Matisse on Art (UK: Phaidon Press Limited, 1973), 85. The intention has been to stay as faithful as possible to the original text by Matisse.
Matisse was very talented. Apart from painting and sculpting, he designed stage backdrops, costumes, carpets, and containers, producing for ballet troupes and upmarket businesses. He scattered the seeds of art far and wide among the masses. He produced illustrations for books and poems. The poems recited by the words and the songs sung by the lines complemented one another beautifully. Matisse elevated the value of the publications and also attracted the attention of readers.

Towards the end of his life, beginning from when he was 79, Matisse spent all his energy on redesigning a church in Vence — its building, murals, glass windows, podium, priests’ robes and the Stations of the Cross. He worked almost single-handedly. His greatest success came in his managing of the church's ambience. He took the church's cold, dark and wintry interior and turned it into a bright and cheerful spring. The stained glass, patterned with green leaves, directed light into the building, light that reflected off the ceramic tiles which had human figures thickly outlined on them. The hall was filled with happiness, and the woes of the past were swept away. This was a major instance of a revolution in art being of benefit to religion.

Matisse was born in Le Cateau-Cambresis in 1869. A city in the north of France, this place is not far from the border with Belgium. It is rather isolated and its weather, cold. It is worlds apart from Matisse’s place of residence in the south of France during his middle age, which is cheerful and warm. Nice, Antibes, St Tropez and Cannes, which are along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, are part of the famous “coast of the azure blue.” Côte d'Azur has warm winters, cool summers and beautiful scenery. Members of royalty and the rich visit it to escape cold winters and hot summers. Residing there, Matisse naturally produced works that are happy. Besides, his happy marriage and financial well-being also helped to develop his carefree and optimistic style. The places he toured, such as Italy, Switzerland, Spain, North Africa and Algeria, Morocco, and the paradise on earth — Tahiti in the Pacific Ocean — were places of exceptional beauty. It would have been difficult for these locations not to leave indelible marks in his heart.

Matisse wanted to study the essence of traditional arts to nurture his potential. When he was 20, he went to the Louvre to copy the works of past masters. Italy’s Raphael, France’s Watteau, Fragonard, Boucher, Poussin, Chardin and Champaigne were his favourites. These artists shared a commonality: they focused on the charms of beauty, rich rhythm, and a happy atmosphere. They are, very apparently, the source of inspiration for Matisse’s subsequent iconic creations.

At the time when Fauvism just started, Derain, Braque, Rouault, Manguin and Friesz were all under 30. They were young, strong, bold and energetic, having been nurtured under the cheerful outlook of Gustave Moreau, their teacher. Moreau had wanted each of them to display his own personality. They were influenced by the radicals: Cézanne, van Gogh and Gauguin. Owing to many factors, the Fauvist movement developed, with Matisse as its leader. Their bravery was undeniable. In truth, Fauvism did not have a complete theory that could be followed. Braque subsequently left the group to become a key member of Cubism, and Derain gradually receded from active participation. Thus, it is only natural that there is a significant artistic gap between Matisse’s early and later works.

From the viewpoint of an Oriental, the works by Matisse may not seem unusual. This is because we do not emphasise light and perspective. We have always relied on lines to draw images and do not care about the likeness or shape of the object. We treasure artistic concepts that are ancient and distant, pure and elegant. Matisse had been brought up in a Western culture and trained in traditional European art. That he could break free from this, come into contact with other excellent cultures, absorb their goodness and create a new form of art, is indeed a sign of his greatness.