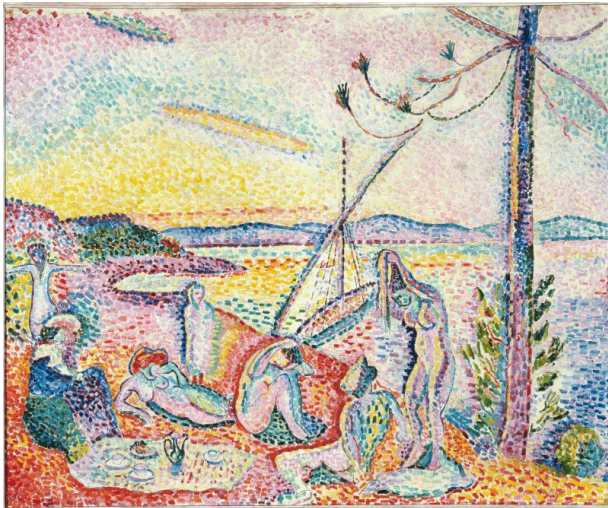


Matisse and the Fauves

Background Notes

Dr Jacqueline Cockburn — 23 April, 2025



(1) Henri Matisse, *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*, 1904. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

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Henri Matisse was born in Northern France, the son of a wealthy grain merchant. He went to Paris to study Law and started painting when his mother brought home some art supplies to help him convalesce after an attack of appendicitis. He started to paint more seriously, despite opposition from his father, in 1889 aged 20. In 1891, where this lecture will begin, Matisse studied under Bouguereau at the Académie Julien and then under Gustave Moreau at the prestigious Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts. By 1896 he had sold two works of art to the French State. He and his wife Amélie Noellie Parayre brought up his illegitimate daughter Marguerite and two further children. By 1898 he had met Albert Marquet and André Derain who would later form part of the group called the Fauves. He owned works by Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin and was greatly inspired by Seurat and Signac. No doubt the retrospectives of all these painters at the turn of the century meant they were popular and could be bought at a reasonable cost at the dealerships of Ambroise Vollard and others. This lecture will begin with a number of works which show his early techniques and his concentration of colours and their relationship to form. Take a simple coffee pot in the morning sunshine or late at night and you can see that it will change colour depending not only on its surroundings but also on the mood of the painter as he works to render texture and capture light.

When Matisse met Maurice de Vlaminck in 1900, through André Derain, he no doubt saw a kindred spirit and they would all discuss the role of colour in painting and the importance of the freedom to choose colours which expressed their feelings. Matisse spent time with Signac in his home in Saint Tropez in 1904, keen on the Divisionist principles of colour, and he produced his stunning *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* (1) soon after the trip.

This work, which references the poem by Baudelaire (see page 8), will change the course of art and showcase new and modern ways of observing the world. A small group of like-minded artists made

the groundbreaking decision to show their work at the Autumn Salon of 1905 in Room 7 at the Grand Palais. An exhibition of Ingres' work was in the next room. The opening on October 15th led to an outcry amongst the critics who saw the artists as 'wild beasts' - *Les Fauves*, an epithet the artists did not seem to mind, for their explosive colours, laid thickly and unevenly onto the canvases gave them a mutual purpose, confidence and sharing of ideas for a few subsequent years. Along with artists such as Raoul Dufy, Charles Camoin and Georges Braque, and cheered on by the dealer Ambroise Vollard, Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck treated colours like sticks of dynamite and revelled in what they saw as a modern outlook on life. Influenced by Cézanne, Sérusier, Seurat and Signac amongst others, they were accused of flinging a pot of paint at the public. Articles appeared in local newspapers decrying their work and laughing critically at what they saw as the antithesis of art. Colour was daubed onto the canvas in thick 'splotches'; in fact, they questioned whether the artists were simply playing with colour as a child plays with his first paintbox. Perhaps it was difficult for a Parisian audience to understand the freedom these artists felt as they used paint inventively on their canvases, often leaving the canvas bare, insisting that anything that is unnecessary in painting is detrimental to the spirit of their enterprise.

What the French called the '*culte de la vie*' (cult of life) meant freedom, not just in terms of brushstrokes which were expressive and visible, but colours which were autonomous. A tree does not have to be green and brown. Light will fall on it at sunset and cast blue shadows or a red glow. What matters most is the perception of the painter and the impact on the viewer. A work of art must evoke an emotion in the viewer and awaken his senses. Derain understood this in his *L'Age D'Or* of 1906 (2).

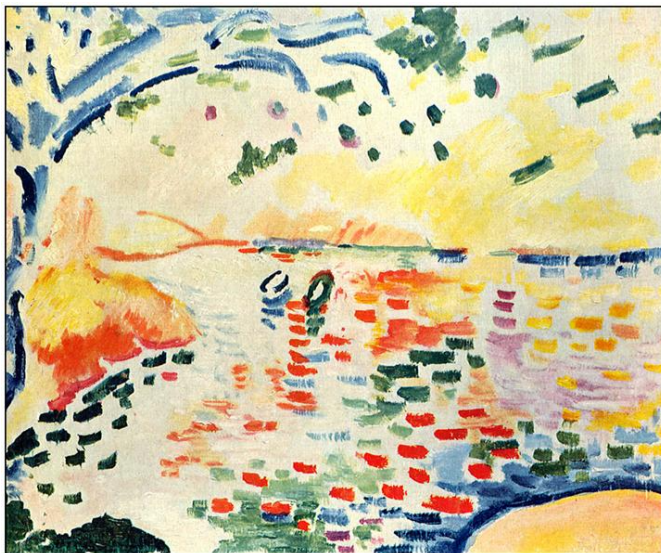


(2) André Derain, *L'Age d'Or*, 1906. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art

The title evokes Ingres' *Golden Age* of 1862, but his figures, dancing wildly across the canvas seem to belong to another world; a 'primitive' world. Many of these artists were collecting sculptures, reliquaries, masks and so forth from African countries which were being plundered by a greedy art market. These beautiful objects seemed synonymous with the very freedom they sought. At this point, ethnographical discussions had not fully understood the purpose of the objects nor the artists who made them. Matisse bought a few and turned to sculpture to explore the three-dimensionality of figures, sometimes copying but at other times organising his brain and sensations, or so he wrote. We are fortunate that he wrote his *Notes of a Painter* in 1908, and we can understand his aims and intentions through reading this piece.

The death of Cézanne at the end of 1906, and further retrospectives, led our happy band to further experimentation. It is

difficult to assess whether they lost some of their spontaneity in 1907 in their search to emulate their master and pay homage to his greatness. We see a flattening of form and a dimming of colour, particularly in the work of Derain who will follow ultimately in Braque's footsteps **(3)** and turn to Cubism with Picasso. Despite some success due to the dealer Vollard who bought up the entire studios of Vlaminck and Derain and sent the artists to London where they would blossom further and discover the work of Monet, the group lost momentum in 1907 and developed their work in different ways. Perhaps competition with Picasso also had an impact on their work.



(3) Georges Braque, *The Bay at La Ciotat*, 1907. Centre Pompidou, Paris

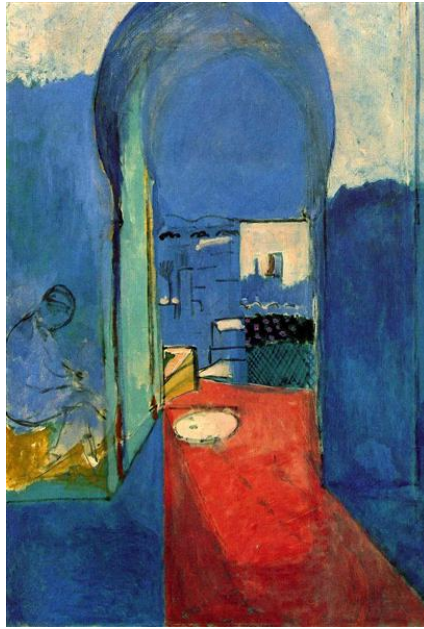
Matisse would go on to develop his colours through his various travels to Padua, Munich, Cordoba and Tangier where this lecture will end. His main dealer was the Russian, Sergei Shchukin, who had

bought works by the Impressionists and later bought works to decorate his palatial home in Moscow. He owned a number of works by Derain and Marquet, but it was particularly Matisse who interested him. Many consider the two works by Matisse commissioned by Shchukin to be some of his greatest works and a turning point in his career. *The Dance*, 1909 **(4)** particularly shows a change of style and focus as five figures perform a dance, gripping onto one another to form a circle. *Music*, 1910 hung on the staircase in Shchukin's mansion.



(4) Henri Matisse, *The Dance*, 1909. The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Matisse's trips to Tangier with Marquet and Camoin in 1912 and 1913 as war loomed, express a joyful look at a city as the rains cease and the sun overwhelms the white rooftops. His painting of the Kasbah **(5)** shows him laying on large areas of blue and red to stunning effect and rendering a North African light with contrasts of shade and light.



(5) Henri Matisse, *Entrance to the Kasbah*, 1912. Hermitage, St Petersburg

Matisse would stay in contact with many of his dynamic and brave pioneers of art over the years until his death in 1954. He was ever inventive, but this period as a Fauve remains one of the most remarkable of his long career.

Suggested Reading

Flam, J. *Matisse on Art*. (University of California Press ,1995)

Johnston, Sona K., Johnston, William R. *The Triumph of French Painting: Ingres to Matisse*. (Royal Academy of Arts,London, 2000)

Spurling, H. *Matisse the Master*. (Penguin Books, 2005)

Whitfield, S. *Fauvism*. (World of Art, 1991)

Charles Baudelaire : L'invitation au voyage

Mon enfant, ma soeur,
Songe à la douceur
D'aller là-bas vivre ensemble!
Aimer à loisir,
Aimer et mourir
Au pays qui te ressemble!
Les soleils mouillés
De ces ciels brouillés
Pour mon esprit ont les
charmes
Si mystérieux
De tes traîtres yeux,
Brillant à travers leurs larmes.

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et
beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté.

Vois sur ces canaux
Dormir ces vaisseaux
Dont l'humeur est vagabonde;
C'est pour assouvir
Ton moindre désir
Qu'ils viennent du bout du
monde.
— Les soleils couchants
Revêtent les champs,
Les canaux, la ville entière,
D'hyacinthe et d'or;
Le monde s'endort
Dans une chaude lumière.

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et
beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté.

My child, my sister,
Think of the rapture
Of living together there!
Of loving at will,
Of loving till death,
In the land that is like you!
The misty sunlight
Of those cloudy skies
Has for my spirit the charms,
So mysterious,
Of your treacherous eyes,
Shining brightly through their
tears.

There all is order and beauty,
Luxury, peace, and pleasure.

See on the canals
Those vessels sleeping.
Their mood is adventurous;
It's to satisfy
Your slightest desire
That they come from the ends of
the earth.

— The setting suns
Adorn the fields,
The canals, the whole city,
With hyacinth and gold;
The world falls asleep
In a warm glow of light.

There all is order and beauty,
Luxury, peace, and pleasure.

— William Aggeler, *The Flowers
of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy
Library Guild, 1954)

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