

## The Sincerity in Matisse's Art

In this semester's *Visual Arts: Observing and Reading* course, I was most captivated by Professor Tao's introduction to Henri Matisse and his connection to Fauvism. After class, I delved deeper into Matisse's life and artistic journey. Throughout his life, he struggled with illness multiple times. One of the most transformative experiences came during his early years when he was hospitalized for a long period. It was then, at the age of 20, that he discovered his passion for art after watching a young fellow patient, Léon Bouffier, painting landscapes beside him. This chance encounter led him to try copying those paintings, and he produced his very first work.

Before this, Matisse had studied law and was already working at a firm in Saint-Quentin. But the encounter sparked a deep desire in him to pursue art. He first enrolled at the Académie Julian in 1891, where William Bouguereau taught, and later transferred to study under Gustave Moreau at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. This period laid a solid foundation for his future artistic development—he continuously refined his techniques, frequently copying works at the Louvre, sketching on the streets, and absorbing different kinds of light and color through his travels.

Even those unfamiliar with art history likely have an impression of “Fauvism” when hearing the name Matisse. This movement, led by a group of young artists including Matisse, was named “Les Fauves” (the wild beasts) by critic Louis Vauxcelles after their bold colors and expressive style shocked audiences at the 1905 Paris Autumn Salon.

Fauvist painting rejected passive imitation of nature, abandoning traditional perspective and light-shadow techniques. Instead, it expressed strong emotion using simple lines and flat color blocks. These works disrupted the conservative norms of painting and opened a new chapter in art history. However, although Matisse is often linked to Fauvism, it was just a brief stage in his career, one marked by unrestrained expression. In fact, the wildness suggested by “Fauvism” contrasts sharply with Matisse's own modest and refined character. Even at the height of Fauvism, he never abandoned compositional order, demonstrating both sensitivity and rationality in his work.

For example, his painting *Marguerite Wearing a Fur Hat* conveys a delicate sense of calmness through rational lines. Matisse's signature use of color and line—two elements he explored from the beginning of his career in both oil painting and drawing—also stood out to me. He once compared color to music, seeking flowing harmony and bright symphonies from the collision of tones: “Each color plays a role, expressing a tone, like notes in a chord.” His use of color was never random—it came from deep thought, experimentation, and imagination, reflecting rich emotions. In *Two Girls, One in Yellow Dress and the Other in Tartan Skirt*, vibrant color blocks of yellow and red express the fullness of his inner world.

As for line work, Matisse's simplicity in drawing stemmed from careful thinking—clean lines and concise forms were distilled from complexity. The fewer the materials used, the more

precise the expression needed to be. Whether through color or line, he pursued ultimate expression throughout his life. In *Large Head of Katia*, the minimalist lines perfectly capture the essence of the subject.

No discussion of Matisse is complete without mentioning his paper cut-outs. In 1930, already in his sixties, Matisse was drawn to Paul Gauguin's Tahiti and traveled there alone. Six years later, he reconstructed the experience in his "Tahiti Window" series, and ten years after that, marine life, birds, and stars danced in his earliest cut-outs, *Oceania: The Sea* and *Oceania: The Sky*. I believe this trip planted the seed for one of Matisse's greatest artistic revolutions: the invention of cut-outs.

Some suggest he turned to this medium out of physical limitation after the age of 72. However, the rigor with which he approached the cutting, composing, and finalizing process proves otherwise. He was not forced to use cut-outs due to illness; rather, after conquering painting, he consciously launched a new exploration—one that required tremendous physical and mental energy. For Matisse, cut-outs combined the essence of painting, sculpture, and drawing: "With cut-outs, I can paint with color directly. It simplifies the process. I don't need to draw and then color—I use color directly, which is more precise and less redundant." His work *The Clown*, for example, vividly comes to life using nothing but these simple shapes.

During the 1940s, Matisse immersed himself in cut-outs, expanding their expressive power and adapting them to murals, fabrics, stained glass, books, and more. These works are now viewed as another artistic revolution. They expanded painting's possibilities and inspired movements like abstract and minimalist art. My personal favorite is *The Codomas Brothers*, where he mirrors jazz improvisation in his scissor work. As he put it: "Artists should respond to their works as they unfold." The cut-outs embody Matisse's elegant spontaneity and lively mind.

Above all, the work I love most is the Vence Chapel. Though not religious, Matisse approached art with the devotion of a believer. He began designing the chapel in 1948, in his late seventies, and regarded the project as the culmination of his life's artistic quest. Over four years, he designed everything from architecture to murals, stained glass windows, clerical garments, and religious objects. On the north and east white-tiled walls, he drew with black lines, while the other two sides displayed colorful stained glass windows using only yellow, blue, and green. Their patterns were drawn from Mediterranean plants and his memories of Tahiti.

To Matisse, the Vence Chapel was not a religious site, but an immersive art experience: "Visitors will feel spiritual relief. Even non-believers will sense emotional comfort and inner peace here." After watching a video tour of the chapel online, I was deeply touched by the sincerity it exuded. It spoke of a man fully devoted to creation—a soul who loved art with his whole being. This final masterpiece, born from the last moments of his life, left a deep impression on me. It strengthened my determination to follow his footsteps and continue creating art.

This semester in Professor Tao's class has been tremendously rewarding. As someone who once knew little about art, I've experienced the profound shock that creative expression can bring. More importantly, I've discovered a new path—one that truly speaks to the heart. I'm grateful

for the guidance and encouragement, and I hope to carry Matisse's sincerity with me on my own artistic journey.