Henri Matisse

a biography

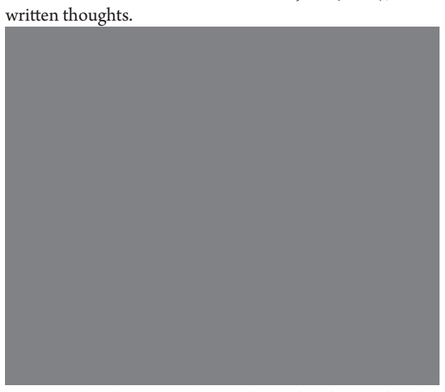
Henri Matisse, Paris, May 13, 1913. Photo: Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882–1966), The New York Public Library, Rare Book Division, 483434

Henri-Emile-Benoît Matisse was born in a small town in northern France on December 31, 1869. His mother introduced him to painting at age 21 by bringing art supplies to his bedside while he recovered from appendicitis. He promptly gave up pursuing a law career and moved to Paris to study traditional nineteenth-century academic painting. He enrolled at the Académie Julian as a student of artist William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), but struggled under the conservative teacher. Matisse continued his studies with Gustave Moreau (1826–1898) in 1892, a Symbolist painter at the École des Beaux-Arts. When Matisse first began exhibiting his work in 1895 it was in the dry, academic style that reflected his early training. He quickly discovered the more dynamic Parisian art scene, however, and began to experiment with new kinds of light, brushwork, and composition. His early work in this mode shows the influence of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) and Édouard Manet (1832–1883).

In 1904, while visiting artist Paul Signac (1863–1935) in Provence, Matisse was inspired by the light of southern France and switched to a brighter palette. He also discovered Pointillism, a painting technique using many small dots in complementary colors. Although he did not directly apply the method to his own work, he was fascinated by the Pointillists' ability to create a harmonious visual tone through color. Matisse subsequently developed "color structure," or the concept of using large, flat areas of color to establish mood and decorative effect. Through the synthesis of these ideas about color, Matisse's own artistic character emerged in masterpieces such as *Luxe, calme, et volupté (Luxury, Calm and Pleasure, 1904)*. In 1905, the artist exhibited several canvases at the Salon d'Automne, where art critic Louis Vauxcelles labeled Matisse and his compatriots les fauves, or "wild beasts," because he disapproved of the uninhibited color, furious brushstrokes, and abstraction characteristic of their works. Fauvism, with Matisse as its leader, thus opened the new millennium and marked a turning point in modern art away from Impressionism.

Though his goal of discovering "the essential character of things" and producing an art of "balance, purity, and serenity" remained the same throughout his life, Matisse's career can be divided into several periods of stylistic shift. From about 1908 to 1913, he focused on decorative art, inspired by trips to North Africa to explore ornamental arabesques and flat patterns of color. From roughly 1913 to 1917 he experimented with and reacted against Cubism, the leading avant-garde movement in France at the time. During his early stay in Nice, France, from about 1917 to 1930, his subjects largely focused on the female figure and his works were infused with bright colors, southern light, and decorative patterns.

In 1930, Matisse traveled to the United States and received a mural commission from Dr. Albert Barnes, the art-collector who established the Barnes Foundation in Pennsylvania. Destined for the main hall of the Foundation and installed in 1933, Matisse's masterpiece *The Dance II* is renowned for its simplicity, flatness, and use of color. In preparation for the mural, he began using the technique of composing with cut-out pieces of colored paper, which soon became his preferred exploratory method. Although wheelchair-bound in 1941 from intestinal cancer treatment, Matisse continued to create artworks using lushly-colored cut-outs, which are among his most influential. He continued to focus on graphic arts and illustration, the efforts of which culminated in his book *Jazz* (1947), a collection of cut-paper collages accompanied by his written thoughts.



Henri Matisse (French, 1869–1954), *Luxe, Calme et Volupté (Luxury, Calm and Pleasure),* 1904, oil on canvas, 37 x 46 in., Musée d'Orsay, DO 1985 1

In 1951, Matisse completed a commission for the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France, which included the creation of stained-glass windows, murals, and even clerical vestments. Unable to paint due to age and illness, Matisse worked solely with cut-outs during his final years. The artist directed his assistant to pin pieces on the walls of his room as studies for murals as well as for finished works, including his collage *The Snail* of 1953. Matisse's work with cut-outs, or "painting with scissors," unified his skills as a master colorist and a master draftsman.

The artist died of a heart attack at the age of 84 on November 3, 1954, and is remembered for fundamentally altering the course of modern art.

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Henri Matisse
French, 1869–1954
Head of a Woman
1917
oil on wood panel, 15 1/2 x 12 1/2 in.
Partial gift of the Gilbert C. Swanson Foundation and museum purchase, 1989.9

Henri Matisse based his art upon observation of his surroundings, which he then modified to express his inner vision. Although he retained recognizable subject matter, he accentuated the two-dimensionality of his designs by emphasizing the flatness of his working surface. This mode of representation is evident in the artist's *Head of a Woman* of 1917. Matisse likely painted the canvas while in Paris during a crucial time period during the artist's career.

Anguished by the events of World War I, Matisse split his time between studios in Paris and Nice. While in Nice, the artist focused on the effects of light and concentrated on still lifes, landscapes, and the female form. From 1916 to 1917, he created many portraits of women in order to explore their unique facial features. He often began these studies with a relatively naturalistic depiction of his subject, but then progressed towards abstraction. *Head of a Woman* demonstrates his skillful ability to balance between a non-realistic appearance and a representational one. Matisse focused on the linear outlines of the head and facial features, using bold swaths of saturated color to emphasize areas of shadow as well as the sitter's brown hair, fair complexion, and dark eyes. While the green background contrasts with the figure's countenance, the orange of the chair blends with the light pink tones of her shirt. The work's expressive style resembles other portraits done during his early stay in Nice, including those of his daughter Marguerite and of his Italian model Laurette.

While many artists' portraits depict identifiable sitters, this is not the case with *Head of a Woman*. Although the figure remains unknown, she can be considered an individual rather than a head study or type. The figure's direct gaze is thoughtful, austere, and unyielding, and presents the viewer with a psychologically powerful representation of her disposition. Overall, *Head of a Woman* exemplifies Matisse's excellent draftsmanship in addition to his mastery of color as a tool to incite feeling in the viewer.

Discussion Questions

Is Henri Matisse's *Head of a Woman* a portrait? Why or why not?

❍

How would you describe Fauvism?

❍

Why were Matisse and Pablo Picasso rivals yet good friends?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's academic standards and related lesson plans.

Timeline

1869 Henri Matisse is born on December 31 in Le Cateau, France

1870

1880

1887–89 Studies for law degree in Paris

1890

1891 Ends law career pursuits; begins to study art in Paris

1894 Marguerite, Matisse's daughter (with Caroline Joblau) and his most frequent model is born

1896 Exhibits at Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts; accepted into the Salon society

1900

1904 Visits Saint-Tropez in Southern France; discovers its brighter colors and light

1905 Critic Louis Vauxcelles labels Matisse and his colleagues *les fauves,* naming the Fauvist movement

1906 Meets Pablo Picasso

1910

1908 Publishes *Notes of a Painter*

1908–1913 Trips to Spain and Morocco inspires focus on decorative art

1913–1917 Experiments with and responds to Cubism

1920

1917–1930 Focuses on the female figure and odalisques in his "early Nice period"

1929 Travels to America; sits on the jury of the 29th Carnegie International exhibition

1930

1933 Installs mural *The Dance II* at the estate of art collector Dr. Albert Barnes (now Barnes Foundation), Philadelphia

mid-1930s Creates series of pen-and-ink drawings featuring the artist and his model

1940

1941 Resorts more to paper cut-outs following serious operation and long convalescence

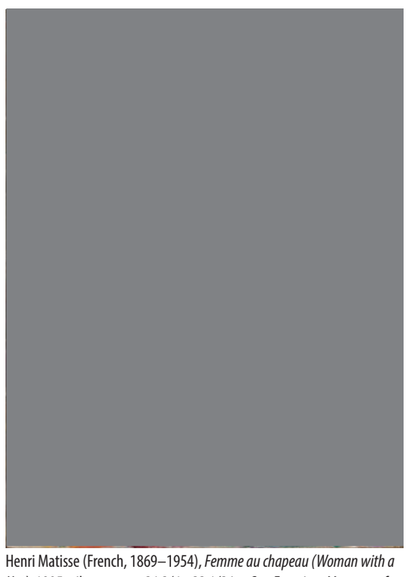
1947 Publishes *Jazz* which features cut-out compositions

1950

1948–51 Designs the decorative scheme for Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France

1954 Dies on November 3 in Nice, France

Fauvism



Henri Matisse (French, 1869–1954), *Femme au chapeau (Woman with a Hat)*, 1905, oil on canvas, 31 3/4 x 23 1/2 in., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, bequest of Elise S. Haas, 91.161

In 1905, Matisse summered with André Derain (1880–1954), who was a fellow pupil of Gustave Moreau (1826–1898), in the small port of Collioure in southern France. The two men introduced unrealistic color and wild brushstrokes into their painting, using vibrant colors directly from the paint tube. Their artworks and those of their colleagues were labelled "Fauvist" by art critic Louis Vauxcelles that fall. While viewing works like *Matisse's Woman with a Hat* at the Salon d'Automne, Vauxcelles commented that the Renaissance-style sculpture sharing the exhibition room was "un Donatello parmi les fauves," or "a Donatello among the wild beasts." Despite this initial hostility, many of the Fauves later enjoyed commercial success.

Fauvism was the first of the avant-garde movements to break with Impressionism and to flourish in France in the early twentieth century. The style was championed by a loose group of artists who shared a similar approach to nature that departed from more traditional methods of perception and artistic practices. The movement emphasized spontaneous, subjective responses to the world expressed with bold brushstrokes and vibrant colors. The Fauvists successfully separated color from its representational purpose and allowed it to exist on the canvas as an independent element. Instead of representing the natural world, they used color to project a certain mood and to establish structure and compositional balance within the artwork. Their simplified forms and saturated colors drew attention to the inherent flatness of the canvas, and they strove for the immediate impression of their work to be visually strong and unified. Above all, these artists valued individual expression. The artists' personal, direct experience of their subjects, their emotional responses to nature, and their intuition were more significant than theory or naturalistic representation.

Matisse is considered the founding artist of the Fauvist movement and arrived at the style after experimenting with the Post-Impressionist styles of Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890), Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), and Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), as well as the Pointillist work of Georges Seurat (1859–1901) and Paul Signac (1863–1935). Other notable Fauves include Maurice de Vlaminck (1876–1958), Kees van Dongen (1877–1968), and Georges Braque (1882–1963). For most, Fauvism was a transitional, learning phase. Braque went on to co-found Cubism. Derain, after a brief Cubist phase, painted widely in a Neoclassical manner. Arguably, Matisse alone continued along the path Fauvism had begun for him, as he continued to work with color, emotion, and his subjective experience of the world around him throughout his career.

Matisse and Picasso: Rivals as Friends

Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) are considered two of the most influential artists of the twentieth century and although the artists came to represent the opposing forces of modern art, their art is intertwined due to a shared history and artistic relationship that was more in dialogue than in opposition. They were initially fierce rivals, but developed both a creative and personal relationship that was closer than is often recognized.

The artists were famously introduced by American Gertrude Stein in 1906, although the careers of both men were linked as early as 1902 by a show at the gallery of Berthe Weill, a famous female avant-garde art dealer. A year after their meeting, the artists exchanged paintings, and in 1910, they were featured in the article "The Wild Men of Paris" in *The Architectural Record*. The two also began to meet and visit each other's studios, a practice that continued with relative regularity. As Picasso began to assume the status of a leader among avant-garde artists, their works were more frequently compared.

Matisse was the elder of the pair and already well-known from his Fauvist works. Although Matisse initially disliked Cubism, he spent his truly experimental years of 1913 to 1917 reacting to it and Picasso's influence, as seen in his *Portrait of Madame Matisse*. Whereas Matisse's work is often characterized by color, decorativeness, flatness, perception, and unity, Picasso's Cubist work is known for its austerity, monochrome palette, angular form, and fragmentation. These perceived stylistic oppositions lead to perceived ideological ones as well, where Matisse is seen as detached and artificial, while Picasso seems more critically engaged and genuine in his artistic approach.

In 1918 Matisse and Picasso jointly exhibited their work for the first time, allowing viewers to compare their unique modes of visual representation. The author of the exhibition's catalogue described Matisse as an instinctual artist pursuing simplicity and finding intense sumptuousness, while Picasso was a lyrical painter in profound communion with the art of the past, ever-changing, and constantly crossing uncharted territory. He thought Matisse's work burst with light, while behind Picasso's lay mysterious darkness. There was much more to their artistic relationship, however, with the two often looking to each other's works for inspiration. Picasso's viewing of Matisse's Fauvist masterpiece *Le bonheur de vivre (The Joy of Life)* at the Salon des Indépendants in 1906 reverberated in his imagination through the rest of his life. He responded to the work with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (The Young Ladies of Avignon),* which is regarded as one of the most pivotal paintings in modern art.

The artists' reciprocal relationship was summed up by Picasso in his old age. He said, "You have got to be able to picture side by side everything Matisse and I were doing at that time. No one has ever looked at Matisse's painting more carefully than I; and no one has looked at mine more carefully than he." Although their work diverges from one another's in various ways, from the start, Matisse and Picasso seem to have recognized that each was the only rival of the other. Both are rumored to have said: "We must talk to each other as much as we can. When one of us dies, there will be some things that the other will never be able to talk of with anyone else."

Henri Matisse (French, 1869–1954), *Portrait of the Artist's Wife.* Oil on canvas. 146x97.7 cm. France. 1913. Inv. no. GE-9156. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Vladimir Terebenin.

Matisse's Sculptures

Although best known for his paintings, drawings, and works with paper, Matisse was also an accomplished sculptor. In 1899, at a time when his paintings showed talent but not much direction, he began attending classes in sculpture and clay modeling. From then on, he pursued the medium both as an independent expressive form and a method to solve pictorial problems. He often downplayed his skills as a sculptor, however, and his total output is dwarfed by his oeuvre of drawings and paintings.

In contrast to the typically more elegant composition of his paintings, Matisse's sculptures are often about stress and struggle. His interest in non-European cultures and art is also evident, as his figures often undergo a dramatic simplification, moving away from naturalism towards a more primal sense of the human body, as he observed in African sculpture.

Although he used the medium throughout his life (often working on pieces for years) most of Matisse's sculptures were produced between 1900 and 1910. His particular interest in relief sculpture can be seen in some of his most famous works, including his series of *Back* reliefs (1903–31). He recognized that relief sculpture was a compromise between sculpture and painting, between complete three-dimensionality and the unavoidably flat representation of figures on canvas. Relief sculpture allowed him to explore the full human form and to clarify his sense of how to represent it two-dimensionally.

Henri Matisse (French, 1869–1954), *The Back (II),* Issy-les-Moulineaux, 1911 (?) - early March or April 1913, bronze, 74 1/4 x 47 5/8 x 6 in., The Museum of Modern Art, Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund, 240.1956

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HENRI MATISSE
French, 1869–1954

HEAD OF A WOMAN
1917, oil on wood panel, 15 1/2 x 12 1/2 in.