

From Three-Dimension to Two-Dimension: The Formation of Henri Matisse's Painting Style

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Abstract: Through his life as a pupil in his early years and the transformation into a Fauve (wild beast), Henri Matisse learnt that he must forgo the traditional techniques of the masters and understand art in his own way. He first replaced the color scheme in his paintings with purer colors and clearer outlines of color ranges; in his later life, he devoted himself to two-dimensional coloring and finally to two-dimensional paper cut-outs. Therewith, a unique style brought forth by Henri Matisse took shape, ushering the diversification of the drawing medium. Since then, paintings are no more confined to rigid classicism, which only explores the relationship between colors in sketch-based three-dimensional spaces, but a reflection of the painters' scrutiny of the nature of painting.

Keywords: Fauvism; Two dimension; Paper-cutouts

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1. Introduction

Henri Matisse is one of the most influential artists in modern art history. Through the classical education at his early age and the imitation of impressionism, he gained a good understanding of paintings, but he did not win the recognition of the mainstream society at that time until his Fauvism style came into being. In his "Fauvism" paintings, he emphasized on color changes and used them to control the painting and display the power of colors. In moving out of the shadow of impressionism, his paintings provided a new sense of color with purer colors and clearer outlines of color ranges. Toward the end of his career, Matisse turned exclusively to two-dimensional color use and paper cut-outs.

2. Matisse's early life

2.1. At the end of the nineteenth century

At the end of the 19th century, the western modern art movement was in its infancy, where modern art was undergoing experimentations, examinations, and questions. At this time, Henri Matisse was a pupil under Adolf Bouguereau for traditional academic training at Académie Julian in Paris, far from the emerging art movement. Soon later, Matisse felt something was wrong, and immediately transferred to Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he was tutored by Gustave Moreau. Unlike many other artists who were committed to the objective picturing of nature, Moreau encouraged his students to make simpler and colorful drawings. Under the guidance of Moreau, Matisse began to appreciate that natural images are only one of the artistic expression carriers and it is the imagination of the artists that breeds the colors. This understanding set a solid foundation for Matisse's great achievement in art.

2.2. At the beginning of the twentieth century

The beginning of the 20th century witnessed the bloom of multiple artistic ideological trends. This heterogeneity influenced Matisse's artistic creation. While he continued to imitate the techniques of impressionism and post-impressionism, he started looking for a new path. As early as 1897, Matisse began reflecting on impressionism and his own artistic pursuit after his creation of an oil painting, "Breakfast," which is an embodiment of impressionism from subject to technique but failed to obtain the appreciation of the mainstream society on an official salon. "The impressionism technique does not fit me; I want to know things over their subtle color variation through experiments. In a word, I want to know myself," said Matisse in 1935 ^[1]. As shown by his work, "Sideboard and Table," which was created using the stippling technique in 1899, Matisse had once favored post-impressionism for a long time. The stippling art, which employs a scientific arrangement of colors and forms shapes with small dots, had greatly inspired him in profiling with pure colors and controlling the interior relationship between colors. However, post-impressionism failed to satisfy Matisse as well. "I was so obsessed with the special techniques of post-impressionism, but I knew it very well that the achievements from these techniques were strictly restricted by rigid logic rules ^[2]," said Matisse.

2.3. The dawning of Matisse's artistic pursuit

From the beginning of the 20th century to 1935 when Matisse made the above two comments, there is a gap of over 30 years, long enough to change his artistic style and improve his academic capability. The authenticity and reliability should be diluted when explaining for the earlier works in light of the later speeches. To be frank, Matisse's earlier works, whether the 1897's *Breakfast* or the 1899's *Sideboard and Table*, were far from comparable with mature painters (traditional realistic painter and impressionists) at that time in terms of traditional techniques, such as sketching, coloring, and stroking. In terms of sketching, the perspectivity of the figures – the cups, plates, and fruits in the two paintings is flawed by certain inaccuracy; the range of values is loosely composed and the gradation between black, white, and gray does not rival that of the paintings by Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, and other excellent impressionists. For coloring, the scientific optical analysis of impressionism is well represented in the two works; the temperature relationship between light and backlight as well as the subtle color change requires more effort to reach the harmony expressed by senior impressionists (Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, etc.). With regard to stroking, there is a lack of well-defined connection between the strokes and profiles in the paintings; the rough strokes do not match the profiles well and walks causally. Judging from the two paintings, Matisse neither had the attainment of senior impressionists nor made any breakthroughs in his impressionism career. This shows that a gap existed between Matisse's self-awareness and his artistic merit at that time; it is also evidence that Matisse's paintings are not merely copies of the paintings by senior painters.

In short, Matisse did not succeed in imitating the works of impressionists. One of the reasons Matisse gave up on impressionism was that he did not reach the level of senior impressionists in terms of traditional painting techniques. In other words, Matisse's abandonment was a passive one. As he later said in 1951, "Impressionism's aesthetics, like Louvre's technique, cannot satisfy us. We would like to express what we want more directly. Just follow one's own mind to paint a few color blocks, and the artist could have an opening to free himself from such restrictions ^[3]." This statement is more like a definition made on an already successful art. Viewing earlier experiences from the standpoint of a later success is inevitably subjective. On one hand, it is an indisputable fact that Matisse's ability in traditional painting was crude. On the other hand, as Matisse had sharply remarked the rigorous modeling and objective color system of traditional and impressionism painting as a restriction, it can be implied that the feeling of passivity due to the restriction of the masters forced Matisse to the opposite side and give up traditional painting techniques.

3. The birth of Fauvism

3.1. Influence from Paul Cezanne

In 1899, Matisse took an interest in Cezanne's work *The Bathers*; this was the beginning of Cezanne's influence on him. In 1900, the influence became apparent in terms of object and expression techniques in his works. Matisse deemed that Cezanne's works revealed the true nature of painting; in other words, objects are made up of geometry, and their structural relationship is the most important thing. Matisse attached importance to the geometric shapes and the brave choice of color. At this period, he strove to put Cezanne's painting skills to practice in still life paintings, paying more attention to geometric shapes and the purity of the color instead of the three-dimensional sense. More importantly, he kept his eyes on the relations between the colors and dominated the whole painting by using colors, so as to demonstrate the power by itself. At the same time, Matisse was deeply affected by Gauguin and jumped out of the influence of impressionism. The area of two-dimensional color became larger and purer, and even the outline of color ranges became clearer. In 1951, Matisse said, "The dominating role of a color is considered to be strengthened through comparison. In fact, I think the contrasting color is as important as the dominating color because of the weakness of the contrasting color. So, I choose to paint in two-dimensional color. This is Fauvism ^[4]." In 1905, Matisse relinquished three-dimensional modeling and depiction as well as bravely employed the way of emphasizing the dominating role of colors when he was creating *Matisse's Wife* and *A Woman with the Hat*. In *Matisse's Wife*, he painted the outline with pure colors and partial color ranges were finished in the two-dimensional form, mainly with bright and pure colors. The color of the background comprised of three two-dimensional colors – red, purple, and green. A classic statement made by Matisse in a paper arguing modernism and tradition, "The object and background are equally important in a painting. To make it more accurate, there exists no main part, only the whole patterning is the most important." From 1905, the birth of Fauvism marked Matisse's confirmation of the purpose of his artistic pursuit, regardless of his obsession with oriental elements or African sculpture. The main expressive means lies in two-dimensional color, and two-dimensional expressive ways appeared a lot in his works.

3.2. Fauvism period

In 1906, Henri Matisse visited Algeria and Morocco. The touring experience in Moscow deepened his enthusiasm toward oriental art, which includes the following features: the bright color of red, green, and blue; two-dimensional color; the expressive power of lines. There were some clues of these features found in his creations. During this period, decorations of oriental art were frequently used by Matisse. Most of his works disregarded the depth and sense of space found in western traditional painting. He emphasized the plastic use of lines, which was typically used in oriental art, and combining with the form of two-dimensional art, he finally demonstrated the two-dimensional effect. When he created *Luxury* in 1907, he first drew the outline of the objects, including the human body, the sky, the cloud, distant mountains, the water, and ground. He used single and pure colors to paint over the human body and other parts. The yellow body, blue sky, light yellow cloud, red land and distant mountains, as well as blue-green water constitute a complete picture by the use of single lines and two-dimensional color painting, replacing the three-dimensional sense with the space sense through color expression. In *Dance* and *Music*, created in 1910, the colors became clearer, and only three colors were left in the paintings. In these two paintings, he employed two-dimensional color to create a contrast by using three color blocks – blue sky, green grassland, and ember human body, marking a complete change in the influence from those he had learned and forming his own unique style. At that time, Matisse has established the artistic pursuit of two-dimension. In his following paintings, he sketched a lot and mainly focused on lines. He abandoned the contrast of light and shade as well as the three-dimensional effect, which were kept in his oil paintings.

4. Moving toward two-dimensional paper cut-outs

In 1947, Henri Matisse created *Jazz* as a collection of paper-cutouts, which marked the beginning of paper-cutouts in a large scale. *Jazz* is a collection of illustrations for a poet's poetry anthology and was published at last. After that, he started creating paper cut-outs in large quantities. Matisse painted different colors on the paper cut-outs discreetly in a two-dimensional way, making the images seem absolutely independent. In contrast to traditional paintings, in which the mingling of brush strokes produces blurry outlines, the clear outline of the images cut with scissors best express the colors by means of two-dimension. According to Matisse, paper cut-outs were the simplest and the most direct way to express his ideas. He once said, "The color itself is the corresponding material and embraces countless possibilities." In 1949, Matisse was reaching eighty years old, and he was unable to continue with oil painting, so paper-cutouts might have been the best choice for him. Matisse came to realize the "creation of a picture through the two-dimensional combination of different colors." Matisse's paper cut-outs represented his lifelong pursuit for the art. The simpler a picture is, the more abstract the images are. The picture in this type of art is composed of serial lines and clear color blocks.

From 1948 to 1951, Matisse created *Wancy's Chapel of the Rosary*, which he regarded as his most important achievement. This work started out as paper cut-outs. Its walls were partly vitrolite wall paintings, and its windows were partly colored glasses. It belonged to the artistic expression forms with his other paper cut-outs, which was called two-dimensional color combination. *The Sorrows of the King*, one of his later paper cut-outs, was created in 1952. After watercolor was painted on the papers, Matisse cut them out and pasted these paper cut-outs together. The color he used was bright and light. All the pure colors, such as black, white, red, yellow, green, blue, and so on, appeared in his works. Simple images were the only focus of Matisse's creation throughout his life. For example, the body of women, flowers, and leaves were all dealt with geometric shapes in his paintings. Different elements became harmonious under certain limitations, especially the limitation of proportion. Two-dimensional color blocks were astonishingly segmented, symbolizing his creative power and self-expression ability. *The Sorrows of the King* represented a culmination of Matisse's artistic achievements due to its unique form and choice of color.

Regardless of his passive choice of giving up traditional techniques in his early days or his active choice of artistic self-realization, Matisse's two-dimensional color choice and paper cut-outs are unprecedented in contemporary western paintings. He focused on two-dimensional color expression and painted by using its relations, which had a profound and far-reaching influence on other artists. Since then, Matisse's personal style has formed in its own special way.

5. Conclusion

Since the birth of Fauvism, Matisse has changed the color sense of pictures and the application of three-dimensional color. According to his theory, the purer the color is in the picture and the clearer the outline is in the color ranges. His distinct personal style did not form until he created three-dimensional pictures in the form of paper cut-outs. In his later life, the application of two-dimensional color and paper cut-outs art were apparent changing process in his works. Besides, the weakness in traditional techniques was the most important objective reason why there was a change in his style. There is no denying that his subjective willingness has played a decisive role in the process of pursuing art. Matisse presented the essence of painting in his unique way, in which the dominating color's contrast mitigates the relations between pictures. The direct effect of extensive color ranges has the same function with the contrast of two-dimensional color. Matisse made good use of two-dimensional color to dissolve the effect of traditional techniques in paintings. As a result, paintings have developed in various forms instead of just classicism paintings, in which sketching acted as the leading part of presenting the color. Meanwhile, impressionism presented the sketching by promoting the color. However, Matisse actively performed his own search for the nature of

painting. As modern art was confronted with problems such as tradition versus modern, conservation versus innovation, and so on, Matisse was the right person as the precursor of art innovation then. His works are an inspiration to explore art and art expression.

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