

Chapter 3

Fauvism: Political? Decorative? or True Vision?

As the end of the 19th century approached, most of the impressionists themselves had abandoned the emphasis on atmospheric, light-saturated effects which they had created. In fact, the atmospheric painting was more likely to be associated with symbolism or interior states of being at this point. Monet's paintings (see, for example, Figure 1: *Charing Cross Bridge*, 1900) had increasingly become paintings of his mental responses and psychological states, rather than paintings of nature. Extensively reworked in his studio over long periods of time, there was no way they could continue to be seen as the record of a transparent moment in time and nature. Renoir, confirming a tendency which had already existed in his paintings, treated life with increasing idealization, ignoring social realities, and using a style that suggested direct continuity with the French rococo tradition of the 18th century. His *Three Bathers* of 1897 (Figure 2) is only one of the many which could be used as an example.

The artists who became known as the Fauves at the very least were united by their elimination of ethereal and atmospheric effects along with the avoidance of any suggestion of bourgeois idealization. [See, for example, Figure 3, André Derain, *Westminster Bridge*, 1906, and Figure 4, Maurice de Vlaminck, *House at Chatou*, 1905.] Although they denied the possibility of these forms of transcendence, the belief that they were rendering nature as directly observed may be difficult to accept, but there are reasons to consider it. Because their style centralized the appearance of a hasty, simple, and visceral response to nature, many observers did perceive their paintings to be a natural rendering of nature, without the intervention of artifice. This perception of naturalism, in turn, contributed to another response to Fauvist paintings: a tendency to see them as depicting true social commentary and to promote an association between the Fauves and various political positions which may not have been true of the artists themselves. If we cannot be certain about their political positions, we can be certain that the one quality they shared was the use of bold, pure color for the pure optical pleasure of color. To assume that optical pleasure was their only motive does not fully account for the situation of these paintings in the social context of the early 1900s. As a result, the attempt to relate the Fauve painting to a political position, although problematic, is an interesting one and worth tracing.¹

The argument begins with naturalism. In the eyes of some contemporary critics, the Fauvist contribution to the art and social world at the turn of the century was a new form of naturalism which allowed the Fauves to become the legitimate heirs of the French artistic tradition – a tradition which was based on the academic, “beaux-arts” style of painting. The basic premise of naturalism is that it is possible to produce a correspondence between a painted image and true nature. This correspondence presupposes the use of conventions (about perspective, color, and shape). To the extent that any form of naturalist painting is based on conventions about what the natural world looks like and how it should be represented, naturalism has the ironic and perhaps unintended effect of causing people to evaluate the natural world in terms of some of the conventions used in painting. Impressionism in the 1870s and 1880s had already contributed to the creation of a different set of conventions which emphasized atmospheric effects, but by the 1900s, those atmospheric



Figure 1: Charing Cross Bridge, 1900

Compare the treatment of this scene with the similar subject matter in the painting by Derain, *Westminster Bridge*. For more striking examples of Monet's later changes, look at his paintings from the 1920s of the Japanese bridge in the lily pond.



Figure 2: Three Bathers, 1897

As the information provided by the museum notes, Renoir's paintings of bathers were a response to the perceived insubstantiality of impressionism. For Renoir, the classical (or rococo) nude was the attempt to return stability. Monet's response took the form of more intensely saturated colors and a newer agitation to his brushwork. Figure 1, *Charing Cross*, remains closer to the Monet of changing light conditions. But compare this painting by Renoir to Derain's painting of dancers (Figure 10).

effects had become associated with symbolism and were no longer thought of as naturalistic. Because the Fauves rejected this atmospheric quality and replaced it with a more visceral response, viewers could either question the Fauve ability to render nature as it is or they could question the belief that nature had been accurately represented before Fauvism. The “compromise” position is the belief that yes, the Fauvist landscape is not entirely true to what we think we see because it is challenging convention and in this challenge, it is also making a statement of social commentary.

Many observers associated Fauvism with the cult of “naturism,” a movement which celebrated the experience of physical sensations and an exuberant naturalness. Followers of “naturism” embraced spontaneity and a *joie de vivre*, and in some cases, they also embraced anarchy, leading critics to see naturism as a pointed rejection of the order and stability of bourgeois life. Whether Matisse and the other Fauves were actually naturists or anarchists is not really known. Their paintings do, however, appear to share naturist beliefs in that they are predominantly landscape paintings. When human figures are present, they engage in dancing and sexual activities, leading to the perception of these paintings as paintings which are about a sensual, exuberant, and primitive life style, with the meaning of primitive in this case implying a life which is unencumbered by the rules of urban society.

Traditional landscapes by the 19th century might be exemplified by the style of Poussin in a painting such as the *Landscape with St. John on Patmos*, 1640 (Figure 5). These were heroic landscapes which often included classical architecture (possibly in ruins) and figures engaged in heroic action. The alternative to the heroic landscape was the rural or intimate country landscape which became the progenitor of the impressionist landscape. The impressionist landscape, however, did not remain intimate as it quickly evolved into a landscape of bourgeois social activity. Think of the restaurant and dancing scenes painted by Monet, Renoir, and later, Seurat. The Fauves, however, did not continue in this tradition: when people are present, they are not engaged in recognizable bourgeois leisure; when people are not present, the scenes do not appear to be intimate country scenes. Indeed, they struck some viewers as decorative and either primitive or unreal – far from what we might think of as a political painting.

When Matisse turned to the decorative, contemporary landscape with several figures, such as *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*, 1904 (Fig. 6), it was new subject for him. The style revealed several influences: Seurat’s neo-impressionist style, which he would have encountered in a recent retrospective of Seurat’s work, and Cézanne’s paintings of bathers. Here, he united the influence of neo-impressionism with that of Cézanne: varying his brush stroke, he also changed his palette, using more hues and mixing primaries. The subject can also be seen to reflect the influences of neo-impressionism and Cézanne, in this case united with the utopian or arcadian landscape tradition of Puvis de Chavannes and Poussin. The title of the work suggests a final influence on this painting. Using a phrase from a poem by Baudelaire, Matisse told the viewer that this painting was based in his imagination and in literature, and not in real life. This dissociation of the landscape painting from a natural landscape, despite the real source which existed and which Matisse loved (the painting is based on his Collioure landscapes), is the result of the fact that *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* is the synthesis of several studies. It is an eclectic composition and style. Matisse was not



Figure 3: Westminister Bridge, 1906

The bridge is not the same one as in Monet’s painting, but that’s the least of the differences between them. Notice how one painting dissolves the structure and materiality of the bridge into an almost monochromatic pale blue painting, while the other emphasizes the harsh colors and emphatic lines of the bridge, powerfully pulling the viewer into the distance.



Figure 4: House at Chatou, 1905

Vlaminck was always closer to Van Gogh in his style than the other Fauves, although Van Gogh, in comparison with Vlaminck, was much more attentive to the quality of drawing in the painting. Vlaminck uses Van Gogh as part of his own search for the crude, primitive style some of the Fauves wanted.

alone in his attempt to prevent the association of his art with a single style or the association of his subject with a specific time and mood. All the Fauves sought this painterly anonymity in the belief that it allowed the painting to assert itself as a spontaneous, naturally emerging representation of the real world. Perhaps it is the conflict between their colors and reality, or more seriously, the conflict between succeeding as an artist without a recognizable style which made Fauvism such a short-lived movement. But Matisse, the one artist in the group who had a long career, was already beginning to do something here which would characterize much of his subsequent work: the use of variations in the brush stroke to suggest different levels of reality in the painting.

The Joy of Life, 1905 (Fig. 7), is another arcadian scene, more clearly a bacchanalia. Similar to the earlier painting on which it appears to be based, it rejects contemporary and urban life. The contemporary setting of the former painting has now been replaced by a completely imagined and idyllic setting. The composition of this painting relies on repetitions of linear elements and triangular clusters of figures, with a central triangle rising to the Gothic arch of the trees in the center, creating a canopy for the dancing figures and evoking the composition of Cézanne's Philadelphia Museum painting of bathers. We can, however, also look at the dancing figures as a circular composition which is echoed in the arabesques of the trees and the other figures. Depth is indicated by positioning, with higher figures suggesting distance. In some places, size of the figures also indicates how close the figure is to the viewer. Treating space in this way may have been a deliberate reference to either Persian or Byzantine styles, but we cannot rule out another longstanding and more personal influence on Matisse's work – textiles and tapestries. The mixture of styles in the painting tells us that Matisse was still experimenting with style but it also suggests greater receptivity to the real world, if we define the real world as referring to the world of art and style.

By 1906, Matisse had begun to move toward a flatter, more decorative style, devoid of modeling either through color or chiaroscuro. This development reached its culmination in the two paintings made for the Moscow collector, Sergei Shchukin: *Dance and Music* (Figures 8 and 9), both of 1910. The two paintings have identifiable precedents in earlier work, in terms of the groupings of figures and in terms of style. The oval chain of figures in the *Dance*, clearly the same figures as we see in the center of *Joy*, fills the rectangular canvas and creates an arabesque pattern. Each figure is curved and taut, and bends in a different way from the others. The two figures on the left reach their hands toward one another but an almost imperceptible gap exists between them, adding tension to the movement. The painting of *Music* offers a more composed and restrained experience, a composition of order which has been compared to the arrangement of musical notes on a staff. *Music* also seems to be the Apollonian response to the implied Dionysian frenzy of the *Dance*. Dance, according to Nietzsche in his book *The Birth of Tragedy*, was the time when man could feel like a god, walking in air, in ecstasy, and in his dreams. To society, dancing was the equivalent of moral and physical health. These associations have contributed to the hypothesis that Matisse's paintings of exotic dancers, along with comparable subject matter by Derain and one or two other artists at this time, were paintings in support of the colonialist values of French nationalism in the early years of the 20th century.

Undoubtedly, paintings such as *Joy of Life*, and *Luxe, Calme, et Volupté*, and Derain's *Bathers* of 1907 (Figure 10), with their avoidance of an academic finish,



Figure 5: *Landscape with St. John on Patmos*, 1640
Poussin, a French baroque artist, was one of the key artists in the development of a "grand manner" style of landscape painting. The landscape we see in this image did not really exist, although the land formations and nature may have had some basis in reality. But it is neither the French landscape that Poussin would have known or the landscape which would have been appropriate to the narrative in the painting.



Figure 6: *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*, 1640
Note that although we're discussing this painting in the context of Fauvism, technically it's much closer to neo-impressionism. We might consider this one to be the beginning of a change in Matisse's work.



Figure 7: *Joy of Life*, 1905
In this painting, Matisse is more clearly aligned with Fauvism. We will continue to see Fauvist characteristics in his work until about 1910, even as he begins to move away from it.

the use of bold colors, the visual and tactile rhyming in their compositions, asserted a recognizable and decisive break with the classical and idyllic landscape tradition. Yet, at the same time, the subject matter of a utopian landscape was not new and itself was part of the classical tradition. To viewers who were looking for a political message in paintings (one which would support the policy of colonialization), the Fauve landscape had married the mantle of utopian, idyllic classicism to the new “naturalism,” while Fauvism and Matisse, above all, were now married to the French national tradition. The suggestion of an exotic landscape, made through the intense colors which continued to evoke Gauguin, and which, through Gauguin, evoked the primitive world, along with the crude finish of these paintings (suggestive of the untutored eye) and the presence of dancing women, as a symbol of exotic femininity, acted together to further an association between these paintings as a national message of French absorption, and therefore containment and control, of its north African territories. This message does rely on the presence of women and the belief that the female body is also being conveyed naturalistically, a factor which means that not all Fauvist paintings can be seen to be part of this political imaginary.

The Fauvist political message may have been ambiguous because it was made through color, far more than subject or line. Matisse, for example, violated French principles of design in his arcadian paintings. The lines are not clearly articulated throughout and spatial ambiguities abound. Yet, through their use of color, colors which have been compared to sticks of dynamite in their anarchy and destruction of the old order, the Fauve landscape becomes a painting about destruction. But this destruction may also target aesthetics. If the Fauve landscape was the initial site of the destruction of representation in painting, perhaps it could also have been seen as the destruction of the notion of an idyllic fantasy landscape with its origins in the golden age of the past. If the paintings of Matisse and Derain did reject the paintings of a golden age of the past, they did not appear to offer visions of a utopian future to emerge in the Mediterranean south of France. What political or painterly geography do they inhabit? In the end, what they may be saying is that the golden age of the classical past and the utopian age of the future co-exist in the same space – the world of the imagination.

This interpretation reflects recent attempts to find political meaning in an artist who seems, perhaps more than any other, to stand outside politics, and it would be incomplete if we did not return to a reading of Matisse and the Fauves which is based in formalist aesthetics rather than social theory.

Matisse, like his contemporaries, had his origins in a conservative style and education which he rejected slowly as he developed interest in Cézanne, Gauguin, Rodin, the symbolists, and the impressionists, and as he began experimenting with intense color. From Cézanne, Matisse and the Fauves absorbed a tendency to compress space and tilt perspective and to bring objects close to the picture plane. Even more than structural influences, what Matisse and the others saw in Cézanne was a surface pattern of colors embodying planes. This was a lyrical treatment of space in which space was created by color, not by light. It is three-dimensional space without being real space, something these artists thought of as “colorspace.” From symbolism, Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck incorporated the lesson of relying on the



Figure 8: Dance, 1910

Compare the circle of figures in the Joy of Life to this painting. The impact is quite different, although the two chains of dancing figures are almost the same. But here, the circle fills the canvas, heads and shoulders touching the edges, feet cut off by the bottom, and the central figure on the bottom with outstretched hand, reaching but not quite touching the dancer to his (her?) left, almost appears to be flying.



Figure 9: Music, 1910

Matisse made more than one version of both Music and Dance, and reproductions are likely to vary in the intensity of the colors. I assume that the pair made for Shchukin would have had almost identical colors but the two reproductions I have here do not. You can, however, see the similarities and differences in the compositions, the much more restrained order to the painting of music and more frenzied feeling in Dance.



Figure 10: Bathers, 1907

The intended comparison here is to the bathers we see in Renoir's painting. We might also go back and look at Cézanne's bathers, also of this time to see how influential his bather paintings were and also to see how Derain's figures have a very believable naturalism in their bodies, despite the somewhat less natural coloring.

truth of one's inner experiences, making the subjectivity of the artist into the subject of the painting, and from synthetism (Gauguin's style), in particular, they absorbed the idea of the painting as a representation of different planes of reality coexisting in one plane.

The outcome of all of these lessons or influences was the recognition of the difference between constructing an image and reproducing or representing reality. Just as Seurat sought to represent a greater optical reality than could be achieved by more accurately reproducing the colors he saw, the Fauves represented what they saw and what they felt without reproducing visual reality. That's an important lesson with implications for modernism in the 20th century: the design or pattern of color, shape and line on the surface of the painting is not the same thing as the object which has been depicted. Representation does not equal reproduction. For Matisse and the Fauves, it goes further than this, and here we find a critical difference between the Fauves and other post-impressionist styles, such as synthetism, from which they derived their own style. The decorative surface of the Fauve painting does not correspond to some inner or essential truths. Unlike the synthetists and symbolists, the Fauves are not speaking of resonance between colors and sounds or sensations. They are part of a transition in which color will be seen as a direct route to the creator's mind with "creator" increasingly referring to both the artist and to a more spiritual form of creator. The painting is no longer about anything other than the painter. And if the painter paints out of an inner necessity which corresponds to the spirit of the age, the painting will be a path to the spiritual. This leap is not truly part of the Fauvist period but it

Notes:

1. For the key source on the politics of Fauvism, see James D. Herbert, *Fauve Painting: The Making of Cultural Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). A more recent discussion is Margaret Werth, *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art*, circa 1900 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). A more traditional discussion of Fauvism, emphasizing its stylistic sources, is Marcel Giry, *Fauvism* (New York: Alpine Fine Arts, 1982).

2. Matisse, *Notes of a Painter*, p. 132, quoted in Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 61.

is an essential step to the spiritual expressionism of Kandinsky.

For Matisse, the decorative quality of a painting was an important part of this path. His understanding of the decorative was derived in large part from middle Eastern art, and in particular, from the tapestries and calligraphy he saw in northern Africa. In Islamic calligraphy and painting, the letters are responded to as a path to the spiritual which essentially lies behind the letters. Although there are important beliefs for the presence of writing in Islamic art, to the outsider the art has an organic rhythmic and flowing movement, created by the arabesques of the letters. Matisse, drawn to north Africa for the light, was undoubtedly as influenced by the organic compositions of the tapestries he would have seen (and collected) there. In his writing, he spoke about composition and the decorative in art, saying that "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."

² He then wrote of his search for the undiluted or true essence of something, a search which continued to link him to the symbolist/synthetist movement, even as had begun to change the nature of that search. Whereas the synthetist turned to the decorative as a means of asserting a primitivist or archetypal spirituality which has not been corrupted by urban bourgeois life, Matisse turned to the decorative as a means of asserting pictorial and optical values, knowing that the spiritual lay behind them.