

Teleri Mai Griffiths 2502384

Illustration

Chris Harrendence : Ways of Perceiving ADDA4023

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How Henri Matisse's work has evolved from canvas to collage?

Henri Matisse was a French artist born on 31 December 1869 at Le Cateau-Cambresis. His parents kept a household provisions store, with one extra department for seed and another for paint. According to Volkmar Essers in their book *Matisse*, Henri Matisse states he “was the son of a seed, merchant due to take over the business from my father” (Essers 2016 ,p. 7). In fact, Matisse went on to study law in Paris for two years.

It is understood that whilst suffering from a bout of appendicitis his mother gave him a box of paints and this is when he discovered his passion for painting. According to John Cauman in his book *Matisse in 50 works* he states that in 1895, he was officially admitted to Ecole des Beaux-Arts to the Moreau class (Cauman, 2019, p.7).

It is said according to Douglas Mannering in his book “*The Paintings of Matisse*” (Mannering, 1989, p. 7) that Matisse was one of the founders of modern art during the early 20th century. As well as utilising a range of styles from late 19th century Impressionism to almost abstract art. It also states that he was a painter, printmaker and also a book illustrator.

We can therefore see that his work evolved from initial observational and painterly approaches to subsequently a more simplified, expressive, and abstract style through collage.

In his book *Matisse* by Volkmar Esser (Essers,2016,p.7), Henri Matisse is quoted as saying “I try to create a kind of art that every viewer can understand”.



Fig 1, Dinner Table, 1897

In the summer of 1895 Matisse travelled to Brittany where he first discovered Impressionism. Following this visit, he was filled with enthusiasm for prismatic colours and this can be seen in the painting “Dinner Table” 1897 (Essers ,2016, p. 9).

He however found it difficult to make a living from the sale of paintings and following the task of decorating the Grand Palais in Paris for the Great Exhibition in 1900 which was exhausting work he felt so despondent that he considered giving up painting. His painting *Studio under the Eaves* gives an impression of his struggle for survival, Matisse by Volkmar Esser (p.12).

The painting is described as being a gloomy, dungeon-like painting with little light or colour. It is said that the tree blossoming outside the open window is a promise of revelation, an image within the image. Matisse was later to tell his son Pierre: “That was the transition from valerus to colours.” Matisse by Volkmar Esser (p.14).



Fig 2 Woman with a Hat, 1905

Matisse's painting *Woman with a Hat* was part of an exhibition at the autumn salon in Paris which was jointly held by Andre Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck. There was some public controversy as collectively their use of unrestrained colours resulted in them being dubbed the Fauves meaning wild ones. Matisse was the main target of this criticism particularly for his painting *Woman with a Hat*. The collector Leo Stein when he viewed the painting stated 'Brilliant and powerful, but the nastiest smear of paint I had ever seen'. (Cauman , 2019, p. 44).

The painting demonstrates how conventional forms are replaced by lurid patches of colour, Matisse by Volkmar Esser (p.14). This new style which Matisse presents in this painting would come to be called Fauvism (Cauman, 2019, p. 44).



Fig 3, Joy of Life, 1906

We can see that drawing underpinned all of Matisse's work. It would seem in his own opinion, Matisse's life's work began with the painting *The Joy of Life* (Essers, 2016, p. 19).

Gertrude Stein said "In this picture, for the first time, Matisse deliberately achieves his intention of drawing the lines of the human body to harmonize the visual values of unmixed colours to which nothing has been added but white – to harmonize, and to simplify. He put his systemic twists of draughtsmanship to the same use as you would put discord in music, or vinegar or lemon in cooking – the way you would use eggshells in fine coffee" (Essers, 2016, p. 21).

In relation to his painting *The Blue Nude* Matisse held as a maxim that the human figure should be dominant and stated "what interests me most is the figure, not some still life or landscape. Painting the human figure is the best way for me to express what I might call my own peculiar religious feeling about life" (Essers, 2016, p. 21).

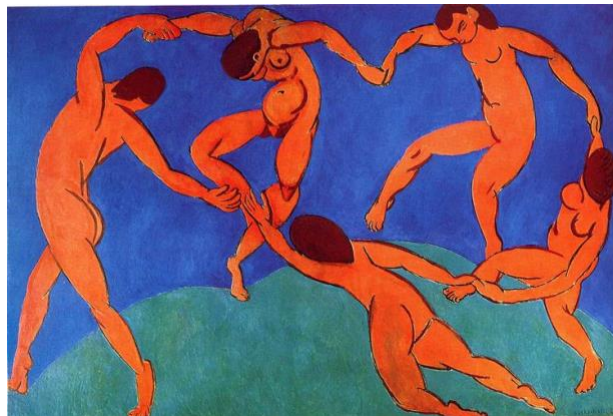


Fig 4, *Dance II*, 1910

This is also demonstrated in the *Dance II* which is a painting of five naked females dancing on a green hill in front of a blue sky. Compared to an earlier painting *Dance I* we can see that the principal vehicles of this transformation are drawing and colour (Cauman, 2019, p. 65).

We then see a period where Matisse moves away from traditional painting, and his work becomes flatter and more decorative and pattern based. Matisse stated, “A Young painter who cannot liberate himself from the influence of past generations is digging his own grave” (Essers, 2016, p, 35).



Fig 5, The Red Studio, 1911

In his painting The Red Studio we can see a departure from his usual style. We can see that he demonstrates less depth and perspective using strong shapes and colour blocks. It would appear that composition becomes more important than realism.

Similarly, the painting Interior with Aubergines which again shows an interior setting, although of a darker colour palette experiments with spatial ambiguity but is slightly more detailed filling it's blank space with a flower pattern.

This could be interpreted as a stepping stone towards collage and his later work.

His style becomes akin to illustration with the use of bold shapes and colours instead of detailed outcome.

The final evolution of his work occurred in his later life. Ill health in 1941 resulted in two serious intestinal operations (Mannering, 1989, p .115) and meant that he was bedridden for a considerable time and could not stand for long periods of time.

Due to his disabilities, we see that he adapts his own technique by using scissors and gouache painted paper cut in to shapes creating art more accessible to him.

During this period Matisse created his own illustrated book called “Jazz”. The book included a piece called Icarus which depicts a figure falling through the sky. Although using a simple cut out method it still shows emotion and tells a story.

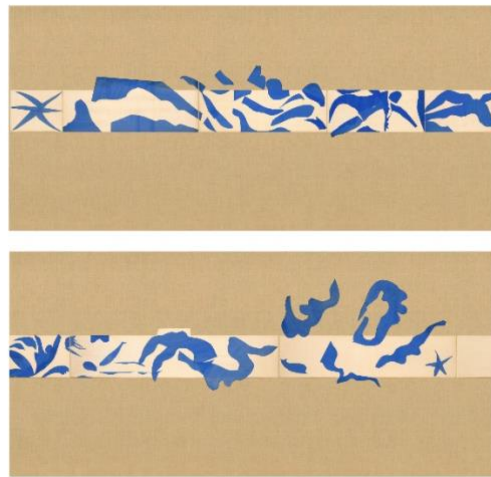


Fig 6, The Swimming Pool, 1952

In 1952 Matisse created his largest cut out The Swimming Pool which was meant to decorate his own home. Its inspiration was a holiday many decades before and his love of the sea. Matisse stated about the cut out “I have always adored the sea, and now that I can no longer go for a swim, I have surrounded myself with it” (Cauman, 2019, p. 130).



Fig 7, The Snail, 1953

One of Matisse's final works was The Snail one of his most abstract pieces. We can see that the spiral shell of the snail is conveyed by the arrangement of the coloured shapes (Cauman, 2019 , p. 134).

We can therefore see that Matisse's earlier works provide an illusion of depth and detail with brushwork adding texture inspired from observation.

His later work provides flat shapes with bold colour block and abstract form.

We can deem that the contrast in style and technique is not a break but a refinement of ideas.

By way of continuity, we can see that the lines of his early drawings and/or paintings become shapes in his later work and that colour becomes more dominant.

We can conclude that Matisse's work shows a clear development over time, not a sudden change. He began with bold, expressive paintings linked to Fauvism, using

strong colour and loose brushwork. Gradually due to his disabilities his style changed and became simpler and more focused, leading to his later cut-out works like *The Snail*.

Even though his materials changed, drawing always remained important in Henri Matisse's work. His understanding of shape and the human figure helped him reduce forms to their most basic elements. In his collages, he combined drawing and colour in a more direct and physical way.

Overall, his work became more simplified and expressive as time went on. This shows that collage was not a break from painting, but a development into what he called his second life. We can therefore see today that his work is important because it shows how simplifying shapes and focussing on colour can create strong effective artwork.

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Figures list

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Fig 5. Matisse, H. (1911). *The Red Studio*. [Oil on Canvas]. [Accessed 27 Apr. 2026].

Fig 6. Matisse, H. (1952). *The Swimming Pool*. [Gouache on paper, Collage]. [Accessed 27 Apr. 2026].

Fig 7. Matisse, H. (1953). *The Snail*. [Gouache on paper, Collage]. [Accessed 27 Apr. 2026].