

How did Henri Matisse's use of colour and form revolutionise modern art?

Henri Matisse stands as one of the most influential figures of modern art, renowned for his innovative use of colour and form. Emerging in the early 20th century, Matisse challenged the codes of traditional artistic conventions and paved the way for new movements, particularly Fauvism. His vibrant paintings and unique approach to composition not only earned him the nickname, "The King of Colour" in Laurence Anholt's published book inspired by none other than Matisse, he also captivated audiences and continues to inspire countless artists who followed. Throughout the years his works have inspired and pushed my creativity unlike any other artist. This essay will explore the aspects of Matisse's life that shaped his art while also assessing his groundbreaking techniques and artistic philosophy that revolutionised the art world, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to resonate today.

Although Matisse's career path would seem blatantly obvious to anyone, this reflection is only available to us now through the gift of hindsight. Through my research I found Zeidler (2021). Which offered great insight on how Matisse may have never pursued this path if it wasn't for his numerous health complications. "After studying law in Paris (1887–1889) and briefly working as a legal clerk (1889–1890), Matisse discovered painting—his true profession—through a health issue."

"We owe the art of Henri Matisse (b. Dec. 31, 1869) to a convalescence. Recuperating from a severe attack of appendicitis at his parents' home in Bohain-en-Vermandois in northern France, Matisse was given a box of colors by his mother. Later the artist spoke of the experience as a conversion: "The moment I had this box of colors in my hands, I had the feeling that my life was there. (Spurling, ⁴p. 46), " by Donovan (1992).

As analysed by Zeidler in 'Henri Matisse's medical history: Multiple health problems and impact on creativity. Journal of Medical Biography.' (2021) Matisse suffered with various abdominal diseases which made him bed bound, forcefully offering him a whole lot of time for his creative practice. He also suffered respiratory diseases, chronic insomnia and psychological issues. Whilst Matisse's health issues marked the starting point which led him to find his vocation, those same issues continued to repeatedly play a decisive influence on his artistic work for the rest of his suffering life. However it is also crucial to observe that the correlation between his poor health and his artistic practice can also be seen in the opposite effect, as his art practice often came at the detriment of his health which is mentioned by Zeidler (2021) "the life of Matisse is also characterized by the reverse interaction between health and art, which means that his artistic activity had an impact on his health and mental condition."

Matisse made numerous contributions in the course of his long career, the most significant and important one however "was his first innovation-the development of Fauvism." Galenson (2008, p.114). This movement was a conceptual one, whereby many young artists such as Matisse himself felt inspired by "the strong colors and flattened forms of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, went beyond those earlier symbolists in the expressive use of pure, bright colors and simplified shapes. Matisse was recognized as the leader of the Fauve movement, which began abruptly in 1905 and ended abruptly in 1907. Fauvism became important for its influence

on a series of expressionist painters, beginning with the German Die Brücke and Blue Rider movements.” Galenson (2008, p.114)

While Matisse created Fauve paintings for three years, the conceptual nature of this new contribution “meant that the most important were those that announced the innovation, and these were the paintings of 1905 that were exhibited at the Salon d'Automne exhibition of that year.” Galenson (2008, p.114). Part of this exhibition was *Open Window, Collioure* as seen below it is a vibrant piece depicting an open window overlooking a harbor in south of France, capturing all the classic codes of fauvism as we know it now. “Several rust-orange masts of ships with hulls painted with swipes of indigo blue, flamingo pink, forest green, and marigold orange float in the water beyond. The water is painted with parallel strokes in pale pink and butter yellow. The sky above is painted with thick, wavy lines of steel blue, periwinkle purple, and seafoam green.” “Matisse's *Open Window, Collioure* is an icon of early modernism. A small but explosive work, it is celebrated as one of the most important early paintings of the so-called fauve school, a group of artists, including André Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck, and Georges Braque.” “The effect is one of spontaneity, although the works reveal a calculated assimilation of techniques from post impressionism and neo-impressionism. *Open Window* represents the very inception of the new manner in Matisse's art.” (National Gallery Of Art)



Henri Matisse

Open Window 1905

Previously we discussed the impact Matisse's health issues had on his practice, this can be recognised especially in this later work. Notably remembered for his series of cut outs, Henri Matisse turned almost exclusively to cut paper as his primary medium when his health could no longer let him experiment with other mediums. In the late 1940s, Matisse would cut painted sheets into forms of varying shapes and sizes which he would then arrange into lively compositions. His subject would differentiate from abstract figures, plants, shapes, his environment and scenes. "Initially, these compositions were of modest size but, over time, their scale grew along with Matisse's ambitions for them, expanding into mural or room-size works. A brilliant final chapter in Matisse's long career, the cut-outs reflect both a renewed commitment to form and color and an inventiveness directed to the status of the work of art, whether as a unique object, environment, ornament, or a hybrid of all of these." Domus (2014)



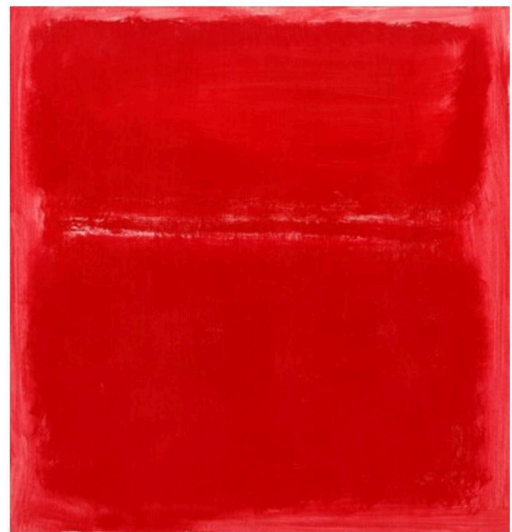
Henri Matisse
Cut Outs 1943-1954

Matisse's emphasis on colour as a means of expression rather than just as a descriptive tool inspired countless artists and helped to redefine the boundaries of visual art. He played a crucial role in the development of abstract art, influencing movements such as Expressionism and Surrealism. Additionally, his influence can also be found in other various art forms, including design and architecture in which his principles of simplicity and vibrancy continue to inspire. Matisse's belief in the emotional power of colour resonates in the works of artists such as Mark Rothko and David Hockney, who similarly prioritised colour and composition to evoke feelings. Matisse was one of Rothko's favourite artists, he even gave one of his 'classic format' paintings a title: *Homage to Matisse*. 'Rothko spent hours in front of Matisse's painting [The Red Studio](#) at the Museum of Modern Art. "When you looked at that painting," he said, "you became that color, you became totally saturated with it." The experience shaped Rothko's ideas for his own abstract paintings—like this untitled red canvas from 1970.' Milgrom (2023), see them side by side below.



Henri Matisse

The Red Studio, 1911



Mark Rothko

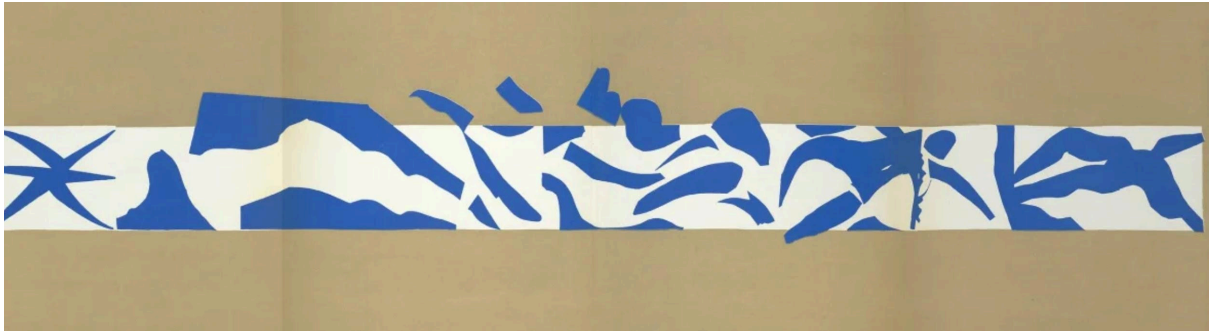
Untitled red canvas, 1970

'Matisse's flattening of space and his disregard for traditional perspective is a technique reflected in some of Hockney's works, where the depth is often suggested through colour and form rather than through linear perspective, bringing a two-dimensional, almost playful flatness to the scenes.' King (2024) 'An intriguing similarity manifests when comparing Hockney's home-made prints with Matisse's 'cut-outs. Matisse describes these works as 'carving into colour, a notion that centres technique and colour as the two key tenets of this series. Hockney's home-made prints are also driven by process and colour, in addition to further limitations of scale.' Halcyon (2024)

In 1986, David Hockney revolutionized printmaking with his abstract 'home-made' Xerox prints, experimenting with a photocopier to represent everyday objects as subtly modified 'translations' rather than exact duplicates. 'Hockney's works Bowl of Fruit (1986), Lemons and Oranges (1986) and Apples, Pears and Grapes (1978) masterfully combine skewed perspective with considered application of colour to create dynamic compositions of luscious fruits, artisanal bowls and highly decorative tablecloths.' Halcyon (2024)



David Hockney
Apples, Pears and Grapes, May 1986



Henri Matisse
The Swimming Pool, 1952

To conclude, Matisse's contributions to modern art are profound and far-fetching. His fearless, experimental exploration of colour and form not only shaped the trajectory of 20th century art but also left an enduring legacy that continues to inspire and inform artists today. I have personally found much of my inspiration within his work throughout the years. Matisse once said, " Creativity takes courage. " These words carried me way out of my comfort zone more than once and allowed me to rediscover myself as an artist, bringing some of my best works to life. Or my favourite of all, "when I put down a green, it doesn't mean grass; and when I put down a blue, it doesn't mean the sky". Colour, in short, was completely set free by Matisse from its original descriptive purpose.

Referencing

Laurence Anholt (2007) Matisse: King of Colour

Zeidler, H. (2021). Henri Matisse's medical history: Multiple health problems and impact on creativity. *Journal of Medical Biography*, 29(2), 63–70.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0967772018820763>

O Donovan, L. J. (1992). "A kind of paradise." (Henri Matisse retrospective, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York). In *America* (New York, N.Y. : 1909) (Vol. 167, Number 18, pp. 456-). America Press, Inc.

Galenson, D.W. (2008) Analyzing Artistic Innovation: The Greatest Breakthroughs of the Twentieth Century. *Historical Methods*, 41(3), 111–120.

<https://doi.org/10.3200/HMTS.41.3.111-120>

National Gallery Of Art

<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.106384.html#bibliography>

Domus (2014)

https://www.domusweb.it/en/news/2014/11/07/henri_matisse_the_cut_outs.html

National gallery of Art; Michaela Milgrom; (October 13, 2023)

<https://www.nga.gov/stories/artists-who-inspired-mark-rothko.html#:~:text=Rothko%20spent%20hours%20in%20front,untitled%20red%20canvas%20from%201970.>

Essie King, 17th of January (2024)

<https://www.myartbroker.com/artist-david-hockney/articles/david-hockney-artistic-homages#>

Halcyon (2024)

<https://www.halcyongallery.com/news/161-innovative-expressions-comparing-david-hockneys-home-made-prints-and-henri-matisse/>