

The art of Les Fauves

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The term “Fauve” has been used to group a collection of bright coloured paintings from the turn of the twentieth century. Henri Matisse remains the most identifiable painter who led this art movement, if it can be called a movement, as it never articulated a clear manifesto during its brief existence from 1904 to 1908.

The Salon tried to convince Matisse not to show the works he transported back to Paris from Southern France in 1905. On his insistence the Salon des Indépendents would not only feature his works but also those of André Derain, and others in their autumn show. Matisse and Derain had spent the summer in Collioure and returned with brightly coloured works that would become known as Fauvist. The name was given to it by a critic named Louis Vauxcelles who attended the 1905 Paris Salon d’Automne, when he described the work of a more conservative sculptor as a “Donatello” among the “fauves” or wild beasts.¹ The flattened, stylized forms and rhythmic surface designs reasonably evolved out of the work of the earlier Post-Impressionists: Cézanne, Seurat, van Gogh and Gauguin. The artists, never formally associated, moved on to work in other styles. Fauvism, despite no apparent “school” or manifesto, shared common objectives and the works exhibit distinguishable characteristics. We will investigate the distinctiveness of Fauvism by an analysis of paintings produced beginning with Henri Matisse.

*The Open Window*² was painted during the summer of 1905, when Matisse, together with André Derain, worked in the small Mediterranean fishing port of Collioure, near the Spanish border.³ This landscape looks out onto the bay at Collioure as the walls frame a scene of boats bobbing in the water. Pots of flowers are seen on the balcony or windowsill as a vine encircles the scene. The painting is expressive in its use of explosive colours. With colour, Matisse constructs space. The walls are not depicted naturalistically but rather with green-blue and fuchsia – they substantively frame the scenery seen beyond the window. The surrounding walls are a clear example of the

¹ Jean Leymarie, *Fauvism*, (Paris: Editions d’Art Albert Skira, 1959), p. 87.

² *Open Window, Collioure*, by Henri Matisse, oil on canvas 55x46cm, 1905, National Gallery of Art, DC.

³ National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, http://www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/fauve/window_1.shtml, accessed on November 26, 2005.

departure from the depiction of nature, they are not logical, they are decorations within the painting's whole. The work exemplifies Matisse's departure from a naturalistic landscape and expresses the desire to reflect the emotions of the subject matter. He investigates form through colour, intense colour. "When I put a green, it is not grass. When I put a blue, it is not the sky. – Matisse"⁴ The flowerpots' foliage juxtaposes red amid green foliage. A blue flowerpot is next to an orange one. Complementary colours⁵ are used throughout to maximize intensity and communicate raw emotion. The coincidence of complementary colours intensifies the overall composition. Looking through the open window, looking above the bobbing boats, colour creates distance – space is created through coloured bands create the sky in the horizon. The overall ensemble appears decorative rather than convincing as a perspective, in essence the image is flattened.

Derain, who also exhibited in the Salon des Indépendents during the Salon D'Automne 1905, explored many of the same concepts as Matisse. His *Mountains at Collioure*⁶ landscape is a scenic depiction and one of many landscapes painted by the artist during his stay in the small town in Southern France. Experimenting with pointillism, Derain is also concerned in creating form through colours. In his work the same colour intensity and complementary colour juxtaposition is seen. On occasion swirls of lines help contain form but are not essential to the delineation of objects. Like Matisse, shadowing is not used and a gradation of colour is not apparent, the canvas remains flat – traditional gradations are not used to elicit perspective. Interesting to note in this work is the influence of van Gogh as similar movements of colour punctuate the background and gives energy to the composition.

⁴ ibid.

⁵ Complementary colors appear opposite each other on the color wheel: red/green, blue/orange, and violet/yellow, for example. When juxtaposed with its complement, a color will look brighter and more intense than it does either standing alone or paired with other colors. Taken from ibid.
http://www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/fauve/window_3a.htm

⁶ *Mountains at Collioure*, by André Derain, oil on canvas, 81.3 x 100.3 cm, 1905, Private Collection.

Most striking in its vibrancy and absence of perspective is Matisse's *Woman in a Hat*⁷ painted in Paris after he returned from the south. Brisk strokes of colour such as blue-greens and vermilion form an energetic, expressive view of the woman. The portrait is rendered with blocks of colour in his depiction of his wife seated looking at the viewer with her flamboyant headdress, gloved hands, and sturdy cane. He uses pure colours – unblended and luminous – to obtain an immediate reaction from the viewer. This riot of colours is indifferent to nature; it is not his intent to portray the naturalistic setting or the colour realities of the figure. There is no hierarchy of colour. Despite Matisse's deliberate disharmonies of colour, the composition exudes an intuitive sense of formal order and cohesive rhythm.

Maurice de Vlaminck's early adoption of Fauvism trialed a form of pointillism in his *Tugboat on the Seine at Chatou*.⁸ A self-taught painter, he painted with Derain and we can see references to Matisse in his works. He would have visited the 1905 Salon d'Automne and was stimulated what he saw. His isolation of colour, in addition to experimenting with quick bold brushstrokes in a sort of pointillism effect, saw him experiment with the direct application of colour from tubes in order to render the colours as pure as possible. He also relies on heavy outlines to confirm contours. His use of colour and delineation of form is true to the principles of the Fauves.

During this same period, Derain continues to explore his techniques and we see a progression of the Fauvist style in *The Pool of London*.⁹ His depiction of the London harbour is one of bustle with boats coming and going in a flurry of activity. He is now painting with expanses of colour that creates form. He also continues his use of lines, at times thick and others thin to establish form. He has adopted an excited handling of colour that adds to the feeling of activity in the bustling port. He does maintain his use of complementary colour combinations clearly seen in the smaller boats where he places

⁷ *Woman in a Hat*, by Henri Matisse, oil on canvas 81x60cm, 1905, Private Collection.

⁸ *Tugboat on the Seine at Chatou*, by Maurice de Vlaminck, oil on canvas, 50.16x65.09cm, 1906, Private Collection.

⁹ *The Pool of London*, by André Derain, oil on canvas 65.7x99.1cm, 1906, Tate Gallery, London.

oranges next to blues, greens next to vermilion and yellows with violets. These juxtapositions intensify the composition and add energy to the port's activities.

Adding to the child-like impression these paintings perpetuate, Albert Marquet's *Posters at Trouville*¹⁰ further simplifies form as seen with the figures next to the beach tents and in front of the posters of this carnival scene. The figures are further flattened as his focus is on stylized, simplified form. His focus on form is further demonstrated with his use of linearity – the lines on the beach tents and the horizontal and diagonals of the posters. Colour continues to be a major focus adding to the action and excitement of the scene.

Another Fauve, Georges Braque worked in several distinct styles during his career; *The Port of Antwerp*¹¹ is characteristic of Fauvism. In 1906 Braque visited Antwerp to paint with Othon Friesz, and painted this Belgian port scene from his hotel window. Rendered decidedly Fauve in its use of complementary colours and his use of patches of colour to create form. It also features an even distribution of light characteristic of Fauvism. Despite activity and energy exuding from the work, an overall balanced arrangement is maintained through the use of colours.

Later in the Fauve period we see a simplification of form as seen in *Boy with Butterfly Net*¹² by Matisse. This work is an open-air figure study. The landscape has been simplified to a line suggesting a hill, painted solid and green with little concession to a naturalistic approach. The use of expressive colours speaks to the connections with raw emotion and feeling rather than the preoccupation on naturalistic details. The diagonal of the path suggests perspective yet all elements appear superimposed on the same plane, each element inherently solid and decidedly flat. The work is non-descriptive of nature as road, hill and sky are rendered without a naturalistic haze of gradation. This is not important as the works' purpose is not to present an accurate depiction of external reality but a depiction of inner emotion. Although a naturalistic haze, as appeared in

¹⁰ *Posters at Trouville*, by Albert Marquet, oil on canvas 65.09x81.28cm, 1906, Private Collection.

¹¹ *The Port of Antwerp*, by Georges Braque, oil on canvas 49.8x61.2cm, 1906, National Gallery of Canada.

¹² *Boy with Butterfly Net*, by Henri Matisse, oil on canvas 177.17x116.68cm, 1907, Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Renaissance paintings, is not apparent, his earlier *The Open Window* does create a sense of depth within the scenery. This earlier work's "perspective" is markedly more noticeable than the flatness displayed by the boy's figure against the mountain backdrop. This evolution of Fauvism, to a flattened plane perspective, foretells of new directions in the forthcoming chronology of modern art.

Conclusion

The establishment and evolution of the brief period known as Fauvism could be seen as an experimental time for some painters in the twentieth century – a necessary step for Matisse and many other painters who moved beyond the Fauvist style to further the evolution of modern painting. During the period known as Fauvism a consensus in approach and execution has been illustrated by this brief analysis of Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck, Marquet, and Braque. The works studied in this paper outline similarities, which have become synonymous with the Fauvists' approach. The works covered all display similar techniques, common handling of line and colour patches, even distribution of light within their works, space constructed with colour, a fondness for similar colours, an absence of shading yet an all over illumination present and a balanced arrangement of picture and content. Although no manifesto was generated, Les Fauves, were, and remain, a linked grouping of individuals that aspired to similar approaches within a brief period of their individual creative developments.

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