1906

Paul Cézanne dies at Aix-en-Provence in southern France: following the retrospectives of Vincent van Gogh and Georges Seurat the preceding year, Cézanne's death casts Postimpressionism as the historical past, with Fauvism as its heir.

Henri Matisse was very fond of a particular Cézanne dictum: "Beware of the influential master!" He often quoted it when addressing the issue of inheritance and tradition. Noting that Cézanne had revisited Poussin in order to escape from the spell of Courbet, he would take pride in the fact that he, Matisse, had "never avoided the influence of others," emphasizing the importance of Cézanne in his own formation (he is "a sort of god of painting," "the master of us all"; "if Cézanne is right, I am right," and so on). But Matisse's claim that he was strong enough to assimilate the example of a master without succumbing to it is disingenuous when it comes to Cézanne. Unlike his friend, and future fellow Fauve, Charles Camoin (1879–1965), who jauntily visited the aging painter in Aix several times, Matisse was acutely aware of the potential danger that Cézanne represented for young admirers like himself. Looking at Matisse's *Still Life with a Purro I*, or his *Place des Lices, Saint-Tropez*, both painted in the summer of 1904, one cannot help but think of a statement he made half a century later (it was one of his last): "When one imitates a master, the technique of the master strangles the imitator and forms around him a barrier that paralyzes him."

The four evangelists of Postimpressionism

The year 1904 was when Cézanne, cut off from a world that had ridiculed him all his life, finally attained celebrity. Imposing articles were published about him (notably an essay by Émile Bernard [1868–1941]); dealers other than Ambroise Vollard, his lone official supporter since 1895, started gambling on him (he had a one-man show in Berlin); and in the fall, a mini-retrospective of his work (with thirty-one paintings) was presented at the Salon d'Automne, one of the two annual Parisian art fairs of the time (three years later, in 1907, its spring equivalent, the Salon des Indépendants, would top this event with an exhibition double in size).

A document from 1905 provides a window onto the atmosphere of the Parisian art world at the time. The poet-critic Charles Morice's "Enquête sur les tendances actuelles des arts plastiques" (Investigation of Current Trends in the Plastic Arts) presented the answers to a questionnaire that its author had sent to artists of various persuasions. The question that received the longest and most passionate replies was "What do you think of Cézanne?" (Matisse did not bother to give his obvious answer). The rise of Cézanne's reputation was then unstoppable: by the time he died, in October 1906, his appeal was so pervasive that his foremost champion, the painter-theoretician Maurice Denis (1870–1943)—who had paradoxically seen him as the savior of the moribund tradition of French classicism—cried foul and berated the work of his many followers as either too derivative or, in the case of Matisse, nothing less than a betrayal.

Morice's "Investigation" helps us to put this sudden hype surrounding Cézanne into context. He had bluntly asked: "Is Impressionism finished?" Then, more diplomatically: "Are we on the eve of something?" and "Must the painter expect everything from nature, or must he only ask from it the plastic means to realize the thought that is in him?" These questions were followed by a request for an evaluation of the work of Whistler, Fantin-Latour, and Gauguin, as well as that of Cézanne. If the query about Gauguin was to be expected, since Morice had long been a close ▲ ally of the painter's (he had coauthored *Noa-Noa* with him), those concerning Whistler and Fantin-Latour, testifying to Morice's active participation in the Symbolist movement twenty years earlier, were incongruous (as the answers confirmed). A more savvy critic would have juxtaposed the names of van Gogh and Seurat with those of Cézanne and Gauguin in such a questionnaire, for by then it had become obvious that the new generation's loud "Yes" to Morice's sequence of anti-Impressionism questions was a cumulative effect of this quartet's coeval work.

It should be noted that van Gogh and Seurat were long dead—the first in 1890, the second, the following year—and that Gauguin, who died in 1903, had been abroad for more than a decade. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that, among the four evangelists of Postimpressionism, Cézanne should be the most present at this point. Yet, for Matisse and his peers, it was urgent to reckon with them all. Between 1903 and Cézanne's death in 1906, van Gogh, Gauguin, and Seurat had each been celebrated by several retrospective exhibitions (with their attendant string of publications), sometimes with the direct involvement of Matisse. And while the personal relationships between these four father-figures of modernist painting had been marred by hostile

▲ 1903

ignorance, if not outright conflict, it now seemed possible to grasp what they had in common.

Their direct epigones had already done some of the groundwork as far as art theory was concerned. Both Denis and Bernard had advocated a synthesis between the art of Gauguin and that of Cézanne; but the most important event for Matisse and his cohorts was the serialization of Paul Signac's *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme* (From Eugène Delacroix to neo-Impressionism) in *La Revue blanche* in 1898. Not only did this treatise present Seurat's method (indifferently labeled "divisionism" or "neo-impressionism") in an orderly, accessible fashion, but, as its title made clear, it was conceived as a teleological account, as a genealogy of the "new" in art from the early nineteenth century on. There was surprisingly little emphasis on Seurat's dream or on the optical physiology theories on which it was based—the idea that the human eye could perform something like the prismatic decomposition of light in reverse, that the "divided" colors would resynthesize on the retina in order to attain the luminosity of the sun—perhaps because Signac had already admitted to himself that this was a chimera. Rather, Signac insisted on the successive "contributions" of Delacroix and of the Impressionists, understood as having paved the way for the total emancipation of pure color performed by neo-Impressionism. Within such a context, Cézanne's idiosyncratic, atomistic brush-strokes (one color per stroke, each kept conspicuously discrete) were deemed a congruent contribution consolidating the ban on the mixing of colors that had still been standard practice during Impressionism.

Matisse's first encounter with Signac's gospel was premature. After a trip to London in order to see Turner's paintings (on the advice of Cézanne's mentor, the old Camille Pissarro), he had headed for Corsica, where his art—then a murky and not-so-competent form of Impressionism—turned "epileptic," as he wrote in a panic to a friend, upon his sudden discovery of southern light. In the numerous paintings he completed in Corsica and then in Toulouse in 1898 and 1899, the feverish brush-strokes are thick with impasto, and the colors ineluctably lose their intended incandescence as the pastes mix directly on the canvas. The cardinal axiom of Postimpressionism (of whatever persuasion), that one had to "organize one's sensation," to use Cézanne's celebrated phrase, came to Matisse via Signac precisely at this point. But his attempt at following the minute procedures required by the divisionist system, during the next few months, remained frustrating. Yet this failure exacerbated his desire to comprehend the whole of Postimpressionism (he notably purchased several works by its masters—then a considerable financial sacrifice for him—including a small painting by Gauguin and, above all, Cézanne's *Three Bathers*, a painting from the mid- to late 1870s that he would treasure like a talisman until he donated it to the city of Paris in 1936).

Cohabiting with these few works and never missing a Postimpressionist show constituted the major part of Matisse's modernist education prior to his second bout of divisionism. He gradually understood that despite major differences in their art, the four major Postimpressionists had all stressed that if color and line were to be celebrated, if their expressive function were to be enhanced, they had to become independent from the objects they depicted. Further, these artists showed Matisse that the only way to assert this autonomy of the basic elements of painting was first to isolate them (as a chemist would do) and then to recombine them into a new synthetic whole. Although Seurat had erred when he sought to apply this experimental method to the immateriality of light, that unreachable Holy Grail of painters, his analysis / synthesis process resulted in the apotheosis of the physical, nonmimetic components of painting, and it was such a return to basics, Matisse was now ready to see, that governed Postimpressionism in general. Because divisionism was the only Postimpressionist branch that came with an explicit method, it was a good place from which to start again. When Signac invited Matisse to spend the summer of 1904 in Saint-Tropez, Matisse was still trying out the various Postimpressionist dialects, but he was a far more seasoned modernist than he had been in 1898. Even though it was now harder for Matisse to play the apprentice, the timing was right.

Matisse comes of age to lead the Fauves

As far as Signac was concerned, the anxious and reluctant Matisse was finally turning out to be his best pupil: Signac purchased *Luxe, calme et volupté* **[1]**, the major canvas that Matisse completed in Paris upon his return from Saint-Tropez and exhibited at the 1905 Salon des Indépendants (where both van Gogh and Seurat had a retrospective). Was it the idyllic subject matter that particularly seduced Signac—five naked nymphs picnicking by the seashore under the eyes of a crouched, dressed Madame Matisse and those of a standing child wrapped in a towel? Or was it the title derived from Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), a rare direct literary allusion in Matisse's oeuvre? Whatever the case, Signac chose not to notice the heavy colored contours wriggling all over the composition in defiance of his system. But when Matisse sent *Le Bonheur de vivre* to the Salon des Indépendants of the subsequent year, Signac was incensed by precisely such elements in this canvas, and by the undivided flat planes of color. Between these two events, the Fauve scandal had taken place at the infamous 1905 Salon d'Automne.

As the British critic, painter, and teacher Lawrence Gowing remarked, "Fauvism was the best prepared of all the twentieth-century revolutions." But one should add that it was also one of the shortest: it lasted but a season. True, most of the Fauves had known each other for years and had long considered the older Matisse as their leader (between 1895 and 1896, Albert Marquet [1875–1947], Henri Manguin [1874–1949], and Charles Camoin were his colleagues in the studio of Gustave Moreau, the only oasis of freedom at the École des Beaux-Arts, and when he switched to the Académie Carrière after Moreau's death in 1898, he met André Derain, who soon introduced him to Maurice de Vlaminck [1876–1958]). But the initial spark can be traced to Matisse's visit to Vlaminck's studio, at Derain's urging, in February 1905. Matisse had then just

1 • Henri Matisse, *Luxe, calme et volupté*, 1904–5
Oil on canvas, 98.3 × 118.5 (38¾ × 46⅝)

finished *Luxe, calme et volupté*, of which he was rightfully proud, but now he felt unsettled by the coloristic violence of Vlaminck's production. It would take him the whole summer, which he spent with Derain in Collioure, close to the Spanish border, to get over Vlaminck's jejune audacity. Spurred by Derain's presence, and by the visit they paid together to a trove of Gauguin's works, he painted nonstop for four consecutive months. The results of this strikingly productive campaign were the key works of what was soon to be called Fauvism.

Upon seeing the academic marbles of a now long-forgotten sculptor in the middle of the room where the work of Matisse and his friends Derain, Vlaminck, Camoin, Manguin, and Marquet was exhibited at the 1905 Salon d'Automne, a critic exclaimed "Donatello chez les fauves!" ("Donatello among the wild beasts!"). The label stuck—perhaps the most celebrated baptismal episode of twentieth-century art—in large part because the uproar was considerable. Matisse's Fauve canvases—*The Woman with the Hat* **[2]** in particular, painted shortly after his return from Collioure—provoked the crowd's hilarity as no work had done since the public display of Manet's *Olympia* in 1863, and news that this infamous painting had ▲ been purchased (by Gertrude and Leo Stein) did not calm the sarcasm of the press. Not only did Matisse's associates benefit from his sudden fame, but the idea that he was the head of a new school of painting crystallized, and indeed his art was emulated (the initial Fauves were soon joined by others such as Raoul Dufy [1877–1953], Othon Friesz [1879–1949], Kees van Dongen [1877–1968] and, ● momentarily, Georges Braque [1882–1963]). But while his acolytes, with the exception of Braque, got forever stuck in the exploitation (and banalization) of the pictorial language invented during the summer of 1905, for Matisse the Collioure explosion had been only a beginning: it marked the moment when he finally achieved the synthesis of the four trends of Postimpressionism that had captivated him, and laid the ground for his own system, whose first fully fledged pictorial manifestation would be *Le Bonheur de vivre*.

▲ 1907 ● 1911, 1912, 1921a, 1944b

Roger Fry (1866–1934) and the Bloomsbury Group

Undoubtedly the most passionate supporter of advanced French painting in the English-speaking world at the beginning of the twentieth century was the British artist and critic Roger Fry. It was he who, with his 1910 exhibition "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" at the Grafton Gallery, first introduced the work of Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, Matisse, and others to an incredulous London public, in the process coining the now-familiar term "Postimpressionism." He followed the show with a second in 1912, again at the Grafton Gallery, "The Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition."

Fry was one of the most prominent members of the Bloomsbury Group, a shifting community of artists and writers in London during the opening decades of the twentieth century that included the novelist Virginia Woolf and her husband Leonard; her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, and Bell's lover Duncan Grant; the Strachey brothers, James and Lytton, both writers; and the economist John Maynard Keynes.

Fry's aestheticism and passion for avant-garde French art formed part of the Group's model for a life devoted to the minute analysis of sensation and of consciousness. As the poet Stephen Spender described it: "Not to regard the French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters as sacrosanct, not to be an agnostic and in politics a Liberal with Socialist leanings, was to put oneself outside Bloomsbury." In his 1938 essay "My Early Beliefs," Keynes tried to convey the sensibility of the Group:

> *Nothing mattered except states of mind, our own and other people's of course, but chiefly our own. These states of mind were not associated with action or achievement or with consequences. They consisted in timeless, passionate states of contemplation and communion, largely unattached to "before" and "after." Their value depended, in accordance with the principle of organic unity, on the state of affairs as a whole which could not be usefully analyzed into parts."*

The example Keynes gives of such a state is of being in love:

> *The appropriate subjects of passionate contemplation and communion were a beloved person, beauty and truth, and one's prime objects in life were love, the creation and enjoyment of aesthetic experience and the pursuit of knowledge.*

Virginia Woolf's recollection of Fry illustrates many of Keynes's characterizations of Bloomsbury, such as the pursuit of "timeless, passionate states of contemplation and communion, largely unattached to 'before' and 'after'" whose "value depended, in accordance with the principle of organic unity, on the state of affairs as a whole which could not be usefully analyzed into parts." Accordingly, she describes Fry's lectures at the Queen's Hall in London in 1932, and the effect they had on their audience:

> *He had only to point to a passage in a picture and to murmur the word "plasticity" and a magical atmosphere was created. He looked like a fasting friar with a rope round his waist in spite of his evening dress: the religion of his convictions. "Slide, please," he said. And there was the picture—Rembrandt, Chardin, Poussin, Cézanne—in black and white upon the screen. And the lecturer pointed. His long wand, trembling like the antenna of some miraculously sensitive insect, settled upon some "rhythmical phrase," some sequence; some diagonal. And then he went on to make the audience see—"the gem-like notes; the aquamarines; and topazes that lie in the hollow of his satin gowns; bleaching the lights to evanescent pallors." Somehow the black-and-white slide on the screen became radiant through the mist, and took on the grain and texture of the actual canvas.*
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> *He added on the spur of the moment what he had just seen as if for the first time. That, perhaps, was the secret of his hold over his audience. They could see the sensation strike and form; he could lay bare the very moment of perception. So with pauses and spurts the world of spiritual reality emerged in slide after slide—in Poussin, in Chardin, in Rembrandt, in Cézanne—in its uplands and its lowlands, all connected, all somehow made whole and entire, upon the great screen in the Queen's Hall.*

Fry's conviction that aesthetic experience could be communicated by bringing another to perceive a work's organic unity, and its accompanying feature of "plasticity," led to a style of verbal exposition focused exclusively on the formal character of a given work. Consequently, his writing has been labeled "formalist." Trying to convey Fry's pursuit of perceptual immediacy, Woolf recounts his words about looking at pictures: "I spent the afternoon in the Louvre. I tried to forget all my ideas and theories and to look at everything as though I'd never seen it before.... It's only so that one can make discoveries.... Each work must be a new and a nameless experience." It is possible to discover Fry's capture of this "new and nameless experience" in the essays he wrote, some of which are collected in *Vision and Design* (1920) and *Transformations* (1926).

2 • Henri Matisse, *The Woman with the Hat*, 1905
Oil on canvas, 81.3 × 60.3 (32 × 23¾)

Matisse's system

What one witnesses first in Matisse's Fauve output is the progressive abandonment of the divisionist brush-stroke: Matisse retains from Signac's tutoring the use of pure color and the organization of the picture plane through contrasts of complementary pairs (this is what ensures the picture's coloristic tension), but he relinquishes the most easily recognizable common denominator of Cézanne and Seurat: their search for a unitary mode of notation (the pointillist dot, the constructive stroke) that could be used indifferently for the figures and the ground. And other major traits of Postimpressionism are summoned: from Gauguin and van Gogh, flat, unmodulated planes of nonmimetic color and thick contours with a rhythm of their own; from van Gogh's drawings, a differentiation of the effect of linear marks through variations in their thickness and their closeness to one another; from Cézanne, a conception of the pictorial surface as a totalizing field where everything, even the unpainted white areas, plays a constructive role in bolstering the energy of the picture.

The moment when Matisse "gets" Cézanne—and stops merely trying to imitate him, as he had done in the past—is also his farewell to the tedium of pointillism: while Signac had advocated filling the composition outward from any area (or more precisely, from any line of demarcation) chosen as a point of departure, the myriad dots being patiently added in a sequence preordained by the "law of contrasts," Matisse found out that he could not follow this myopic, incremental procedure. As is made clear by one of the few unfinished canvases from the Fauve season, *Portrait of Madame Matisse* **[3]**, Matisse, like Cézanne, works on all areas of his picture at once and distributes his color contrasts so that they echo all over the surface (note, for example, the way the triad orange / green-ocher / red-pink is disseminated and calls in turn for various neighboring greens). There is a gradual process, to be sure, but it concerns the level of color saturation: a color harmony is determined at first in a subdued mode (it was at this point that *Portrait of Madame Matisse* was interrupted), then it is heated up, all parts of the canvas being simultaneously brought to a higher pitch. Would the public of the Salon d'Automne have found *The Woman with the Hat* less offensive if Matisse had shown with it this abandoned work? Would the piercing dabs of vermilion, the palettelike fan, the rainbow mask of the face, the harlequin background, the dissolution of the very hat's unity into a shapeless bouquet, the telescoped anatomy, as seen through a zoom lens—would all this have seemed less arbitrary to the laughing crowd if Matisse had allowed them a glimpse at his working method? Nothing is less certain. *The Open Window* **[4]**, now perhaps the most celebrated of the Fauve canvases, was no less decried at the

3 • Henri Matisse, *Portrait of Madame Matisse*, 1905
Oil on canvas, 46 × 38 (18⅛ × 15)

4 • Henri Matisse,
***The Open Window*, 1905**
Oil on canvas, 55.2 × 46.4
(21¾ × 18¼)

Salon, and yet it is less aggressive than the others, and more transparent about its procedures: it is easy to sort out the pairs of complementary colors that structure it, make it vibrate and visually expand, and that order our gaze never to stop at any given point.

Shortly after the Fauve salon, Matisse, reflecting upon his achievement of the past few months, stumbled upon an axiom that would remain one his guidelines all his life. It can be summarized by the statement, "One square centimeter of any blue is not as blue as a square meter of the same blue," and indeed, speaking about the red planes of his *Interior at Collioure (The Siesta)* from c.1905–6, Matisse would marvel at the fact that, although they looked to be of a different hue, they had all been painted straight out of the same tube. Discovering that color relations are above all surface-quantity relations was a major step. Struck by a statement Cézanne had made about the foundational unity of color and drawing, he had been complaining to Signac that in his work, and particularly in *Luxe, calme et volupté*, so cherished by the older artist, the two components were split and even contradicting each other. Now, through his equation "quality = quantity," as he often put it, he understood why for Cézanne the traditional opposition between color and drawing was necessarily annulled: since any single color can be modulated by a mere change of proportion, any division of a plain surface is in itself a coloristic procedure. "What counts most with colors are relationships. Thanks to them and them alone a drawing can be intensely colored without there being any need for actual color," wrote Matisse. In fact, it is very probable that Matisse made this discovery about color while working on a series of black-and-white woodcuts in the beginning of 1906, and then set himself up to apply or to verify it in *Le Bonheur de vivre* **[5]**.

5 • Henri Matisse, *Le Bonheur de vivre* (The Joy of Life), 1906
Oil on canvas, 174 × 240 (68½ × 94⅞)

A parricide in paint

The largest and most ambitious work he had painted so far, *Le Bonheur de vivre* constituted his sole entry at the 1906 Salon des Indépendants. Six months after the Fauve scandal, the stakes were high: it was all or nothing, and Matisse carefully planned his composition in the most academic fashion, establishing first the decor from sketches made at Collioure and then planting, one by one, the figures or groups of figures that he had studied separately. But if the elaboration of this vast machine had been academic, the result was not. Never had flat planes of unmodulated pure color been used on such a scale, with such violent clashes of primary hues; never had contours so thick, also painted in bright hues, danced such free arabesques; never had anatomies been so "deformed," bodies melting together as if made of mercury—except perhaps in Gauguin's prints, which Matisse had revisited during the summer. With this bombshell, he wanted definitively to turn over a page of the Western tradition of painting. And to make sure that one got the message, he reinforced it by means of a cannibalistic attack at the iconographic level.

Scholars have painstakingly pursued the vast array of sources that Matisse convoked in this canvas. Ingres is predominant (he had a retrospective at the 1905 Salon d'Automne, with his *The Turkish Bath* and *The Golden Age* prominently displayed), as is the Postimpressionist quartet; but Pollaiuolo, Titian, Giorgione, Agostino Carracci, Cranach, Poussin, Watteau, Puvis de Chavannes, Maurice Denis, and many more painters are also invited to this ecumenical banquet. New guests keep being discovered; the whole pantheon of Western painting seems to be quoted—back to the very origin, since even prehistoric cave painting can be traced in the contours of the goats on the right. This medley of sources goes hand in hand with the stylistic disunity of the canvas and the discrepancies of scale—yet further rules of the pictorial tradition that Matisse deliberately upsets.

And that is not all: behind the paradisiacal imagery of the frolicking nymphs, behind the happy theme (the Joy of Life), the painting has a somber ring to it. For if the pastoral genre to which the canvas refers established a direct connection between physical beauty, visual pleasure, and the origin of desire, it was also based on a solid anchoring of sexual difference—something that, as Margaret Werth

has shown, Matisse perturbs here in countless ways. Werth starts by observing that the shepherd flutist, the only male figure in the painting, had initially been conceived as a female nude; she then notes that the sexual attributes of the other flutist, the large nude in the foreground, also clearly female in a study, were suppressed; that all the figures either have counterparts or form couples, but that all of them—apart from the shepherd and the "Ingresque" nude standing on the left, gazing at the spectator—are de-anatomized. (The culmination of this sadistic assault on the body is provided by the couple kissing in the foreground, two bodies—one of indeterminate sex—virtually melded with a single head.) The montagelike nature of the composition, with "disjunctive transitions" that are "characteristic of dream images or hallucination," leads Werth to construct a psychoanalytic interpretation of the painting as a phantasmatic screen, a polysemic image conjuring up a series of contradictory sexual drives corresponding to the polymorphous infantile sexuality that Freud uncovered (narcissism, auto-eroticism, sadism, exhibitionism)—a catalog that revolves around the Oedipus complex and the concomitant castration anxiety.

At all levels (formal, stylistic, thematic), the painting is parricidal. The dancers of *Le Bonheur de vivre* celebrate the definite toppling of a dreaded authority—that of the academic canon legislated by the École des Beaux-Arts. But Matisse let us know that the resulting freedom is not without risks, for whoever kills the symbolic father is left without guidance and must endlessly reinvent his own art in order to keep it alive. As such, this canvas opens the gates of twentieth-century art. YAB

FURTHER READING

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