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Theories and Practices of Abstraction

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Paper 1

### Beauty & The Avant-Garde: In Relation to Matisse

Artistic avant-garde approaches and beauty have not always appeared in a synonymous relationship. To begin we must understand the radicalism of the “ugly” - of the work that was not seen as a depiction of realism, but rather a deconstruction of common visuals to create a truer representation of individual reality. Artists recognized by the Fauves movement, Cubists, Dadists, Expressionists and abstract workers of all denominations, were realistically after the passion of expression, rejecting the primary goal of imitation, and in turn created visual distortions that allowed for an intimate and personal response to the world around them. These depictions of an inner self may not have been considered traditionally accepted as “beautiful”, however we must recognize the courageous act of intimacy through self expression as an act of beauty itself.

In relation to artist Henri Matisse, beauty played a significant role, while still not being the primary purpose of his work throughout the decades of his career. In works such as *The Dance* (1909-10), the oil on canvas painting brings forward five rhythmic dancing figures in a relatively flat, and empty landscape. Through this flatness and use of solidified colors rather than a conservative chiaroscuro approach, Matisse concentrates on energy of the figures, allowing the mind to centrally focus on movement

rather than a highly detailed background space that suggests outlying themes. There is a shattering of the ideas of beauty through these traditional illusions (SmarrHistory). Also in conversation, the simplification of not only the forms, but the two-toned background as well, that emphasizes the “decorative” qualities of the work- “the spaces between the figures are just as important as the figures themselves, and we are encouraged to read the painting both as a depicted scene and as a pattern or arrangement of forms” (Gaiger, 45). Furthermore, there is certainly an ode to traditional anatomical compositions, but there also is a sort of oddity in the movements and gestures of the nude figures as well. The balance and harmony of these figures (though tension is created through the stretch of fingers just barely missing the next to complete a whole circle), allows for a compositional structure that creates an internal arrangement that expresses emotion in a subtle and not outwardly expressive way. In this piece, the approach to beauty is tenuous, as Matisse did not prioritize the importance of it. Rather, the composition was allowed to be easily digestible (and therefore possibly considered as decorative), and in turn became subjectively beautiful as its simplicity allows the viewer to relish in the movement and intimate moment of the figures.

In response to Matisse’s fascination with the Divisionist technique that called for applying paint in small touches, his work *Luxe, calme et volupté* (1904-5), emerged during a trip to the seaside. The work that sports highly saturated brushstrokes while allowing the white of the canvas to shine through, certainly pays tribute to the classical paintings of the past, while also becoming remarkably radical in its depiction of the scene at hand. In a traditional sense of calm and beauty artists associated with Pointillism were frequently concerned with optical illusions and color palettes that paid

homage to the everyday; however Matisse was completely disinterested in such an approach, though technically speaking, his Divisionist application somewhat replicated the approach of Pointalists. Matisse was more involved with the “convention and spontaneity of expression” (Gaiger 41) through his immensely imaginative use of color. The tremendousness of contrast through the recognition of classical forms and structure against the more unexplored approach of color and paint application creates a wonderful juxtaposition, and conversation into the ideals of beauty. In this work, it can certainly be noted that classical beauty is something that artists including Matisse are still drawing from, and gathering importance from. The unconventional approach to this recognition of the classic however, is where the question of beauty comes in- is the expansion of something to becoming more intimately expressive, then not beautiful to the larger masses?

In works such as Matisse’s, it is known that there is a cultural significance and draw from the works created before him. However, through an excessive need to express an inner reality, viewers are able to see the distortion and color manipulation that allowed for a conglomeration of stylistic approaches that were deemed as radical and therefore subjectively not beautiful. It cannot be for certain concluded that beauty meant less, or nothing, to Matisse nor Expressionists or Fauvists alike. However it must be said that the unrelenting need for self expression, is a practice and process that is a beautiful form of human nature. The beauty of the short lived movement allowed for expansion of abstraction in every direction “or to some kind of neotraditionalism” (Britannica).

The quoted subjectivity of beauty was originally strictly mandated to the classical forms of art, and to true renditions of a shared reality. But through Matisse and endless forms of Expressionism, that standard began to waiver. Matisse and Fauvism created a bold departure from traditional standards of beauty that consequently has left an enduring mark on the art world, challenging conventional perceptions and fostering a more liberated approach to aesthetics. Through vibrant colors, distorted forms, and raw emotional expression, Matisse and fellow Expressionists shattered the confines of realism, inviting viewers to embrace a new, subjective interpretation of beauty. By celebrating individuality within personal realities and rejecting societal norms, these artists sparked a revolution in artistic expression that continues to inspire and influence contemporary art movements, reminding us that true beauty lies not in conformity, but in the fearless exploration of the human experience.

Image Appendix:



Henri Matisse, *The Dance*, 1909-10, oil on canvas, State Heritage Museum



Henri Matisse, *Luxe, calme et volupté*, 1904-5, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

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