

FAUVISM AND ITS COLOR

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The basic premise to early 20th century avant-garde art was that painting should offer an equivalent to nature and not an imitation of it.¹ This freedom is implied by the pre-sense of color being used as a non-descriptive element rather than to describe subjects in a realistic manner. This freeing of color from formal description was the basis of fauvism.

Fauvism was a synthetic movement seeking to include and expand art styles from the immediate past. It looked back on the means in which Gauguin, van Gogh, Seurat, the Nabis, and the Neo-Impressionists approached color. Color was being used to designate emotions, thoughts, and ideas, rather than just to enhance the realistic rendering of subject matter. Fauvism was neither a school nor a system; it was merely chance encounters and common aspirations of a group of young independent painters, who reacted more or less alike to the climate of the times.²

Matisse was the central figure in the Fauve group. His early law studies would have provided him with a secure future, but in 1890 while recovering from an appendicitis operation he discovered his great love for painting. A year later he persuaded his father to allow him to go to Paris to attend painting classes at the Julian Academy, where he was taught by Bouguereau and Ferrier. Matisse, however, could not agree with their illustrious style of painting nor their method of teaching and was in fact thrown out of the life class. Through this he was lucky enough to be noticed by Gustave Moreau at the École des Arts Décoratifs. Moreau's greatest faculty was his intelligence and

curiosity, and his ability to transform his own learnings into communicative teaching. He insisted on the necessity of studying and copying the old masters in the art galleries. Yet he would also tell his students not to be content in going to the galleries, but to go into the streets too. He encouraged individuality.

With these teachings, Matisse went to work at copying the masters. He started on the Dutch masters with a free copy of a still life by de Heem.² Matisse then went on to copy the styles of more contemporary works. His ambition seemed to be to synthesize the modern tradition of painting as it existed. Moreau had said that Matisse was born to simplify painting.

Matisse's approach to Impressionism came to a peak with his work, "The Dinner Table" (1897).³ With a common theme of French painting, the subject matter has a rich effect of Impressionism that glows with shimmering color. In another work, "Still Life with Fruit Dish" (1897-98),³ one can sense Matisse's understanding of the strong feelings intense colors can convey. The shadows thus rendered in high chromatic colors give a sense of strength and power instead of being presented in terms of neutral values.

Once he understood how to control the power of high intensity colors, Matisse continued expanding his ideas of art by learning to construct a painting exactly. He was guided in this by the work of Cézanne, whose painting "Three Bathers," he kept in his studio most of his life.³ In Matisse's painting, "Carmelina" (1903),³ the essential lesson from Cézanne is not forgotten: that the painting has to be planned as though by a gifted architect. Cézanne's secret was to put down only those elements that are essential to the artist's idea.

Through the study of Cezanne, Matisse learned how to simplify his art. "Carmelina" has the sensation of a well constructed design. The forms and colors are crisp and clear. The colors are as well constructed as the forms, yet Matisse's use of color was soon to burst forth with a power of its own.

Matisse then went on to study the style of Seurat and Pointillism. Pointillism consisted of a novel brush stroke and a completely scientific use of color. Each color was applied in exact diamond-shaped dots and every color was accompanied by its complementary color, the one that would bring it out and raise it to its maximum strength. The use of the dots of pure color was a projection of the Law of Simultaneous Color Contrast by Eugene Chevreul,⁴ who stressed that a spot of pure color gave theretinal impression of a halo of its complementary color around it: orange rimmed with blue, red rimmed with green, purple with yellow. The interference of these aureoles meant that each color changes its neighbor. Color perception then became a matter of interference.

The use of the dot served two purposes. One was practical in that at normal viewing distance the dots of pure color begin to blend in the viewer's eye to become a wide range of vibrating tones and shapes. The other was that an impersonal, almost mechanical brushwork preserved the scientific integrity of the Pointillist work.

Matisse tried to adapt himself to the method but found he could no more make his brush conform to arbitrary laws of optical mixture than he could contain his sense of color within scientific guidelines.³ Matisse's attempt at Pointillism shows his individualistic handling of color theory. In his "Luxe, Came et Volupte" (1904-05),³ the dots become heavier, more rectangular, brush strokes.

Matisse, however, discarded Pointillism the same year he adopted it. He was too imaginative an artist to be restricted by rules in his preoccupation with the relationship of color.³

The anxiety of Fauvism was that the artists, being encumbered with all the techniques of the past and present, asked themselves, what next? The Fauvists were not creating a new movement just to create one, but they carried existing styles to their logical conclusion. In a way, Fauvism differs from other movements. It wasn't strongly against any previous movement but it merely combined them and continued their goals to a final revelation.

The liberation of color from form as expressed in the works of Gauguin, van Gogh, Seurat, the Nabis, and the Neo-Impressionists, were all important in the collaboration of ideas on color in the Fauve Movement. Gauguin's use of color pointed to the future and a belief that colors could act like words. He believed color held an exact counterpart to every feeling and emotion. It was not used to describe, but to express. Color could claim the liberty of thought itself, and thus become more of a gift than a requirement.³

Van Gogh also used color in an expressive manner. He redefined nature in such a way so that the viewer forgets the reality of the nature which the artist worked from, and is only aware of the final reality of the painting. Here, reality of color yields to expression.⁵

Through Seurat, the scientific theory of color was examined and continued by the Fauves, with the use of intense color juxtapositions. All of these artists and styles continued and strengthened the liberation of color as a nondescriptive element.

The emphasis of Fauvism is on the expressive potential of color. Strong vibrant color was being used in a nondescriptive manner, independent of nature. In Fauvism, color serves a structural purpose that line and composition fulfill in other styles.⁶ Color was used in a combination of expressive, decorative, and scientific manners. They used strong, intense colors straight out of the tube, purposefully detaching color from its descriptive manner.

This movement brought forth a thrust in which color and expression were used in painting. The Impressionistic sense of expressive color was to enhance a mood or an atmosphere. Their approach was less about color theory than it was a personal view or personal feelings toward colors. The Fauves approach to color was not in creating an atmosphere or overall emotion. It was to use color as an element in and of itself and not simply to enhance other elements in the work. Color worked to create certain vibrations on the viewer's retina, which created a tension or sensation of power.

The Fauve color is not a highly decorative art or an ornament but is purposely there as structure. It is color as an expression of tensions. Its color is more intense than that of Neo-Impressionism and it does not accentuate a romantic, mystical or sentimental view on a subject. It is used in a more expressive intuitive manner than the binding scientific theory of Pointillism, and it deals more with the effects of high chromatic color than the subtle somber expressive qualities of impressionism.

Their use of color leans toward color theory only in that certain juxtapositions of intense colors affect the retina in different ways. Yet, the decisions of the colors and where to put them are also achieved

intuitively. The colors are adjusted until they express the desired tensions.

The Fauves continued to paint the objective world, i.e., landscapes, figures, portraits, and still lifes. They made these subjects abstract by detaching color from its descriptive function causing it to act independently as form and expression instead of merely descriptive. Their idea was not to mimic nature but to recreate the sense of heightened vitality, power and force, that one gets from looking at nature.⁷ This sense of power/force is achieved in different ways through color. When two colors of varying yet high intensity are laid next to each other. This creates in the viewer's eye a sense of vibration or a tension that brings forth the expression of power or excitement. The use of certain colors is then purposeful. The artist wants to put down color so that it acts directly upon the viewer's nervous system. In this way, Fauvism combines color theory with color as expression.

A good example of color used in a Fauve manner is Matisse's work, "Woman With the Hat (Mme. Matisse) (1905).³ Matisse thoroughly detaches color from its descriptive function and it begins to act as shapes and forms. Intense color juxtapositions are highly planned compositional elements. The forcefulness of certain intense colors are kept in balance by the surrounding tones, yet they still convey a presence of power or vitality.

Fauvism's contribution to modern painting revolves around its freeing of color from its descriptive function. The Fauves unique use of color brought a new dimension to modern painting with an intuitive use of intense color juxtapositions. It is not based on tightly

controlled color theory but on an intuitive inner sense that creates strong, vibrant reactions in the viewer's eyes. It conveys a new sense of color as expression, not color as mood or emotion, but pure power. Fauvism helped loosen the reins on color as a descriptive element. It brought forth color as an element in and of itself.

ENDNOTES

¹John Elderfield. The "Wild Beasts" Fauvism and Its Affinities. New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976.

²H. H. Arnason. History of Modern Art. New Jersey, New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2nd edition.

³John Russell. The World of Matisse, 1869-1954. Time-Life Books, New York. Time, Inc., 1969.

⁴Robert Hughes. Shock of the New. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1981.

⁵René Hoyghe. Gauguin. Crown Publishers, Inc., New York.

⁶Amy Goldin. "Forever Wild: A Pride of Fauves." Art in America, May-June, 1979, pp. 90-93.

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