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The decorative and the "culte de la vie:" Matisse and Fauvism

Traditional histories of Fauvism describe a group of progressive young artists who burst onto the scene in 1905, with a display in Gallery seven of the now notorious Salon d'Automne of that year. According to the popular myth they outraged critics and artists alike with their daring, brightly colored works. These unconventional paintings won them the label of "wild beasts" (*les fauves*) with all its connotations of instinctive, spontaneous expression. Although this myth is partly based on actual critical responses, the notion of a radical group which suddenly shook the Parisian art world has been qualified and challenged. It is now well established that many of the so-called "Fauve" interests had been in evidence well before the 1905 exhibition, and that the critical response to the show was by no means that of universal outrage and consternation (often seen as a necessary qualification for avant-gardism). Several critics saw in their work - especially that of Matisse - evidence of an innovatory form of what Maurice Denis called "pure art".

The representation of Matisse as "le fauve des fauves"—as the artist whose work embodied the most significant elements of this new art movement—was a consistent response to this and other Fauve exhibitions. His work in particular was singled out in terms of its "originality" and its "expressive" qualities—hence the emphasis on Matisse in this section. The problematic nature of the label "primitive" and its shifting meanings within early twentieth-century art criticism is exemplified in both contemporary and subsequent attempts to define the primitivism of the Fauves. Critics of different political persuasions often used the term "barbare," variously translated as "primitive" or "barbarian," to describe their work. In fact, in some of the more conservative reviews of the 1905 Salon d'Automne, the associations of the label sustained a nineteenth-century pejorative meaning. The seemingly naïve aspects of works such as *Woman with a Hat* or *Open Window at Collioure* were seen as evidence of a lack of artistic competence. Hence Marcel Nicolle's now notorious comment in the *Journal de Rouen* of 1905 that these works were "nothing whatever to do with painting ... the barbaric and naïve sport of a child who plays with a box of colors he has just got as a Christmas present."

Nicolle's explicit and pejorative association between avant-garde techniques and child-like painting was a common one. The strategic avant-garde response was to appropriate the connection and invest it with value as part of a post-Gauguin re-evaluation of unsophisticated modes of painting. Many of the more liberal critics took up the "child-like" association, either satirizing the narrow philistinism it represented, or seeing it as a positive virtue. Guillaume Apollinaire for example introduced his review of the Salon d'Automne with a satirical song:

Mets to jupe en cretonne Et ton bonnet, mignonne! Nous allons fire un brin De l'art contemporain Et du Salon d'Automne	Put on your cotton skirt And your bonnet, my pet! We're going to have a good laugh At modern art and the Salon d"Automne.

Thus the seemingly child-like qualities of the Fauve works also became the main focus of contemporary debates about their "modern" status and, as we shall see, of their associations with the "decorative." The crude, unfinished appearance of some of these canvases, with areas often left unprimed and/or unpainted, characterized the style. While the critics’ focus on this aspect of Fauve work has provided endless material to bolster some of the clichés about the modern artist’s painful struggle against philistine attack, it also carried with it a complex cultural baggage, rooted in various contemporary discourses of primitivism.

The idea of the "barbarian," then, with its connotations of untamed, direct expression, was frequently associated with the “child-like” or the naïve. Both sets of associations could certainly have been read into the idea of the artist as a "wild beast," and were implicit in contemporary critical representations of the early group as the expression of "impétuosité juvénile et barbare” (“a youthful, primitive impetuosity”). Such attitudes to artistic expression may also owe something to the cult of Nietzsche, which had already spread to France by the late 1890s. In 1898, Henri Albert”s translation of the complete works, *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*, was met with great enthusiasm by many writers and intellectuals. For the French, this appeal lay partly in the range of intellectual interests with which his work could be associated. As Oppler has shown, Nietzsche”s exaltation of life and individualism could be seen to encourage individualist and anarchist tendencies, and notions of free artistic expression. On the other hand, his defense of Mediterranean culture, of "l’esprit latin contre l’esprit germanique” (“the Latin spirit against the German spirit”) could be seen to encourage a more traditionalist pro-French Latin culture. (Nietzsche himself used the labels Dionysian and Apollonian to represent similar alternative modes of artistic expression.)

It is now well documented that the early Fauves, particularly Derain and Vlaminck, who worked together in Chatou in 1901, were well versed in Nietzsche’s work, as were writers and critics such as Andre Gide, the poet Apollinaire and the art critic Andre Salmon, with whom members of the Fauve group associated. In fact both sets of Nietzschean interests summarized above could very possibly be seen to have informed Matisse’s preoccupations, and perhaps some of the technical developments which ensued in the period 1904-7. While the supposed “impétuosité barbare” of the Salon d’Automne exhibits could be identified with a Nietzschean cult of spontaneous individualism, Matisse’s slightly later interest in a more controlled mode of painting, what he called in his *Notes of a Painter* “an art of balance, purity and serenity” could be seen to fit the other Nietzschean formulation.

A possible literary connection can be found in the writings of André Gide and the cult of “Naturism.” Gide’s *Les Nourritures terrestres*, published in 1897, exalts a direct, spontaneous approach to life and sexuality, a *culte de la vie* which became the distinguishing characteristic of the Naturist movement. The specifically French concept of “joie de vivre,” the idea of reveling freely in physical sensations and direct experiences is often associated with Naturism and with Gide”s writing. In fact many supporters of the movement actually called themselves “barbarians” to signify their joyful return to natural experiences. With such ideas in common currency the label “wild beasts” was easily interchangeable with that of “barbarians,” with all its connotations of direct physical and sexual expression.

The interests summarized above have been associated with very different political attitudes within the culture of “la Belle Époque." The idea of avant-garde artists as impetuous “wild beasts” was frequently identified with anti-establishment anarchist tendencies, already visible in France in the 1880s and flourishing in response to the Dreyfus affair. This affair, which

revealed massive corruption within government institutions and the military, created a fertile climate for political and intellectual anarchism, which reached its height in the 1890s. However, the only member of the Fauve group who actively espoused anarchist causes was Vlaminck. While the other Fauves (at least during the early years of the movement) adopted a mode of spontaneous artistic expression which could be loosely associated with anarchist attitudes, this did not involve any conscious political commitment.

Attempts to relate Fauve works to specific political interests are fraught with problems, for some of Matisse's works from this period have also been associated with a more conservative bourgeois tradition. His middle-class leisure subjects, such as his Collioure landscapes and harbor scenes, or his later nudes in Mediterranean surroundings, and his more "Classical" pastoral scenes (which we will discuss shortly) have been represented in these terms. The other classicized "primitive" tradition suggested by "an art of balance and order" has been seen to embody contemporary middle-class values of order and stability, the conservative response to the destabilizing anarchism of the post-Dreyfus years. But how do we relate these sorts of interests and associations to the actual paintings, to the techniques and subject-matter employed?

Several critics have associated the seemingly naïve painting of early Fauve works with a political anarchism, although this may involve a crude causal relationship. But Matisse himself does seem to have encouraged some less overtly political associations. In the choice of title and subject-matter for his Fauve work *Bonheur de Vivre* (sometimes also called *Joie de Vivre*) he was indirectly acknowledging Naturist connotations. The work depicts naked women and men dancing, embracing and reclining in nature, a theme which recurs in the work of other Fauve painters such as Derain. Matisse"s interpretation emphasizes a lack of inhibition; there are figures dancing wildly in the background (a group later reworked in *La Danse*, 1910), while others embrace and many of the women recline in relaxed, erotic poses. But this work is also rooted in pastoral and arcadian themes popular among Symbolist painters, which can be traced back to Poussin"s pastoral subjects, in which mythological themes are enacted in carefully composed landscapes. In *Bonheur de Vivre* Matisse reworks the theme of a Classical arcadia, a peaceful idyllic environment which is also reminiscent of Bougainville's "La Nouvelle Cythere." In its subject-matter at least, Matisse's painting combines two "primitive" traditions: a classicized "primitive," and a (supposedly) more spontaneous *culte de la vie*. And both sets of associations are evoked through the relationship of the figure to the landscape. When Matisse includes the human figure (both male and female) in his Fauve landscapes, the landscape theme becomes inflected with many other layers of meaning.

Landscape painting was well established as a dominant genre in both the official Salon and the independent exhibiting societies. The Fauve painters, however, were seen to be developing a form of *paysage decoratif* (decorative landscape), which, as Roger Benjamin has argued, appears "to have been a modernist addition to the traditional Academic division between the historic landscape (paysage historique) with figures in heroic action and the rural landscape (*paysage champetre*) with its more initimate country setting." While the former was often associated with the work of Poussin, the early Impressionist landscape developed from the latter. For contemporary critics the *paysage decoratif* was one in which the subject-matter need not be of a recognizable location; it was increasingly seen as a means to a more "decorative" end. In this context the adjective "decoratif" signified a schematic or abstracted image, and could be connected with concepts of the *barbare* or *naif*, whether these terms were being used pejoratively or as a measure of the innovatory status of the work.

Matisse exhibited *Bonheur de Vivre* at the Salon des Indépendants of 1906, where it became the focus of debate about the value of "decoration." While Fauve landscapes without figures, which seemed to contemporaries to be "abstracted" landscapes, were easily assimilated into the category of the "decorative," the imagery of *Bonheur de Vivre* made it more difficult to categorize. For some critics the echoes of a reworked Classicism evoked by the frolicking and reclining figures must have jarred with the formal handling of the work. The distorted scale and perspective, the stylized rhythms, loosely painted and flattened areas of color caused Vauxcelles, for example, to blame the influence of Derain and his dreams of "pure decoration." Despite his general support of the Fauves, Vauxcelles seems to hold an ambivalent view of an art which is exclusively "decorative." By 1906 the term had become unstable, and was used both as a marker of the work's modernity, and in a more pejorative sense to signify the ornamentation of the applied arts.

I will return to the problem of these shifting associations later in this section. The point I want to make here is that for critics and artists the debate about the value or otherwise of "decorative" painting seems to have found a focus in Fauve landscape painting.

Bonheur de Vivre was only one of several landscapes by Fauve artists which reworked traditional pastoral themes, giving them a modern edge and thereby provoking critical debate. Matisse"s earlier *Luxe, calrne et volupte* (c.1904-5) suggests a similar combination of meanings. The title is from the chorus of Baudelaire"s poem about a sensual arcadia*, L'Invitation au Voyage:*

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté	Everything there is order and beauty
Luxe, calme et volupté	Luxuriance, calm and voluptuousness

The classicized "primitive" is evoked, then, by this notion of calm and order in a remote land. Yet it is also a modern leisure scene dominated by figures: women bathers are picnicking naked on a beach at St Tropez, a fishing village and holiday resort. Moreover, despite the Classical references, Matisse's use of the word "luxe" in this and other titles of works on similar themes suggests an association with a contemporary cult of "joie de vivre." The French word "luxe" has some slightly different resonances to its English equivalent "luxury"—it could also suggest voluptuousness, self-indulgence and sensuality. Thus it could be seen to relate to a cult of sensual self-indulgence identified with Naturism and the "culte de la vie." And it is not without significance that in Matisse"s work the word "luxe" is usually applied to the image of nude women, with its connotations of eroticism and sexual desire.

The handling of *Luxe, calme et volupte* also helped to place it as "modern:" although Matisse does not employ the loose spontaneous application of paint which later provoked the label "wild-beasts," the somewhat crude adaption of Neo-Impressionist techniques and the rhythmic distortions and simplifications disrupted some of the more conventional associations of a pastoral theme.

African sources

The production of so-called Fauve paintings around 1905-7 also involved a more literal form of primitivism. By 1906 Matisse, Vlaminck and Derain had all started collecting non-Western art. Vlaminck claimed (in *Dangerous Corner*) to have been the first to "discover" African art, when

he bought three statuettes in a bistro in Argenteuil around 1905; however, he was notorious for embellishing accounts of Fauve activities to give himself a leading role. The issue of which artist, or groups of artists, first "discovered" African art in ethnographical museums has been endlessly argued over by art historians. However, I want to focus on how these works were perceived by the artists and on how they were absorbed into a culture of the modern associated

The mythologized "discovery" of "primitive" sculpture raises a related problem. What aesthetic or technical aspects of three-dimensional sculptures (largely figures and masks) could be translated into the two-dimensional medium of painting? For those critics who focus on the "formal affinities" between "primitive" sculpture and modern art, this is clearly a crucial issue. It is often argued that the increased emphasis on modeling—the suggestion of sculptural effects through facetted planes—which appears in the work of Matisse and Picasso around 1906 was one of the effects of this new interest. At the same time the stylized, distorted forms of African art could also suggest aesthetic possibilities for surface design, for which the various styles from different regions in Africa offered a range of formal types.

For some artists this sculptural alternative ran counter to the Fauve emphasis on surface and the optical effects of color. But for Matisse, African art was one of many artistic sources (of which Islamic art became increasingly important to him) which encouraged him to develop his notion of the "decorative" and his belief in the importance of surface design. In the work of Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck there is little direct borrowing from specific African or Oceanic objects. Like most non-Western "primitive" sources, African art could be "pillaged" to reinforce prevailing aesthetic interests. Thus there was much in the formal structures and seemingly abstract forms of such works that could be seen to echo the already established symbolic languages of the Post-Impressionist painters, upon which Matisse and the Fauves were already building. It's no coincidence that 1906, the year in which conventions influenced by "tribal" masks (such as lozenge-shaped eyes and stylized faces) begin to appear in Fauve works was also the year of a huge Gauguin retrospective at the Salon d'Automne. The show included a large collection of paintings, sculptures and woodcuts from Gauguin's Polynesian period. In fact several of the wood reliefs in this exhibition directly influenced cylindrical wood carvings produced by Matisse at the time.

The appeal of African and Oceanic objects for the Fauves was rooted in those same interests and assumptions which underpinned the appeal of Gauguin's work for the group. They signified the exotic or the "primitive," redefined according to a Western avant-garde artistic code. Moreover, the absence of an accessible iconography or history to these objects allowed them to be easily absorbed into a modern artistic culture. This decontextualization is one of several reasons why modern artists have been accused of responding to African and Oceanic art ethnocentrically, attributing to its appearances (signifiers) twentieth-century Western meanings (signifieds.)

However, I think it's important to note that this does not involve a conscious "conspiracy" on the part of Western artists such as Matisse or Picasso to distort and misappropriate the original roles and symbolic meanings of non-Western objects. It was rather the case that they had limited ethnological knowledge or interests, and what knowledge they had was filtered through the institutional machinery, taxonomies, selection processes and colonial politics of contemporary museums, and through various popularized anthropological and academic writings and contemporary political debates. Moreover, Patricia Leighten has suggested that Picasso's use of African art suggests a further level of meaning, which engages with contemporary debates about French colonial activity. She has argued:

> The popular image of Africa in pre-First World War France (embraced by modernists as an imagined primal spiritism), the response on the left to French colonial theory, and the inflammatory debates in the press and the Chamber of Deputies in 1905-6 following the revelations of abuses against indigenous populations in the French and Belgian Congos, form an inextricable part of the power of an allusion to “Africa” in the period 1905-9 and reveal that the preference of some modernists for "primitive" cultures was as much an act of social criticism as a search for a new art.

A late Fauve work which is based on a North African theme, and in which a range of "primitive” interests seem to converge, is Matisse’s Blue Nude, *Souvenir of Biskra*, completed in 1907 and first shown in the Salon des Indépendants of that year. Matisse traveled in Algeria in 1906, visiting the oasis of Biskra, one of the towns of the Ouled Nail tribes on the northern side of the Sahara. Biskra was one of several North African towns which had featured prominently in the French colonial literature of the time, including André Gide’s *The Immoralist*, first published in 1902. Gide describes a fertile settlement of orchards, palm trees and cassia trees amidst a bleak desert, "a place full of light and shade; tranquil; it seemed beyond the touch of time; full of silence; full of rustlings - the soft noise of running water that feeds the palms and slips from tree to tree." A similar image of lush fertility in the barren desert is evoked by Matisse’s retrospective account of Biskra as "a superb oasis, a lovely and fresh thing in the middle of the desert, with a great deal of water which snaked through the palm trees, through the gardens, with their very green leaves, which is somewhat astonishing when one comes to it through the desert." Although the painting was not intended as a reconstruction of the place he had seen, the image is full of literal and symbolic references to the environment and culture of Biskra, including palm trees, lush green grass and flowers. The color blue was often used in the Matisse’s depiction of North African scenes, but without his explanation we can only speculate about reasons for the dominant use of blue in this painting. It has been suggested that it may be a reference to the blue-tinged skin of the local Berber tribe, the Tuareg, who used indigo dye in their clothing. But such literal references are difficult to prove, and it could also have been chosen by the artist for reasons associated with Symbolist aesthetics, or for a combination of reasons, including some of its local associations.

Matisse, then, has chosen an explicitly colonial subject. Since the conquest of Algiers in 1830 the country had been actively colonized by the French, and the primitivism of the work is tied to the contemporary rhetoric of colonialism. The suggestion of a lush peaceful paradise, with its connotations of "replenishment" for the civilized traveler is implicit in accounts by both Gide and Matisse, as it is in Matisse’s panted image in which a reclining sensual woman (in this case blue-skinned rather than dark-skinned) functions as another symbol of this “primitive" oasis.

In fact Matisse reworks a set of well-established nineteenth-century conventions; the female nude or "odalisque" in an oriental setting—often suggesting the harem or prostitution—was a popular Salon theme, given historic status by artists such as Delacroix and Ingres and reworked by Salon artists such as Gérôme, Lecomte du Noüy and Dinet, whose paintings on this theme we discussed earlier [in the book]. And photographic reproductions of Algerian or Arab women, posed partly nude or in "oriental" dress had become a resource for various forms of popular culture, in particular the colonial postcard. However, the various technical devices employed by Matisse upset some of the conventional expectations (both artistic and ideological)

aroused by the subject of an oriental nude. The technique appears both crude and artful. Space is ambiguous, combining a mixture of modeling—or faceting—with flatter areas of color. This spatial ambiguity is further emphasized by the odd distortions in the woman's body, which frustrate some of the associations of the odalisque pose. These distortions are indirectly related to the forms of "tribal objects," and some details, such as the bulbous breasts and exaggerated shape of the buttocks, are common features of African statuettes. The nude woman also assumes an impossible pose, a dramatic form of contrapposto, which further confuses the conventional sexual connotations of the theme.

This is not to say that some of the conventional associations are missing. On one level, this is still a voluptuous female nude luxuriating in fertile nature. The "primitive"—or colonial—subject is still implicitly gendered. Yet Matisse's image cannot be read simply as an exotic luxury item for male consumption. In this painting the means of representation are to the fore, and they serve to confuse or frustrate an easy reading of the woman as a passive (and primitive) sexual object. The distortions, the artfulness, help to produce an image which is less obviously erotic, and less clearly "feminine," in which the sexual relations are less explicitly conveyed than in the manner of Ingres' *Bain Turc*, or Dinet's *Clair de lune*.

I think it is precisely this ambiguity which provoked Louis Vauxcelles to write of this painting when it appeared in the Salon des Indépendants in 1907: "A nude woman, ugly, spread out on opaque blue grass under some palm trees." Despite the elements of a traditional odalisque pose, this woman was not desirable, but ugly. Over thirty years later, Matisse defended the work as follows: "If I met such a woman in the street, I should run away in terror. Above all I do not create a woman, I make a picture."