

Works to Know by Heart

Matisse in Focus

The Snail Teachers' Pack

LIVERPOOL
TATE

HENRI MATISSE *THE SNAIL* 1953



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'An artist must possess Nature. He must identify himself with her rhythm, by efforts that will prepare the mastery which will later enable him to express himself in his own language.'

HENRI MATISSE (1869-1954)

Matisse realised that he was destined to be an artist when his mother bought him a paintbox during a period of convalescence from appendicitis in 1889. He later recalled, 'From the moment I held the box of colours in my hands, I knew this was my life. I threw myself into it like a beast that plunges towards the thing it loves,' and his passion for pure colour stayed with him throughout his long career.

Although he received academic training at the École des Beaux-Arts and executed numerous copies after the Old Masters, his interest in modern art and his experimental approach to painting gained him a reputation as a rebellious student. Influenced by Post Impressionism, colour played a vital role in the developing visual language of Matisse. He studied Cézanne's fragmented surfaces, the emotional impact of Van Gogh's brushstrokes,

the strong outlines and flat planes of Gauguin's paintings and the colour theories of Paul Signac. During this period there was also a shared interest amongst contemporary artists in Japanese prints, African and Oceanic carvings and crafts. In an attempt to break free from what he felt were the restrictive traditions of Western art, Matisse abandoned fixed point perspective and modelling with shading as he allowed colour and line to break free, taking on a life of their own. Rather than attempting to capture a subject naturalistically, the artist's aim was to evoke his own sensual and visual responses in paint. He was not alone in this revolutionary approach; following their scandalous 1905 exhibition at the *Salon d'Automne* in Paris, Matisse along with artists including André Derain, Georges Braque, Raoul Dufy and Maurice Vlaminck became known as 'The Fauves' or 'wild beasts.'

Influenced by his travels to North Africa in the years leading up to the First World War, he began to incorporate sinuous decorative line and the bold un-modulated tones of Moorish art into his paintings of this period. Matisse's work changed stylistically throughout his long career as he experimented not only

with painting, but also sculpture, lithographs, ceramics, textiles and collage.

In his later years, confined to a wheelchair due to ill health, Matisse invented new methods for making pictures with coloured paper and scissors. His friend and great rival, Pablo Picasso later claimed that the Frenchman was his only serious competitor in 20th century art: 'All things considered, there is only Matisse.'

THE SNAIL 1953

The underlying aim of Matisse's art was to explore 'the essential character of things' and to create an art of 'balance, purity and serenity.' Produced in the final year of his life, *The Snail* typifies his childlike approach to making an image. It seems at first to be a random arrangement of brightly coloured shapes. Matisse gave the picture the alternative title *La Composition Chromatique* [Chromatic Composition] which suggests that the work may be interpreted in purely abstract terms. However, the viewer is in no doubt that this is indeed a snail – pared down to its essential form, a sense of its volume, how it occupies space and its slow, laborious movement.

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At the age of 74, Matisse began to develop the technique for his cut-outs or 'découpées' in his picture book *Jazz* 1941. Limited in mobility, following surgery for abdominal cancer he was able to work with sheets of painted paper that had been prepared for him by assistants. This opened up exciting new channels for Matisse's creative expression: 'Papier découpé', he said, 'allows me to draw in the colour. It is a simplification for me. Instead of drawing the outline and putting the colour inside it - the one modifying the other - I draw straight into the colour...'

The Snail was made in the Hôtel Régina at Nice. His secretary Mme Lydia Delectorskaya described its evolution in a letter to the Tate Gallery, 30 March 1976:

'A background of white paper - of the dimensions indicated by H.M. - was put on the wall and the assistant pinned onto it the pieces of gouached paper which H.M. passed to him indicating exactly where they should be placed. When H.M. decided that his composition was finished, it was lightly stuck to the background. The panel was taken down when H.M. needed the wall for a further work.

When later on it was sent to Lefebvre-Foinet [in Paris] to be pasted down, before anything was moved, an extremely precise tracing was made to ensure that no changes were made in the composition, not even by so much as a millimetre.'

The idea for the work originated in the many drawings that Matisse had made of snails during this period. Through refining the snail's concentric form and transforming the spiral of its shell into coloured shapes, Matisse arrived at his composition. He described the process: 'I first of all drew the snail from nature, holding it. I became aware of an unrolling, I found an image in my mind purified of the shell, then I took the scissors.'

Matisse worked with huge dressmaker's scissors that sheared through the paper with ease. Coming from a family of textile workers in Northern France, he may have been consciously returning to his roots as he shifted and rearranged the pinned shapes onto their supporting material.

Vibrant energy is created by pitting highly intensive complementary colours against

each other- red and green, orange and blue, yellow and mauve. The colourful composition brings to mind an earlier Matisse painting, *The Dance* 1909-10 which also has a spiralling sense of movement. Matisse frequently alluded to his Fauvist period during his later years: 'I am now eighty-two, I have remained the same....because all this time I have been searching for the same things, which have perhaps realised by different means.' One of the 'things' was the relationship between colour and space in his work. He wrote to his daughter in 1950:

'A Fauvist painting is made up of the consonance of several colours. They form a possible space for the spirit (as a musical chord does, I believe). The created space might be empty, like an empty room in a flat, but the space is still created.'

The space in *The Dance* releases the figures and throws them into relief with a sense of wild abandonment. The white areas of *The Snail* similarly accentuate the dense blocks of colour and their slowly, rolling movement.

Perhaps the reason why *The Snail* remains

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one of Matisse's most popular works is due to the immediacy and accessibility of its image and materials. It has a hand-made quality, with irregular edges – a human touch that helps the viewer to connect with the artist. In its simplicity, it evokes the childlike pleasure of responding to the natural world in colour, paint, paper and paste.

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ACTIVITIES

FIND OUT ABOUT:

- Matisse's career as an artist: Fauvism, Morocco, Collioure, The Cut-Outs etc. How did his artwork change? What materials did he work with? What subjects did he depict?
- Colour theory – which colours do you associate with certain moods or emotions? Carry out a survey with your friends to see which colours they assign to 'anger', 'sadness', 'joy', 'peacefulness' etc. Find out about complementary and supplementary colours.

MAKE:

- A 3D version of The Snail using boxes and coloured paper
- A cut-out version of another creature eg snake, beetle, ladybird, butterfly, fish...

DISCUSS:

- The influence of poetry and music in Matisse's art. Is there a visual equivalent for rhymes, rhythm, notes, chords etc

- Matisse's use of colour. What impact would other colours have in The Snail? Try making your own version in black and white, pastel tones, different shades of one colour etc.

Children aged 3+ can use our free Shape and Make Station in the exhibition

SNAIL TRAIL

Bookable artist-led workshops for Early Years groups
£100 for up to 15 children
Please contact our Learning Team on 0151 702 7451 or email katy.mccall@tate.org.uk for further information

FURTHER RESOURCES

Karl Buchberg, Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs, Tate Publishing, 2014

Oliver Berggruen, Max Hollein, Henri Matisse: Carving With Scissors: Masterpieces From The Late Years, Prestel Verlag, 2006

Hilary Spurling, Matisse the Master: A Life of Henri Matisse: 1909-1954, Penguin, 2006

<http://www.henri-matisse.net/biography.html>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLgSd8ka0Gs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuJKHKEBfmY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5somtBX1gC8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ob8FWxrKVZY>