

# Fauvism

*Colours became charges of dynamite. They were supposed to discharge light. Everything could be raised above the real.*

ANDRÉ DRAIN

At the 1905 Salon d'Automne in Paris, a group of artists exhibited paintings so shocking – the colours so strong and brash, their application so spontaneous and rough – that they were immediately christened *les fauves* (the wild beasts) by the critic Louis Vauxcelles. Intended as a slight, the name was accepted by the painters as an appropriate description of their methods and aims, and Fauvism has become the standard stylistic label for the ground-breaking work of this loose group of French artists working c. 1904–8. The most prominent of those artists were Henri Matisse (1869–1954), André Derain (1880–1954) and Maurice de Vlaminck (1876–1958), though others are often included (Vauxcelles called them 'Fauvettes'): Albert Marquet (1875–1947), Charles Camoin (1879–1965), Henri-Charles Manguin (1874–1949), Othon Friesz (1879–1949), Jean Puy (1876–1961), Louis Valtat (1869–1952), Georges Rouault (1871–1958, see \*Expressionism), Raoul Dufy (1877–1953), Georges Braque (1882–1963, see \*Cubism) and Dutchman Kees van Dongen (1877–1968).

Fauvism was the first of the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century to shake up the art world, but the Fauves were never a consciously organized movement with an agreed agenda, rather a loose affiliation of artists, friends and fellow students, who shared ideas about art. Matisse, the oldest and most established, soon became known as 'the king of the wild beasts'. It is in his painting *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* (Luxury, Calm and Pleasure, 1904) that many Fauve characteristics became apparent for the first time.



The scene, one to which Matisse would often like to return throughout his long career, as would other Fauves, would have been easily recognisable to the \*Impressionists – but Matisse's treatment of it is very different. With its bright palette and subjective, emancipated use of colour, it creates an atmosphere and a decorative surface rather than a descriptive scene, and in stylistic terms, it is closer to the \*Post-Impressionists and \*Neo-Impressionists. In fact it was painted during the summer of 1904 while Matisse was in St Tropez in the south of France with Neo-Impressionists Paul Signac and Henri-Edmond Cross. Like Matisse, many of the Fauves would pass through a Neo-Impressionist phase. The title of the work is taken from a line in 'Voyage à Cythère', a poem by Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), who was also an inspirational figure for the \*Symbolists and an influential critic. The Fauves shared the Symbolist attitude that art should evoke emotional sensations through form and colour, but the melancholia and moralizing of much Symbolist work was omitted in favour of a more positive embrace of life. In 'Notes of a Painter', published in *La Grande Revue* in 1908, Matisse clarified his conception of the role of art:

What I am after, above all, is expression.... I am unable to distinguish between the feeling I have for life and my way of expressing it.... The chief aim of colour should be to serve expression as well as possible.... What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he businessman or writer, like an appeasing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue.

*Luxe, Calme et Volupté* was exhibited in the spring of 1905 at the Salon des Indépendants, and Signac bought the painting immediately. Upon seeing it, Raoul Dufy was converted to Fauvism and recorded the effect it produced on him: 'In front of this picture I understood all the new principles. Impressionism lost its charm for me as I contemplated this miracle of imagination produced by drawing and colour.'

Many of the future Fauves – Matisse, Rouault, Camoin, Marquet and Manguin – studied under Gustave Moreau (see Symbolism), whose open-minded attitudes, originality and belief in the expressive power of pure colour was to



prove inspirational. Matisse said, 'He did not set us on the right roads, but off the roads. He disturbed our complacency.' His death in 1898 robbed the Fauves of sympathetic encouragement. However, in the first few years of the twentieth century, the Fauves discovered other painters, still unknown to the general public, who were to exert their own influences on their work. Paul Gauguin (see \*Synthetism) was particularly important for Matisse. In the summer of 1906, Matisse and Derain saw many unknown works by Gauguin stored at the house of Gauguin's friend Daniel de Monfried, and had a chance to study the older artist's imaginative use of colour and decorative schemes.

Vincent van Gogh (see Post-Impressionism) proved an overwhelming influence on Vlaminck, by his own account. He first saw Van Gogh's work at an exhibition in 1901, and declared shortly afterwards that he loved him more than his

own father. He adopted the habit of squeezing paint directly from the tube onto the canvas calling attention to the sheer physicality of the material, as in *Picnic in the Country* (1905). He later said, 'I was a tender-hearted savage, filled with violence.' Paul Cézanne (see Post-Impressionism) was also important to the Fauves, and his paintings became more widely known after the large retrospective in 1907; both his *Bathers* and his still lifes had a lasting impact on Matisse. At the same time as they were discovering the latest generation of the avant-garde, the Fauves were looking back to pre-Renaissance French art, which received new appreciation with an exhibition entitled 'French Primitives' in 1904. Derain, Vlaminck and Matisse were also among the first artists to collect African sculpture.

One of the key works on display at the 1905 Salon d'Automne was Matisse's *Woman with a Hat* (1905), a portrait of his wife. With its vibrant, unnatural colours and apparently frenzied brushwork, it caused a scandal. Much of the shock value was due to it being a portrait, a recognizable character, which drew attention to the distortion to which she was subjected. But while the public, and critics, viewed it with incomprehension, the dealers and collectors reacted swiftly and enthusiastically and Fauvist work

**Above: André Derain, *Three Figures Sitting on the Grass*, 1906**

African primitive art interested Matisse, Vlaminck and Derain; they admired and collected tribal masks and sculptures. Derain's use of heightened patches of colour recall Cézanne and Gauguin.

**Opposite: Henri Matisse, *Joy of Life (Bonheur de vivre: Joie de vivre)*, 1905–6** Matisse's bold arabesque contours recall Ingres, while his use of colour and figure drawing is fresh and distinctly modern.

suddenly became the most desirable on the market. The American critic Leo Stein began to collect Matisse's work (including *Woman with a Hat*, which he later described as 'The nastiest smear of paint I had ever seen'), followed by his sister, the writer Gertrude Stein, and his brother Michael and his wife. The dealer Ambroise Vollard bought the entire contents of Derain's studio in 1905 and of Vlaminck's studio in 1906. Soon the rush to buy Fauvist work spread outside France; Russian collectors Sergei Shchukin, who bought thirty-seven works, including Matisse's mural decorations *Dance* and *Music* of 1910, and Ivan A. Morozov were quick to establish collections.

By 1906, the Fauves had in fact come to be seen as the most advanced painters in Paris. *Joy of Life* (1905–6) by Matisse, purchased by Gertrude and Leo Stein, dominated the Salon des Indépendants, and the Salon d'Automne included work by all the participants of the group, a dazzling array of brightly coloured landscapes, portraits and figure scenes – traditional subjects interpreted anew. Derain painted a series of scenes of the river Thames in response to the scenes of London by Claude Monet (see Impressionism) which had been enthusiastically received when exhibited in Paris in 1904. While Monet's paintings are observations of light and atmosphere, the overwhelming theme found in Derain's work is the joy of colour. As in Monet's work, the atmosphere of London is vividly evoked, but its presentation is totally new. Derain combined aspects of the divisionist technique used by the Neo-Impressionists with the flat areas of colour of Gauguin and the tilted perspective of Cézanne to create a fresh new vision based on expressive colour.

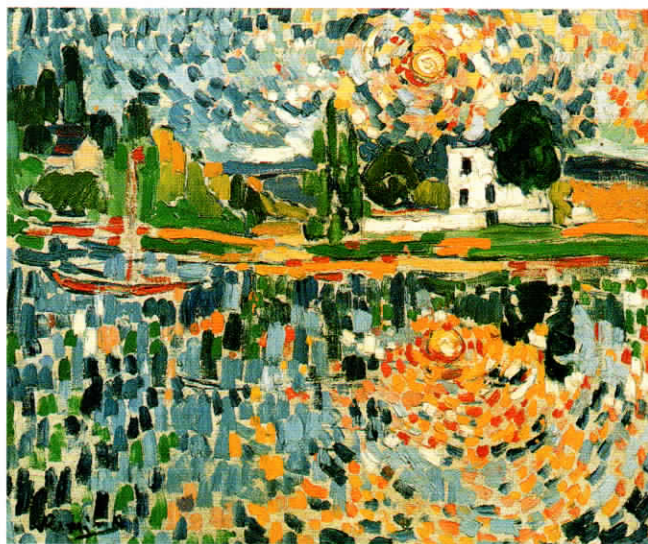
Matisse's late Fauve work, *Le Luxe II* (1907–8), shows how far he had developed and signals the direction his art would take. Like the earlier *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*, the new work presents an Arcadian scene of nudes in a landscape with figures modelled by colour and line. The Neo-Impressionism of the earlier work has been replaced by a leaner style based on simplified colour and line which work together to create light, space, depth and movement, looking forward to the type of pictorial space that the Cubists would develop. It was paintings such as this that caused the poet Apollinaire to remark later that Fauvism was 'a kind of introduction to Cubism'.

Above: Maurice de Vlaminck, *The White House*, 1905–6

Vlaminck's expressive use of colour and his open brushstrokes show the influence of Van Gogh and the Post-Impressionists, but also indicate the Fauves' dynamic intensity.

Opposite: Raoul Dufy, *Street Decked with Flags*

(*The Fourteenth of July at Le Havre*), 1906 Dufy was born in Le Havre, where he met Friesz and Braque. Influenced by Matisse, Dufy's early use of bright colours later developed into vivacious decorative schemes and textile designs.



The Fauves' dominance in Paris was monumental but brief, as the individual artists went their own separate ways and the attention of the art world was eventually diverted to the Cubists. While it would be wrong to describe Fauvism as a coherent movement, the artists experienced a phase of exhilarating liberation, which allowed them to pursue their own personal visions of art. Derain, for example, became close to Pablo Picasso (see Cubism) and then later favoured a more classical approach. Vlaminck abandoned Fauvist colours to concentrate on landscapes in a kind of expressive realism, which brought his work close to the German Expressionists. Other Fauves, such as Van Dongen, who became a member of the \*Die Brücke group in Germany, highlighted the affinities between the two movements that revolutionized art practices of the twentieth century. Matisse, the 'king of the fauves', would in a sense remain a Fauve, becoming one of the best loved and most influential artists of the twentieth century.

#### Key Collections

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota  
Museum of Modern Art, New York  
State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg  
Tate Gallery, London

#### Key Books

S. Whitfield, *Fauvism* (1989)  
J. Freeman, with contributions by R. Benjamin, et al.,  
*The Fauve Landscape* (1990)  
R. T. Clement, *Les Fauves* (Westport, CT, 1994)  
J. Freeman, *The Fauves* (1996)