Henri Matisse (1876-1957)

*Pearson specification requirements:*

1. *How is he influenced by ‘primitivism’?*

**Blue Nude, Souvenir of Biskra** (1907) Perate (critic) described it as an “impetuous, violent, furious and outrageous painting.” Critics felt threatened by the incoherence of the different elements – the limbs don’t fit together and are simultaneously both flattened and three dimensional. They also worried about the presentation of gender - seeing it as manly – and also its race. Certain aspects suggested the subject was non-Western:

* Exaggeration of figure’s buttocks and breasts. (Bulbous contours were one of the period’s conventional shorthand signs of racial otherness.)
* Detachment of figure – despite close proximity to viewer, with left arm breaking the frame.
* Face: thick black eyebrows and almond shaped eyes also hint at non-Western identity (could be African or Asian) echoing the masks that were popular in artists’ studios at the time.
* Palms suggest exotic location.
* Blue hatching on figure’s left breast recalls striated carvings of African sculpture
* Simplification and angularity of the figure together with crudeness of outlines suggest primitive sculpture rather than Western idealism

But this message/influence is not exclusive – also strong awareness of Western traditions of female nude, from pose which goes back via Manet’s Olympia to Goya’s Naked Maja to Giorgione’s Sleeping Venus and Michelangelo’s Night (anther decidedly masculine female nude.) Colour of skin is also problematic for identity as African woman. Again, this caused alarm as many Europeans of the time feared interracial contact and sexuality and Matisse’s refusal to be clear about the race/gender was unsettling. Red nipples and proximity of breasts/arm pose seem sexually challenging/provovative but other aspects – solidity of legs, absent gaze are not. (When this work was exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1913, the students burnt an effigy of it on the steps of the school, accusing the painter of “artistic murder” and “rapine”.

1. *How is he ‘modernist’?*

* In his search for new methods and new strength in art. Determination to push colour beyond its naturalistic or symbolic connotations, to a recognition of its inherent power in its own right.
* Ready to play with genre conventions: portraits without much identity/status/character; landscapes without focus on logical presentation of space and depth and still life with moving objects and simplified brushwork. And in his readiness to abandon the seriousness of these genres and just to use subject matter as an informal/unimportant vehicle for stylistic experimentation.
* In his ability to inspire and lead a short-lived new ‘style’ which had quite different aims from any before in the western tradition.
* In his readiness to abandon the conventions of mark-making and detail for a more simplified and varied technique and process.

1. *How does he reject Academic traditions?*

* Although he quotes from a wide range of predecessors, his work integrates multiple sources at any one time and therefore dilutes or undermines them all.
* Refusal to recognise idealism or realism as vital and for the ‘mimetic’ quality of picture making to be secondary to the canvas itself.

1. *How was he influenced by cultural/social factors?*

Many wanted art to resist, or at least appear to, the commercialisation and commodification of the modern world, but concern that art was becoming financially easy/reduced to a commodity.

Friendships of and with other modern artists was clearly hugely important to Matisse.

1. *How was he influenced by political factors?*

Dreyfus Affair

The Republic: new freedoms. Excitement at new century but also fears that La Belle Epoque had passed and best moments of French art were over.

Colonial environment of France affects readings of works: 1907, France begins colonisation of Morocco. Awareness of earlier Orientalist works with their clear detail developing a message of ‘other’ or difference, these works also posed an important message about the ability to control/survey the other which was important to the colonisers. But simultaneously, fears were growing that physical characteristics did not provide a reliable key for distinguishing races. So Matisse’s Blue Nude was problematic for contemporary audiences in that it resisted any easy reading of difference and in fact it mingled the codes for the North African body with those of the European. No real suggestion that Matisse was seeking to put forward an anti-colonialist position here, more that it was a symptom of the general feelings of the time.

*How was he influenced by technological factors?*

Hard to find much evidence of this in his works: more that he seems to turn away from machines and presentations of the modern urban world in favour of simpler, pastoral, innocent subject matters. A reflection that his aim is not one of representation/epic message but of new technique and possibly lyricism/decoration.

1. *How each chosen specified artist was influenced by two other artists?*

Early works show the influence of both Carriere and Moreau (his teachers) as well as Cezanne (who Matisse was later to call “a sort of god of painting”). In 1907, Matisse wrote “I have worked… to enrich my skill in satisfying the different curiosities of my spirit, striving to know the different thoughts of ancient and modern masters of plastic art…. I have never avoided the influence of others… I would have considered this cowardice and a lack of sincerity towards myself.” (reported by Apollinaire in La Phalange, 1907) **Luxe, Calme et Volupte** (1904) clearly shows influence of Neo-Impressionists, Signac and Henri-Edmond Cross, but also in the subject matter of nudes in the landscape - of Cezanne, whose **Three Bathers** (bought by Matisse in 1899) is also recalled by the slightly awkward placing of the figures in space. The intense colour was also seen by some to refer to the work of Van Gogh (whose 1905 Retrospective, Matisse would hang at the Salon des Independents). This wide range of influences and assimilations caused criticism and controversy at the time, with critics (eg Maurice Delcourt) seeing it as a lack of personal style. This was an impossible dilemma for artists, who were either condemned for being ‘pasticheurs’ (copiers) or ‘originale’ (new – but therefore ignoring tradition and the great lessons of the past.

**Joy of Life**: Gauguin: thick outlines and flat areas of colour, together with languid poses and exaggerated curves of the central figures (eg Gauguin ‘Day of the Gods’) as well as Rodin’s watercolour sketches of dancers. Also Van Gogh, and ‘the distant memory of Ingres’.

Matisse himself was highly conscious – although ambivalently so – of his own trlationship to tradition. In his fullest statement on the matter “On Modernism and Tradition” (1935) he contradicts himself, denying the influence of Impressionism and then later confirming it, and similarly with the Old Masters he had studied in the Louvre and Seurat’s pointillism. Certainly, his piecemeal invocation of tradition tends to scatter meaning and unsettle the models of individual and cultural models.

**Mme Matisse in a Hat** influence of Van Gogh’s self portraits in areas of violent brushwork (areas of shoulder/chest), also in greenish tinge of face, and patches of background colour that remind of VG’s use of complementary contrats although Matisse is much less systematic. Smoother areas of flat colour (bottom left) recalls Gauguin too. The taches (dabs) of her right arm again recall Signac’s pointillism.

There is a debate about what Modernism is. Perhaps, the avant-garde portrayal of Modernism’s identity as an art concerned with purely formal questions, a concern with expression, with intuitive and spontaneous procedures, with getting at the essence of things. But Alastair Wright suggests that Matisse’s paintings “sit on a knife edge between the representational traditions of the nineteenth century and the formalist abstraction to come, making the moment when a series of earlier pictorial conventions entered their endgame but were not yet fully extinguished.” (Matisse and the subject of Modernism)

1. *The extent to which each chosen specified artist typifies the style and country from which they come?*

Matisse clearly typifies the traditions of French art in that his knowledge and understanding of the past is rich and can be well evidenced by looking at **Joy of Life** for instance. It is interesting that he mixes his time at the heart of Parisian life with significant time away – first in the South of France and then travelling more widely, including extended sojourns in North Africa. Perhaps this combination allows him to think outside the box and challenge traditions with radical innovations but it is also clearly important that he was well known in the circles of dealers, critics and collectors which ensure that his work gains attention and interest.

His role in Fauvism is clearly as a leader. He is older than the others and dominant over the two other main players, Derain and Vlaminck, in particular. Again though, he gains much from the association with the style and the group, as the impact of their combined works in Room 7 and 8 of the 1905 Salon d’Automne ensured that their ideas were noticed, even if much of the criticism was negative or shocked. It is also interesting that after this association, Matisse moves away from further style labels or group works - perhaps, having established his name and markets, he realises that he can be more independent/creative if working and travelling alone.

1. *Use of materials:*

As Matisse is working with oil on canvas in each of these works, there is not a huge amount to say about his innovative use of materials. However, if the question asked about technique and/or process (ie the way in which he applied the paint) then you would have much to say, particularly with either **Luxe, Calme et Volupte** or **Madame Matisse in a Hat** where his brush strokes and application offer you rich pickings.

Or **Blue Nude: Souvenir of Biskra**. (large scale work: 92 x 140cm) Remarkable surface with painterly process foregrounded throughout by highly visible brushwork and insistent pentimenti – around the breasts and above the left elbow. Shifts in facture – between the thick and densely worked pigment that coats the upper torso and the alternation between impasto and highly diluted paint in the area around the figure’s feet; or between the densely woven blue-green strokes around her hips and the meagre, almost transparent skein of paint on her knee, through which are plainly visible the repeated alterations of the under-drawing. Picasso said of this work “If he wants to make a woman, let him make a woman. If he wants to make a design, let him make a design. This is between the two.”

1. *Detailed knowledge and understanding of at least one critical text that discusses the chosen specified artist: their works, contributions and influences?*

*Read Matisse’s own words in* ***‘Notes of a Painter’*** *(1908) although he is often contradictory, partly because ideas change and partly because different things apply at different moments.*

Maier-Graefe (1915) on **Joy of Life** “a painting that reduced its multiple sources to mere wisps of memory, emptying tradition both of its weight and of its coherence.”

Symbolist poet and critic, Charles Morice agreed “it is with uneasiness, with sadness, that I see an admirably gifted artist squandering his strengths in hesitant attempts, each one contradicted by the next… unity, concentration, continuity are lacking to this spirit. One cannot distinguish the goal toward which he is working. (*Review of 1906 Salon des Independents in Mercure newspaper*)

Friedrich **Nietzsche** ‘The Will to Power as Knowledge’ “The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary; perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general?.... My hypotheses: The subject as multiplicity.” *(This could be used for almost any Modernist work.)*

Criticism of the work of the Fauves in the Salon d’Automne: “Matisse has arrived at an annoying exaggeration of his method. His canvases become problems that are troubling when they are not shocking.” (Henri Pellier) “Matisse has strayed into coloured eccentricities” (Gustave Geffroy). Leo Stein called **Mme Matisse in a Hat**: “the nastiest smear I have ever seen” – although he bought it a few days later!

John Elderfield calls Fauvism “a mixed-style technique”.

Alastair Wright comments on how **Mme Matisse in a hat** actually shows little expression or emotion, despite Matisse’s range of Post-Impressionist influences. “it is a remarkably fierce and furiously inconsistent piece of painting. Yet none of this violence points toward expression. Brushwork is just brushwork. Colour becomes mere pigment.” (And in this he disagrees with Oppler and Shiff who suggest it can be seen as a kind of Neo-Symbolism.) Boisard called the work “stupefying, the pontiff of a wild and voluntarily naïve art”. Wright suggests that the work is akin “to the schizophrenic text of Todorov\*” – we are physically very close to the sitter but there is an equal lack of engagement with the viewer. In ‘Notes of a Painter’, Matisse writes of the problems of colour: needing them to be strong singly, but also aware that they are diminished in relation to each other, meaning that “it is not possible for me to copy nature in a servile way….there must result a living harmony of colours.”

\*At the turn of the 20th century, madness was seen as signs (or the mind) losing their connectedness, so these ‘disconnected’ paintings of mixed styles/elements/techniques were deeply disturbing.

1. *Motives and role of patronage in commissioned works?*

None of these works are commissioned.

1. *Significance of location and setting?*

Setting of exhibition space highly significant because exposed new style and ideas to audience of public and critics. Shared mockery gained strength whereas **Les Demoiselles d’Avignon** was only seen by painter audience in Picasso’s studio which affects interpretation.