

Case Study

Henri Matisse, *Woman With a Hat*, 1905

See attached images for reference.

Matisse's portrait of his wife in an elaborately dressed hat was created in just a few days as an entry for that year's Salon d'automne. (fig.1)

The Salon d'Automne (Autumn Salon) has been held annually since 1903. An autumn schedule allowed artists to create work during the summer with a view to exhibiting in autumn and as a result of this timing many of the works created were done so en plein air in the French countryside.

In preparation for the 1905 Salon Matisse spent the summer months in Collioure, which was then a small fishing village in the South of France accompanied by his wife and Andre Derain. Matisse's '*Open Window*' was painted there and shown at the Salon. However, unhappy with the other works he was considering to submit for exhibition he quickly painted the portrait of his wife on their return to Paris.

The previous year Matisse had seen Cézanne's "*The Artist's Wife Holding a Fan*" (fig.2) which was exhibited for the first time to the public. Cézanne's painting caused a sensation and its presence as one of the standout works at the exhibition was reported in the press as far away as the U.S.

Matisse's wife had previously worked as a milliner and her ostentatious hat may recall this aspect of her life. Millinery and hat shops had been a popular subject in Impressionist painting as is evidenced in the works of Edgar Degas, Mary Cassat et al. (fig.3)

As with Cézanne's portrait of his wife, Madame Matisse holds a fan. Portraits of women holding fans had long been a popular genre and had become something of a bourgeois convention by the time of Matisse's work. However there is nothing conventional in the way he tackles the subject of painting and portraiture.

Matisse is quoted as saying "*Seek the strongest colour effect possible...the content is of no importance*". From this we can assume that Matisse was not intending to create an accurate depiction of his wife. Instead his concern is colour and how specific colours relate to each other when placed on the picture plane.

Complementary colours are staggered across the composition; patches of light yellow in the background are punctuated by areas of lilac, the hat itself heavily outlined in violet and purple. The orange red of the lips juxtaposed with the light blue cheek. Green plays a predominant role in the work; the green stripe Matisse employed in another portrait of his wife painted that year makes a reappearance and again is employed for the same use; to delineate the nose of Madame Matisse, likewise a slab of dark green indicates either her forehead or the shadow cast by the hat's brim. (fig.4) The skin tones are in essence lurid, as if his wife has been placed under theatrical lights.

The pose itself suggests an aloofness in the sitter, Madame Matisse is seated sideways but has turned her upper torso around, her arm resting in the back of the chair and the fan splayed open covering her shoulders and chest.

Paint has been applied heavily in specific areas such as the hat and silhouette of the body but Matisse has been more sparing in his application of tone and shadow in areas such as the sleeve of the dress. We can see the pale yellow ground wash coming through in patches, decorative detail such as the seams of the sleeve are rendered loosely.

The suggestion of space is limited, as Matisse has used expressive colour we are unsure what is shadow. The background is differentiated from the figure only in terms of how paint is used; broader expanses of loosely applied colour with gestural brushstrokes contrast with the heavily traced figure.

Both the public and critics were scandalised by the showing of this painting. One critic declared “a pot of paint has been flung in the face of the public”. Nevertheless with this painting Matisse found financial support and patronage from the Stein family, wealthy Americans living in Paris.

With this painting and the works of Derain and Vlaminck at that year’s Salon Matisse launched Fauvism on the art world.



(fig.1) Henri Matisse, *Woman With a Hat*, 1905, oil on canvas



(fig.2) Paul Cézanne, *Madame Cézanne with a Fan*, 1886-88, oil on canvas



(fig.3) Edgar Degas, The Millinery Shop, 1884-90, oil on canvas



(fig.4) Henri Matisse, *Portrait of Madame Matisse, The Green Line*, 1905, oil on canvas