

In Turn-of-the-Century Paris, An Explosion of Brash New Art

Dubbed 'les Fauves' (the wild beasts) for their uninhibited use of color, these artists boldly rearranged the imagery of nature

By Helen Dudar, *Smithsonian*, October, 1990

The scandal of the Parisian art world in 1905 was Room VII of the third annual Salon d'Automne in the Grand Palais, its walls throbbing with raw color. Color squeezed straight out of tubes; color assaulting the eye and senses; color that sometimes seemed to have been flung upon the canvas; color that dared to tint human flesh pea green and tree trunks a violent red; color that not only refused to imitate nature but actually had been used to suggest form and depth.



Andre Derain, *The Turning Road, L'Estaque, 1906*

The signatures on the paintings bore the names of men some of whom, surviving notoriety, would soon be more or less famous. Henri Matisse, the oldest of them and the unlikely center of this radical new style, would flourish into his 85th year as one of the masters of our century. Andre Derain would, for a time, produce works of breathtaking originality and virtuosity. Albert Marquet and Henri Manguin, less than household names in our day, would be the best-sellers of the group because they turned out tamer work that was gentler to the untutored eye. Maurice de Vlaminck, a larger-than-life figure and a devout fabulist, would claim with some exaggeration that he was really the first to engage with the new style, and then, the first to abandon it.



The public was shocked by Matisse's 1905 portrait of his wife, *Madame Matisse (The Green Line)*, 1905

Seminal moments of this sort are prey to myth. By one account, possibly apocryphal, one of the organizers of the big show—1,625 works in all—decided to group most of the high-color pictures in a single room for the sake of consistency. (And possibly even in the interests of commerce; the public came to the annual salons of Paris not only to inspect work offered by artists, but also to gossip and gasp over the excesses, and occasionally to buy a picture.) If, instead of being concentrated in one room, the paintings had been scattered through the hall, we would still have had the first group revolutionary statement of art in the 20th century. But would anyone have thought to call its practitioners *les Fauves*?

The label was the gift of Louis Vauxcelles, art critic for the daily newspaper *Gil Blas* and a reasonably sympathetic audience for avant-garde work. Naturally there are several versions of the baptism, but Matisse's seems as plausible as any. As the artist later told the story, Vauxcelles walked into Room VII, spotted a marble neo-Renaissance bust of a child surrounded by the carnival of colors blazing on the walls, and wisecracked, "Donatello amid the wild beasts [*les fauves*]." Vauxcelles was so pleased with the line that he repeated a slightly modified version in his review. Legend, lore, remembrance and a Fauve feast for the eyes come to us this year from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) with "The Fauve Landscape: Matisse, Derain, Braque and Their Circle, 1904-1908."

Said to be the largest international loan show of Fauve art ever mounted and the first to concentrate on outdoor vistas, it will have 175 works assembled from collections all over the world. As it is used in this show, landscape is a broad territory embracing any kind of open-air setting that caught the artists' imaginations. Most of the Fauves were, if not obsessed by outdoor vistas, then certainly unashamedly preoccupied with them. They seemed compelled to set up easels in sunlight and within sight of the real thing—at commanding stretches of country roads and factory towns and city rivers and coasts and beaches—in order to rearrange the imagery and violate the natural colors.



Vlaminck, *The Circus*, 1906

***With my cobalts and vermilions,
I want to burn down the Ecole
des Beaux-Arts.***

- Maurice de Vlaminck

Their work represents an odd time in modern art history. It is generally agreed that the Fauves were not really a school and not quite a movement. Most of the artists were friends—or at least more than nodding acquaintances—and painted side by side in a succession of pastoral or urban settings, but they cannot be said to have formulated a doctrine of common purpose. Fauvism appears to have just happened in an almost coincidental fashion. And it happened at a nervous moment when a new, venturesome spirit was wanted, when questing figures who were becoming artists had to find a way out of the 19th century, a leap beyond the academy, well beyond both the sunny warmth of Impressionism and the Postimpressionist shocks of Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin.

Few radical moments in art have had so brief a life span or have faded so swiftly into the shadows of memory. Given the fevered intensity of the style, burnout seemed inevitable. Georges Braque, who came late to Fauvism and left early, had a reasonable rationale for its swift decline. "You can't remain forever in a state of paroxysm," he explained. Moreover, the pursuit of the new that followed Fauvism—the unnerving plunge into Cubism, the spin into Futurism, the dazzle of Dada and then Surrealism—seized the public audience for art so completely that years slipped by before any serious notice was applied to that first, once-shocking moment in the infancy of modern painting.

To our eyes, the pictures it produced are a joy, a radiant celebration of color. On the other hand, the studies of the times that produced them have always been in slight disarray; hardly anybody seems to agree, for example, on questions of who were true believers and for how long. Judi Freeman, LACMA's associate curator of 20th-century art, who organized the show, is surveying the period through the work of 11 artists, only some of whom were on display in Room VII on that October day.

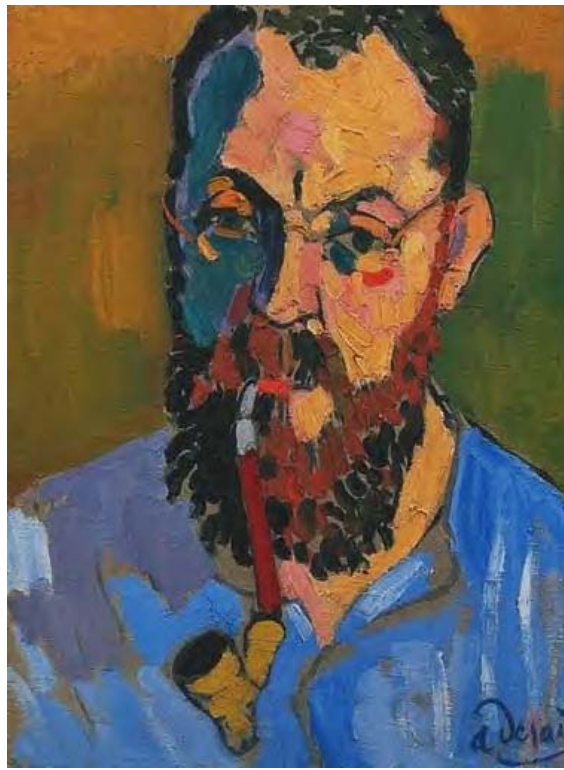
Actually, the catalog covers 12 artists, but the work of one, Jean Puy, is not in the show at all because, Fauvist though he may have been, landscape did not attract him. Also among the missing is Georges Rouault, who has turned up in other Fauve shows but whose Fauvism is in dispute in some quarters, and who, at all events, did not paint landscapes in



Andre Derain, *London Bridge*, 1906

the period Freeman is surveying. On the other hand, there are two paintings by Louis Valtat and one by the Dutchman Kees van Dongen, both of whom are sometimes dismissed as mere fringe Fauves.

Surprisingly, the exhibition is dominated by Derain, who is represented by more paintings than Matisse. Freeman is playing favorites here: she has come to consider Derain "the quintessential Fauve," to believe that, more than any other painter of the time, he knew every inch of the territory and summarized it in one picture or another.



Matisse's *Portrait of Andre Derain* (left) and Derain's *Portrait of Henri Matisse* (right) were painted in 1905, the heyday of Fauvism.

During the summer of 1905, Matisse and Derain set up their easels side by side in Collioure and together explored the sun-washed vistas of the South of France. But, as Freeman observes and Matisse himself confessed, his consuming interest was really the human figure. Still, in his own time, it was Matisse who was seen as the pivotal artist among *les jeunes*, the generation that came of age in the last decade of the past century. Absent an ideology, he never quite articulated the quality of the new art until he had abandoned it, and then it was largely to disparage it. The year Fauvism

expired, Matisse looked back at the recent past and recalled, "There was a time when I never left my paintings hanging on the wall because they reminded me of moments of overexcitement."

Nothing came easily to him in those days. He was so tormented by the problems of making art—what to paint, how to achieve a measure of originality—that he once wrote to his friend and old schoolmate Manguin, "I believe that painting will make me crazy and I am going to try to get out of it as soon as possible."

Matisse had come late to art after abandoning law studies, and he was an altogether unlikely figure to lead an army of avant-gardists, a neat, reserved, rather sober, professorial man whose colleagues referred to him with affectionate mockery as "le Docteur." He was already in his 30s when he and his fellow *jeunes*, most under the age of 30, shook the art world at the Salon d'Automne. Some of them were old friends: Marquet, Manguin, Puy and Camoin had painted alongside him ten years earlier as students at the Paris atelier of Gustave Moreau, whose own style was interestingly if conventionally romantic, but who never discouraged his pupils from unconventionality.

If Matisse was the sturdy bourgeois gentleman, Vlaminck was the polar opposite, a raw, outsize personality with outsize appetites, a cartoon figure of the stereotypical artist. "He painted as other men throw bombs," one critic has commented. He also taught boxing, played the violin in sleazy cafes in his youth, wrote soft-core hack novels and, to compensate for the starved days of his youth, could enthusiastically



Vlaminck, *Woman with a Straw Hat*

consume lamb by the leg. Vlaminck and Derain, a young man of surpassing intelligence, lived in the Paris suburb of Chatou and discovered each other when the train carrying them between the city and their town was stalled by a derailment. It is typical of Vlaminck's inflamed imagination that he later wrote vividly of the awful carnage at the scene, although contemporary newspaper accounts reported no deaths at all.

Matisse first met Derain in an art workshop in Paris and in 1901 ran into him in the company of Vlaminck at a major Van Gogh retrospective. That show, a full-scale encounter with emotionally explosive color and brush strokes, was one of the events that would shape the generation on the brink of inventing Fauvism. As Vlaminck, with characteristic melodrama, would later describe the power of those pictures, "I was so moved, I wanted to cry with joy and despair. On that day I loved Van Gogh more than my own father."

Friendship among the three artists did not really begin until four years later, when Matisse came to visit the studio that the two younger men shared in Chatou. For several years, Matisse had been applying color to canvas in an unorthodox fashion, and some of these unorthodox pieces had been seen by 1904; still, he was thunderstruck by Vlaminck's wild use of raw tints. As he recounted the impact, "I couldn't sleep last night."

The other influential group of artists involved in the short season of Fauvism was the Le Havre circle, three men from the Normandy Coast whose childhood friendship continued into adulthood: Georges Braque, Raoul Dufy and Othon Friesz. Dufy saw an important Matisse piece at the 1905 Salon des Independants, the big spring Parisian annual, and was literally jolted out of his timid Impressionist style. The other two also appear to have been converted that year at the same salon. Braque and Dufy would each become famous far beyond the boundaries of France for work of very different kinds, but Friesz suffered an oddly stunted reputation. A sample of his art is to be found in every provincial museum in France as well as in collections in other parts of Europe, but he is seldom seen and hardly known in the United States.

Braque and Dufy were not part of that epochal 1905 autumn salon, however. Also missing was the President of France, Emile Loubet, whose ceremonial duties included presiding over the openings of cultural events of this kind; he passed up the show apparently upon learning that it harbored the seeds of scandal. In the daily and weekly journals of the day, the critical response to Room VII ranged from friendly understanding to enthusiastic abuse. One review dismissed the pictures as mere "daubs"; another saw them as either "raving madness or a bad joke"; a third compared them to "the naive and brutal efforts of a child playing with its paint box."



Raoul Dufy, *The Traveling Show*, 1906

As for the reaction of the general public, the best account we have is from an American who did not get around to checking out the Fauves until 1908, when the style was pretty well exhausted, and who wrote an article, "The Wild Men of Paris," which did not see print here until 1910. The piece has become an important little document in Fauve history because the author, Gelett Burgess, ran around Paris and, feeble though his French was, actually interviewed some major figures: Matisse, Derain, Braque, Friesz, "all young, all virile, all enthusiastic . . . and all a little mad." Among "the wild beasts" he mistakenly included the young Picasso, clearly a rising star but one who had never dipped a brush into Fauvism.

Burgess was a writer, an illustrator and, it may be useful to remember, a humorist. He describes stepping into the hall that housed the Salon des Independants that spring to be assaulted by "shrieks of laughter coming from an adjoining wing." He tells of seeing spectators "lurching hysterically in and out of the galleries." He tells of his own shock upon encountering this strange new world, "a universe of ugliness."

Still, despite the philistine mockery, the Fauve spirit caught on in small, important ways. Pictures sold for modest sums. There were shows, notably in Montmartre in the small space operated by the redoubtable little Berthe Weill and at

Ambrose Vollard's gallery, which in 1904 had given Matisse his first one-man show. A few years later, Vollard bought up the contents of the Derain and Vlaminck studios for sums that were undeniable bargains even then. The Steins, Gertrude and her brother, Leo, lately settled in Paris, became patrons of Matisse. Two wealthy Russians with highly developed tastes in modern art, Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morosov, came calling and carried examples of these strange new paintings home to Moscow.

Assembling an exhibition on the scale of the Los Angeles show becomes an exercise not only in stamina but in detective work. Judi Freeman spent the better part of three years tracking down paintings from collections here, in Europe, the Soviet Union, Israel and Japan. She interviewed the aged surviving children and other relatives of some of the artists, and made translations of letters, many unpublished, that the Fauves had written one another.



Dufy, *The Three Umbrellas*, 1906

about giving his pictures either titles or dates, the pictures were almost invariably labeled "paysage" ("landscape") on the back and invariably titled *The Bridge at Chatou* for exhibition. Exploring the Seine as it meandered through the northern suburbs of Paris, art historian John Klein came to realize that often the picture titled *The Bridge at Chatou* was actually the bridge at the nearby towns of Le Pecq or Bezons or Argenteuil.

In her search for sources for the paintings, Freeman scoured flea markets and antique fairs in France for very old postcards of vacation towns. Matching a photograph to a painting is not always easy. Buildings burn down or are torn down to make way for something modern; war changes the contours of a harbor as German bombing did in St. Tropez. In some communities, Freeman would march into the mairie and ask for the name of the oldest historian in the region; she was frequently lucky enough to be directed to a 70- or 80-year-old resident who could remember some vanished structure in a painting and sometimes knew what business or family it had sheltered. More than the academic's obligatory burrowings were involved in this search, and more than the fact that she wanted to organize the exhibition around major sites. For the unpracticed viewer as well as the professional, there is surely special pleasure to be taken from a picture by looking at the original subject and understanding how the artist has recomposed it.

Naturally, the exhibition is accompanied by a large catalog with reproductions of paintings and with essays by important authorities, but the most absorbing stretch of material may well be Freeman's 63-page chronology of the period. The entries are something like diary jottings except they cover the comings and goings of a small company of people who made or bought or sold art or passed judgment on it during those years; there is something touching about reading often-ordinary details of the lives of extraordinary men. They sent postcards complaining about the bad weather; they borrowed small sums of money and struggled to pay back debts; they worried about not producing enough pictures during an

One of the principal concerns that drove Freeman was hunting down the subjects that the artists had chosen to paint. This is not always easy after eight decades have gone by. Almost anyone who could scrape together a few francs seemed bent on finding some striking place to paint during the warm months. Matisse spent the summer of 1904 in St. Tropez as a guest of the Pointillist artist Paul Signac. Manguin found a house nearby in Cavaliere, and Marquet stayed in a hotel in Menton to the east. In other years, Matisse chose Collioure, farther down the coast toward Spain; one summer Derain joined him there. Friesz took himself off to Antwerp. Derain invested a season in L'Estaque (see page 1), which had provided Cezanne with some of his splendid subjects. Another year, Derain and Dufy settled in together at Le Havre and wandered along the Normandy Coast, discovering vistas worth celebrating in oil. Vlaminck stayed home and painted bridges and, since he was notoriously casual

expensive season in the sun; they discussed their own and their colleagues' periodic crises over painting. Henri-Edmond Cross, the Pointillist artist, encountered Matisse in St. Tropez at Signac's villa in 1904 and wrote to a friend, sadly reporting on "Matisse the anxious one, the madly anxious one."

Judi Freeman brings the curtain down on Fauvism with the major group shows of 1908, although it can be argued that the end of that brief blaze of modern art came at earlier and later times for different artists. The causes were myriad. They included a change in the way Matisse himself had begun to paint; a fresh look at the late work of Cezanne; the discovery and impact of tribal arts; and the large shadow cast by that fiercely talented emigre from Spain, Picasso.

In 1906, Matisse had exhibited the astonishing *Joy of Life* (right), a landscape study of fleshy, female nude bathers arranged in arabesques that could be seen as an abstract composition and, indeed, would be seen as an ancestor to abstract art. Suddenly, in the salons the following year, along with scenic views, everybody seemed to have been busy painting nude women in outdoor settings. Even Vlaminck succumbed, although as a figure painter he was genuinely untalented. Almost as telling was the fact that the colors in some of the later work of the Fauves were shaded down to something approaching natural tones, and often, the figures were actually modeled.



Cezanne, who died in 1906, was

hardly unappreciated by the next generation of artists. In 1899, at a time when every centime counted, the young Matisse had managed to buy one of Cezanne's "Bathers" series, a painting he treasured all his life. But major retrospectives in 1904 and 1907 had focused new attention on the subtly geometrical way in which Cezanne had organized his landscapes. There was a kind of geometry, as well, to the highly stylized African carvings that a few of the artists suddenly found worth buying and studying. Indeed, it was Matisse who is supposed to have introduced Picasso to African sculpture. Not long after this event, in mid-1907, Picasso began working on a strange picture of three women he called *Les Femmes d'Alger* (left), a piece that took some of its inspiration from tribal art and added a new dimension to painting: time.

When he first saw *Les Femmes d'Alger* later that year, Braque was shaken. "It is like drinking kerosene in order to spit fire," he said. Within a few weeks, he was working on paintings in a similar style. Matisse, who could be alternately generous and unkind to his artist friends, was repelled. The following fall, he voted with the majority of the jury that rejected most of Braque's submissions to the 1908 salon. Chatting with Vauxcelles, he disparagingly reported that Braque had begun composing pictures of nothing but "little cubes," and the *Gil Blas* critic who had already named one style was in a position to confer a label on another: it was he who broke the news of Braque's "bizarreries cubiques" to the public.

Cubism was suddenly the fever center of a modern movement; the brilliant Picasso-Braque collaborative friendship was launched, and Picasso was clearly crown prince, if not yet emperor, of the modern art world.

The middle-aged Matisse, no longer the leader of an avant-garde circle, abandoned Paris for its suburbs. The year that Fauvism became history, his palette was less fiery, and he knew he wanted to produce pictures of a different kind, pictures that offered a balm for the spirit. "What I dream of," he wrote in an important 1908 essay, "is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be ...a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair...."



Matisse, *Le Danse (First Version)*, 1909

A kind of holy anxiety seemed to have compelled Matisse to renew his imagination; with his defection from Fauvism came a stream of poetic, vibrantly decorative pieces. But of his friends and followers it has been argued that some of them never again made paintings that approached the quality of their days as "the wild beasts."

Derain briefly climbed aboard the Picasso Cubist wagon. What was wrong with Fauvism, he would later insist, was "a kind of fear of imitating life." Only a few years before, at Vollard's urging and with the dealer's help, he had traveled to England in hopes of repeating Monet's great success with a series of London paintings and had produced several dozen pictures that are still wonders to encounter. Later, in flight from his Fauve past, he turned his back on modernism. Derain's paintings after the 1920s were often quite dazzling pastiches—

reflections of an infatuation with the many Old Masters who had seized his imagination.

Dufy also flirted briefly with Cubism before finding his way to a facile calligraphic style described by one critic as "pretty furniture pictures." Vlaminck once said that one of the reasons he abandoned Fauvism was a fear that he was in danger of "lapsing into mere decoration." Instead, he lapsed into formula, filling canvases with thickly painted views of country roads lined with picturesque cottages and shadowed by dark, brooding skies. He had promised himself, and was fairly faithful to the vow, never to use anything but heavy browns and dirty yellows. It was as if the hot, bright flame that had fired up a lustrous moment in modern art had become a danger, and the daring company of men once thrilled by the light were compelled to cool it down with mud.

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By Helen Dudar

Helen Dudar wrote about Sigmund Freud as collector in August. She wrote about Jasper Johns in the June issue and about the art of John Marin in February.

**NOTE: This reading assignment also includes [Kandinsky, The Effect of Color, 1912](#)**