Matisse and the Metaphysics of Decoration

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The interaction between various levels of materiality in Matisse's painting is one of the most salient features of his art, and the way in which he orchestrated such effects is the closest thing to a "method" that can be identified in his works. This transformative drive is apparent in all the mediums he worked in, and is so strong that it often seems to be a determinant, rather than a by-product, of his formal concerns. A number of his pictorial strategies, from lack of finish to precariously balanced compositional structures, grew out of his lifelong engagement with the way things in the world interacted with each other conceptually and spiritually as well as physically.

Decorative motifs related to the patterning on textiles played an important role in Matisse's strategy for articulating these feelings. They provided him with a constructive element that was pictorially flexible and could also act as an indirect but powerful symbolic device for expressing his vision of a world in perpetual flux. Such motifs furnished dynamic elements that could be played off against the geometrical forms of architecture and made to rhyme with figures and objects. They also allowed him to suggest the interactions between different orders of things—to extend the energy within individual things beyond their physical boundaries and to create, in effect, a kind of metaphysics of decoration.

Within this domain, the arabesques and repeated floral patterns contained in textiles and wall coverings provided Matisse with an especially rich repertory of forms. Such modalities provided him with a means of inflecting his pictures with varying rhythmic structures—and of doing so in a remarkably flexible way, since the surfaces that carried the decorative motifs could be shaped and manipulated without undermining the basic credibility of the scene depicted. Further, although a piece of cloth is a real object, it also contains its own pictorial field, which can function as a kind of picture within the picture and be made to interact with the objects around it in an imaginary as well as a physical way. (And unlike wallpaper, a piece of cloth is also a pliable field that can be draped or folded, or wrapped around a human body, thus offering even richer expressive possibilities.) The decorative motifs on textiles provided Matisse with a dynamic and effective means of suggesting energy and growth, and of making the space of his painting seem to expand beyond its physical

bounds.

Matisse's use of decorative motifs was embedded in his understanding of the new, non-narrative means of painting pioneered by the post-Impressionists. Because of his longtime interest in textiles, Matisse had an acute awareness of the pictorial and symbolic implications of the way decorative motifs were used in late nineteenth century painting—especially by van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cézanne, who used such motifs as a way of enlarging the field of meaning in their paintings despite their eschewal of narrative subjects.

In a number of cases, Matisse adapted or alluded to specific decorative devices from the Post-Impressionists. A work like *Harmony in Red* of 1908, in which the arabesques of the tablecloth and wall embody a symbolic expression of the energy contained within the early spring landscape and the fruit and flowers on the table, owes a good deal to van Gogh's portraits of Madame Roulin as "La Berceuse," where the floral patterning that surrounds the woman becomes a symbol of her vitality and fertility. Matisse also undoubtedly noticed the way in which Gauguin used decorative motifs to suggest imaginary spaces and psychic states. In Gauguin's pictures of sleeping children, for example, the wallpaper patterns behind the children suggest their dream state; and the decorative motifs that surround the reclining woman in a painting like *Manao tupapau (The Spirit of the Dead Watching)* similarly evoke the mysteries of the dream and spirit worlds.[1] Matisse, too, would use patterned cloth and decorative motifs to suggest states of mind, as early as 1903, in his male and female *Guitarist* paintings, where the patterned fabrics that hang behind the figures seem to embody their respectively grave and high-strung states of mind (as well as the nature of the music they are playing). Similarly, the scroll-like patterning next to the woman in *Carmelina* of 1903 suggest the tensions within her, as do the visual rhymes between the cloth and the woman's body in the 1908 *Portrait of Greta Moll*. In later years, Matisse would use such motifs in an especially expressive way, as in his *Dream* paintings of 1935 and 1940.

The bold floral patterns on the dresses of the women in Gauguin's paintings also provided a point of departure that would be echoed and elaborated by Matisse throughout his career, from *The Red Madras Hat* of 1907 to the numerous late drawings and paintings of women wearing blouses and dresses decorated with elaborate floral patterns. In some works, such as *The Manila Shawl* of 1911, where the flowers emphasize the woman's breasts and pubic area, such decoration has explicitly sexual overtones. In others, like *The Rumanian Blouse* of 1940, the floral patterns suggest a more general sense of the woman's blossoming vitality. Photographs taken of *The Rumanian Blouse* while Matisse was working on it permit us to follow the fluid way that he developed such metaphors, and the degree to which he conceived of different orders of things as potentially correlational.[2] At one stage, he left the woman's blouse unadorned but painted ornate floral forms on the wall behind her. As the painting developed, the floral forms were moved from the wall back to her blouse,

and as the decoration on her blouse was further elaborated, the form of her body also changed, assuming a shape that itself suggests an unfolding flower.

The musical metaphors that are sometimes evoked by Matisse's decorative motifs have similar sources. For example, his paintings of a woman seated at the piano, such as *Pianist and Checker Players*, in which the surrounding decorative motifs suggest the music that is being played, take their inspiration from Cézanne's *Overture to Thannhauser*, in which the wallpaper motifs behind the piano seem to embody the music.[3]

Matisse also noticed how Cézanne frequently used floral and leaf motifs on tablecloths, wallpaper, and draperies to suggest a poetically expansive space and to create interrelations between, say, the leaf forms on a piece of fabric or wallpaper and the apples set next to them. He was also alert to how Cézanne sometimes painted tablecloths or swags of cloth in such a way that the foliage and fruits depicted on them become intermingled with the real fruit that adjoin them, creating an interpenetration between the imaginary pictorial world of the cloth and the tangible world of real objects.[4] This is something that Matisse frequently does—and nowhere more strikingly than in *Still Life with "La danse"* of 1909, in which Matisse's own painting of *La Danse* is placed behind a large table covered with a yellow cloth. The tablecloth is decorated with a lively pattern of floral and leaf forms, on which are set several pieces of fruit and two vases filled with flowers. Some of fruit are rendered so flatly that they become conflated with the plant forms on the tablecloth, suggesting an interchange between the real fruit and the plant patterns printed on the cloth. The perspective of the picture is constructed so the forms of the table top and the mouth of the larger vase of flowers converge just at the area where one of the dancers in the painting is lunging forward, making her seem to be bursting forth from the vase of flowers, as if to personify the energy of the forms on the table. What appears at first to be an almost random view of the artist's studio turns out to be a carefully orchestrated and symbolically charged combination of decorative, geometrical, and figurative elements—full of vitality, despite the fact that literally all of the things depicted are inanimate.

Cézanne played an important part in relation to Matisse's conception of the decorative— not only as a model for some of the specific pictorial tactics just mentioned, but also as a prod behind Matisse's broader strategy with regard to decoration. For while Matisse's use of the decorative was sometimes directly inspired by Cézanne's use of certain kinds of motifs, it was even more importantly part of his strong resistance to Cézanne—a way of escaping, or in any case deflecting, the older painter's influence. Sometimes an artist gains from an earlier artist a profound insight into reality which seems, however, inextricably bound to a specific style that appears to preclude being able to take it further. A great artist is able to use such an insight without falling under the fatal influence of the style—which was how Matisse related to Cézanne. The decorative, in effect, allowed Matisse to explore a Cézannian view of the world in a fresh and original way.

The ways in which Matisse did so are fascinating. In his fauve paintings, he had employed bold brush strokes set against the energized white space of the canvas ground. At that time, when he represented patterned cloth he simply inflected his brush strokes differently in those areas, as in *Woman Beside the Sea* of 1905, where the woman's body is differentiated from her surroundings largely in that way. The painterly practice that underlay this kind of dynamic interaction between different parts of the picture had been suggested to Matisse by the carefully modulated brushwork and the fluidity of the space in Cézanne's late works, and by the way Cézanne was able to make it seem as if the objects he painted could exist within more than one realm—and even to inhabit more than one space—at the same time. In the years before the First World War, Cézanne was especially appreciated for how he had been able "to dominate universal dynamism," and reveal "the modifications that supposedly inanimate objects impose on one another."[5] These became essential elements in Matisse's understanding of both the world and the art of painting.

During the course of his career, Matisse would respond to these ideas in varied ways, and his use of decorative motifs changed accordingly. Around 1906, for example, he began to work in two distinctly different manners—one painterly, the other relatively flat and decorative. (The two versions of *The Young Sailor*, 1906, offer an excellent example of this duality.) It was around this time that Matisse began to place new emphasis on the flat patterns in textiles, rugs, and wallpaper. His use of abundant, severely flattened decorative motifs provided him with a means of animating the space of the "backgrounds" in his paintings, and of creating the all-over effect of dynamism that he so admired in Cézanne, but without resorting to the passages of complexly modulated brushwork that were such a signature aspect of Cézanne's paintings.

In using decorative motifs this way, Matisse was also able to enlarge the spatial sense of his paintings and to suggest a dimension beyond that which is literally set before our eyes. Such an expansive, overtly metaphysical vision is especially vivid in the great decorative interiors of 1909-1911, which display an amazing range of pictorial variety. In *Camïaeu blue* of 1909, the objects seem to bob and float on the blue and white sea of the tablecloth, whose fictive baskets of flowers act as a dynamic foil for the real bowl of fruit that is set next to them, and whose scroll forms are daringly made to rhyme with the shapes of the coffee pot and carafe. In the two versions of *Spanish Still Life*, done the winter of 1910-1911, the variously patterned fabrics create two rather differently voiced symphonic ensembles—each in its own way an impassioned expression of the inner energy of the explosive plants, fruits, and vegetables that commingle with their intensely patterned surroundings. Here again, the feeling of animation and vitality in these paintings is so strong that it comes as something of a surprise to realize that the objects depicted in them are not only all inanimate, but also mostly inorganic.

In *The Pink Studio* of early 1911, the decorative motifs are handled in a more discreet but perhaps even

more imaginative way. The floral forms that climb up the cloth on the screen at the center of the painting seem to articulate the flowers that are missing from the vase placed on the stool below, and are also echoed in the branches of the real trees outside the window (an appropriate metaphor, in a depiction of an artists's studio, for creation from nothing). In *The Painter's Family*, done a couple of months later, the feverish decoration articulates the tensions that underlie the placid surface of the artist's domestic life.[6] And in *Interior with Aubergines*, painted that summer, the hyperbolically extravagant decorative motifs are epitomized by the floral pattern that covers, unites, and fairly overwhelms the areas that are supposed to denote the wall and floor, transforming the scene into an abstract meditation on a "higher" dimension of space and time.[7]

In these works and in a number of other paintings Matisse did between roughly 1907 and 1918, the various decorative accessories that he represented—such as rugs, tablecloths, screens, and clothing—were often radically flattened, simplified, and otherwise altered. (This is clear if you compare the blue cotton *toile de Jouy* Matisse owned with his very different representations of it in various paintings.)[8] During this period, decorative motifs were used as overtly structural elements, rendered in a condensed sign-like way, and the compositional needs of the painting were given precedence over concerns about verisimilitude.

During Matisse's early years in Nice, the terms of his engagement with the decorative changed, as what he later called "a will to rhythmic abstraction" gave way to "corporeality and spatial depth, the richness of detail."[9] Decorative motifs continued to play an important part in his paintings, but in a rather different way. As Matisse's rendering of things and the light that fell on them became increasingly naturalistic, the structural role of the decorative motifs became less apparent even though such motifs were used more frequently. The ornamental patterns in his paintings were now often rendered in a detailed and illusionistic way, in order to enliven the rather banal settings of his subjects and to create a general ambience or mood. They also served as a paradoxical counterbalance to the more specific, time-bound nature of Matisse's imagery at this time.

As Matisse's style changed, he became more and more desirous of rendering the particularities of his subjects. But he knew, from over twenty years of experience, that dwelling on the particularities of things did not necessarily produce the strongest kind of art. As far back as 1908, he had written that he wanted his paintings to transcend the "succession of moments which constitutes the superficial existence of beings and things, and which is continually modifying and transforming them," by inventing forms that would express their "more essential character" and "give to reality a more lasting interpretation."[10] Now that he was giving new emphasis to fleeting surface effects, decorative elements furnished a way of imparting greater pictorial density to his paintings. Matisse's rendering of various kinds of decorated cloth (frequently including, for the first time, translucent curtains) lent many of his pictures done during the 1920s an abstracted musical quality that allowed

the viewer to appreciate their pictorial richness almost *despite* their subjects.

So in a painting like *Conversation* of 1921, the profusion of decorative elements operates in a very different way than in the 1911 *Interior with Aubergines*. Here, as in so many other works of the 1920s, the intense decoration creates a kind of atmospheric ambience, which is enhanced by the lightness of the brushwork and by the relative looseness of the patterns it describes. In many of Matisse's paintings of this period, a remarkable "porosity" seems to exist between things because of the way that large areas of highly patterned surface are kept open and breathing. Unexpected pictorial contrasts are also frequently made to carry a good deal of expressive weight. In the intensely decorated *Conversation*, for example, the two women wear plain white dresses, which make them seem quite literally to absorb the intense decoration around them. In other paintings, such accents may be furnished by strategically located bursts of flowers or by the interaction between a design on a piece of cloth and a vase that is placed upon it.

Decorative motifs play an especially interesting role in Matisse's paintings of odalisques, which are often animated by some sort of floral backdrop. Paradoxically, these decorative patterns both enhance the women's sensuality and depersonalize it. In the sultry *Odalisque with Magnolias* of 1923, for example, where the woman's body is set against the violet floral patterning on the screen behind her, the bursting magnolias act as a sumptuous metaphor for her sexuality. Here and in related paintings, the intensity of our confrontation with the model and her provocative sensuality are mediated by the decorative elements, which in an odd way both enhance and generalize the erotic charge of the individual woman by insisting on the artificial and synthetic quality of the painted image. It was largely through such decorative effects that Matisse was able to realize his stated goal during his early years in Nice of balancing "the typical and the individual at the same time, a distillation of all I see and feel in a motif."[11]

During the 1930s, Matisse underwent another important shift in style, and the objects in his paintings became increasingly flattened and removed from real space. Starting in the mid-1930s, the decorative elements in his work once again became more synthetic and more sign-like—as did all of the forms in his paintings. Around this time, which coincided with his early cutouts, Matisse began to speak of his work in terms of the invention of what he called "signs." This was a term that he used in a general rather than in a strictly semiotic sense—that conventional marks, figures, or symbols used as abbreviations, as compressed ways of representing ideas and perceptions—what Matisse's himself described as "the briefest possible indication of the character of a thing. The sign."[12] In his late paintings, Matisse was even more daring in the ways he combined objects to emphasize the affinities that underlay their apparent differences. When looking at his paintings of the late 1930s and 1940s, the viewer is simultaneously asked to accept the objects for what they are —a woman, a table, a vase of flowers, perhaps some fruit, and yards of vividly patterned cloth — and at the same time to understand that taken together these things also suggest another kind of reality and signify another kind of space. This other kind of space is neither strictly two-dimensional nor fully three-dimensional, neither specifically ethereal not corporeal. It is in effect a kind of "third space," a new reality that is created by the differentials between what we are shown and how it is represented. Within this context, decorative motifs mediate between the representation of the object as a real thing and the representation of the object as part of an ensemble of forms that exists in a world apart, and which seems to follow its own rules—rules determined in large measure by the ways in which pictorial energies are guided and modulated by the pulse of decorative patterns.

Matisse's late paintings and cutouts marked an apogee in his use of both signs and of decoration. In some of the cutouts, such as *Les velours* of 1947, the decorative structure is in effect all that remains—as an idea, an organizing principle, and as an expansiveness that transcends, almost disdains, the mere physicality of things. In such cutouts, the entire work is quite literally organized in terms of the structural principles of textile decorations.

The fluid and open kind of space made possible by decorative motifs allowed Matisse to produce works that to some degree parallel the process of consciousness itself by providing a pictorial equivalent for the multiplicity and complexity of our experience of the world.

Notes

1. See for example, Gauguin's *The Little Dreamer* and *Sleeping Child*, reproduced in Washington, National Gallery of Art, *The Art of Paul Gauguin,* Washington, D.C., 1988, pp. 29, 37, 280.

2. The photographs are reproduced in Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, Anne Baldassari, and Claude Laugier, *Oeuvres de Henri Matisse*, Paris, 1989, pp. 96-97.

3. Matisse was acutely aware of analogies between painting and music. In Frank Harris's account of his meeting with Matisse in 1921, he recounts how "Several times in talking he illustrated some peculiarity of painting with musical examples." Frank Harris, "Henri Matisse and Renoir," in *Contemporary Portraits, Fourth Series*, London, 1924, p. 187.

4 Cézanne's *Still Life with Apples*, c. 1895-98 (Rewald 804; Museum of Modern Art, New York) is an excellent example of this.

5. Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, *Du "Cubisme"*, 1912; trans. Robert L. Herbert, *Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 4. ["Il nous apprend à dominer le dynamisme universel. Ils nous révèle les modifications que s=infligent réciproquement des objets crus inanimés."]

6. On the relation between this painting and Matisse's domestic situation, see Jack Flam, *Matisse and Picasso: The Story of Their Rivalry and Friendship*, Westview Press, 2003, pp. 78-79.

7. This effect would have been even stronger when the painting was surrounded by its original painted false frame, now lost, which contained a continuation of the floral motifs that appear inside the picture space, rendered in reversed colors and values, dark violet on light. The repeated all-over floral forms transform the painting into a decorative field similar to that in a piece of cloth, and in a sense anticipate the structure of some of the late cutouts.

8. Even the color of the cloth is sometimes radically altered, as in *Harmony in Red.*

9. In a 1919 interview with Ragnar Hoppe ("På visit hos Matiss," in *Städer och Konstnärer, resebrev och essäer om Konst*, Stockholm, 1931; as translated in Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995, p. 76), Matisse drew a distinctions between what he called "concentration and more intense expression both in line and color and Acorporeality and spatial depth, the richness of detail." Decades later, he characterized this difference to André Verdet (*Entretiens, notes et écrits sur la peinture: Braque, Léger, Matisse, Picasso*, Paris, 1978, p. 124) as follows: "A will to rhythmic abstraction was battling with my natural, innate desire for rich, warm, generous colors and forms, in which the arabesque strove to establish its supremacy." ["Une volonté d'abstraction rythmique livrait combat en moi à ce désir naturel, inné, de couleurs et de formes riches, chaudes, et généreuses où l'arabesque voulait assurer sa suprématie."]

10. Henri Matisse, "Notes d'un peintre," *La Grande Revue*, II, 24 (25 December 1908), pp. 731–745; trans. in Flam, *Matisse on Art*, p. 39. ["Sous cette succession de moments qui compose l'existence superficielle des êtres et des choses, et qui les revêt d'apparences changeantes, tôt disparues, on peut rechercher un caractère plus vrai, plus essentiel, auquel l'artiste s'attachera pour donner de la réalité une interprétation plus durable. "]

11. Ragnar Hoppe, "På visit hos Matiss," in *Städer och Konstnärer, resebrev och essäer om Konst*, Stockholm, 1931; trans. in Flam, *Matisse on Art*, p. 76.

12. Aragon, "Matisse-en-France,"; trans. in Flam, *Matisse on Art*, p. 151.