A beginner's guide to Fauvism

**Distinctive brushwork**

Fauvism developed in France to become the first new artistic style of the 20th century. In contrast to the dark, vaguely disturbing nature of much fin-de-siècle, or turn-of-the-century, Symbolist art, the Fauves produced bright cheery landscapes and figure paintings, characterized by pure vivid color and bold distinctive brushwork.

"Wild beasts"

When shown at the 1905 Salon d’Automne (an exhibition organized by artists in response to the conservative policies of the official exhibitions, or salons) in Paris, the contrast to traditional art was so striking it led critic Louis Vauxcelles to describe the artists as "Les Fauves" or “wild beasts,” and thus the name was born.

One of several Expressionist movements to emerge in the early 20th century, Fauvism was short lived, and by 1910, artists in the group had diverged toward more individual interests. Nevertheless, Fauvism remains significant for it demonstrated modern art’s
The expressive potential of color

The best known Fauve artists include Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Maurice Vlaminck who pioneered its distinctive style. Their early works reveal the influence of Post-Impressionist artists, especially Neo-Impressionists like Paul Signac, whose interest in color’s optical effects had led to a divisionist method of juxtaposing pure hues on canvas. The Fauves, however, lacked such scientific intent. They emphasized the expressive potential of color, employing it arbitrarily, not based on an object’s natural appearance.

In *Luxe, calme et volupté* (1904), for example, Matisse employed a pointillist style by applying paint in small dabs and dashes. Instead of the subtle blending of complimentary colors typical of Neo-Impressionism Seurat, for example, the combination of firey oranges, yellows, greens and purple is almost overpowering in its vibrant impact. Similarly, while paintings such as Vlaminck’s *The River Seine at Chantou* (1906) appear to
Similarly, while paintings such as Vlaminck’s *The River Seine at Chatou* (1906) appear to mimic the spontaneous, active brushwork of Impressionism, the Fauves adopted a painterly approach to enhance their work’s emotional power, not to capture fleeting effects of color, light or atmosphere on their subjects. Their preference for landscapes, carefree figures and lighthearted subject matter reflects their desire to create an art that would appeal primarily to the viewers’ senses.

![Maurice de Vlaminck, *The River Seine at Chatou*, 1906, oil on canvas, 82.6 x 101.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)](image)

Paintings such as Matisse’s *Bonheur de Vivre* (1905-06) epitomize this goal. Bright colors and undulating lines pull our eye gently through the ideallic scene, encouraging us to imagine feeling the warmth of the sun, the cool of the grass, the soft touch of a caress, and the passion of a kiss.

Like many modern artists, the Fauves also found inspiration in objects from Africa and other non-western cultures. Seen through a colonialist lens, the formal distinctions of African art reflected current notions of Primitivism—the belief that, lacking the corrupting influence of European civilization, non-western peoples were more in tune with the primal elements of nature.
Henri Matisse, *Bonheur de Vivre (Joy of Life)*, 1905-6, oil on canvas, 176.5 x 240.7 cm (Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia)

*Blue Nude (Souvenir of Biskra)* of 1907 shows how Matisse combined his traditional subject of the female nude with the influence of primitive sources. The woman’s face appears mask-like in the use of strong outlines and harsh contrasts of light and dark, and the hard lines of her body recall the angled planar surfaces common to African sculpture. This distorted effect, further heightened by her contorted pose, clearly distinguishes the figure from the idealized odalisques of Ingres and painters of the past.

Henri Matisse, *The Blue Nude (Souvenir de Biskra)*, 1907, oil on canvas, 92.1 x 140.3 cm (Baltimore Museum of Art)
The Fauves interest in Primitivism reinforced their reputation as “wild beasts” who sought new possibilities for art through their exploration of direct expression, impactful visual forms and instinctual appeal.

Essay by Dr. Virginia B. Spivey

Additional resources:

Fauvism at theartstory.org

Fauvism at The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Timeline of Art History

African Influences in Modern Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Timeline of Art History

Tips & Thanks

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The essay states, “Bright colors and undulating lines pull our eye gently through the idealic scene…” and by doing this we, as the viewers, are inspired to imagine and experience what is depicted in the painting. This creates a more authentic reaction to art that is personalized.
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