

Picasso & Matisse - Modernist Masters, comparing human body/portrait studies

For this essay I have been asked to contrast two 20th Century items from the same discipline, and explain why the two items have different styles and characteristics. At first I looked at sculptors and minimalist artists but I soon realised I had little or no interest in them so there was no incentive to write the essay which was interesting for the reader. After thinking about the various art movements which interest me I found, which, in my eyes the perfect comparison of a pair of artists and their works from the 20th Century. The artists I have chosen are regarded as the most famous of our time, today their works of art are worth millions and are priceless in most peoples minds, the artists that I have chosen are Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse.

Pablo Picasso was born on October 25, 1881 in Malaga, Spain, as the son of an art and drawing teacher. He was a brilliant student. He passed the entrance examination for the Barcelona School of Fine Arts at the age of 14 in just one day and was allowed to skip the first two classes. During his lifetime, the artist went through different periods of characteristic painting styles. The Blue Period of Picasso lasted from about 1900 to 1904. It is characterized by the use of different shades of blue underlining the melancholic style of his subjects - people from the grim side of life with thin, half-starved bodies. His painting style during these years is masterly and convinces even those who reject his later modern style. During Picasso's Rose Period from about 1905 to 1906, his style moved away from the *Blue Period* to a friendly pink tone with subjects taken from the world of the circus.

After several travels to Paris, the artist moved permanently to the "capital of arts" in 1904. There he met all the other famous artists like Henri Matisse, Joan Miro and George Braques. He became a great admirer of Henri Matisse and developed a life-long friendship with the master of French *Fauvism*, like I mentioned earlier Matisse is the artist who I shall be comparing in this essay. Inspired by the works of Paul Cezanne (another great artist of this period), he developed together with George Braque and Juan Gris developed the Cubist style. In Cubism, subjects are reduced to basic geometrical shapes. In a later version of Cubism, called *synthetic cubism*, several views of an object or a person are shown simultaneously from a different perspective in one picture.

Picasso charmed and fascinated almost all whom he met. For many women his charm led to their seduction and was followed by ridicule. Yet, paintings depicting women gained him more fame during his lifetime than was achieved by any other artist in history. His *Demoiselles d'Avignon* of 1907 while heralding prostitutes served as the world's introduction to modernism. With this information in mind, together with my own interest in the human body, the main focus of the types of work I will be focusing on will be both artists studies of the human body.

Henri Matisse was born as the son of a grain merchant in the Picardy region of northern France. He studied law and worked as a law clerk. When Henri Matisse was 21 years old he became seriously ill. During the phase of convalescence Matisse started painting and discovered his love for art, which should become his

life-long passion. Two years later, in 1892, he gave up his career as a lawyer. He attended art classes at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and played with different styles. He then was influenced by the impressionist and post-impressionist painters Cezanne, Van Gogh, Paul Signac and by the paintings of W. Turner.

Around the year 1905 he finally found his own style characterized by daring, bright colors done in a broad brush stroke. After an exhibition of Matisse's works in 1905 at the *Salon d'Automne* the group around Matisse and Andre Derain was called *Les Fauves*, which literally means *The Wild Beasts*.

1905 to 1906 Matisse painted one of his best paintings, *The Joy of Life*. It is considered to be one of the most important works of Twenty Century art and was bought by the famous art collector Dr. Albert C. Barnes. This painting and the whole Barnes collection was veiled from the public for 72 years. Finally the collection of the Barnes Foundation was opened to the art world again in 1993.

The American writer Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo were early collectors and supporters of Matisse paintings. Another admirer became Pablo Picasso with whom he exchanged paintings in 1907, which will be explained in further detail later on in the essay. After World War I, Matisse had gained a high reputation and was an internationally recognized artist. In 1917 he left Paris and settled in Nice in the South of France where he remained until the end of his life. In 1941 Matisse had an abdominal cancer surgery which had a devastating effect on his health and ability to paint. He was unable to stand upright in front of an easel. The artist therefore turned to another form of artistic expression. He created paper cut-outs in the same vivid, strong colors and daring compositions known from his paintings. He had an assistant and could work lying in bed or sitting comfortably in an arm-chair. Matisse had continued creating paper cutout works until the day of his death on November 3, 1954.

The majority of the works I am going into are from around 1919, namely the pencil, ink and charcoal studies of figures. Main influences were from the various movements that had previously happened, for example Picasso, in 1914 had shown stylistic restlessness in 1914 when he produced detailed pencil drawings of a delicacy and precision new to his art. Matisse on the other hand, when he was experiencing the impact of cubism, was working towards reductive linear pieces. However the following year Matisse created works which were superimposed over old naturalistic images that had been partly erased. The finished pieces were a handfull of naturalistic pencil still-life drawings, rendered to perfection, rather like Picasso's pencil drawings of the previous year, which leads me to believe that they were strongly influenced by each other in terms of art work.

In 1920 Matisse had halted his more draftsmanship drawing for a period, but at the same time he celebrated his own works by arranging a publication of fifty drawings ironically at 50 years of age. These drawings comprised of works which ranged of quality and dated from when he started out to the time he presented them, he saw them as a recording of his life, kind of like a visual autobiography, and more importantly as a way of leading him onwards. At the same time Picasso

was also heading for change, he now was strengthening his neoclassical style, particularly in his draftsmanship, in which he was pressured when he was younger by his father to master traditional skills. In my opinion although Picasso was pressured I think mastering these skills at such a young age worked to his advantage which benefitted him hugely in his career.

Without these skills and the cubist influence I think the 'Les Femmes d'Alger' (O.J.F.), one of Picasso's most famous pieces wouldn't exist. The piece itself consists of a group of nude figures in various shades of white, red and chestnut colours, with small areas of blue black, white and green. There are no traces of primary colours, it has mostly secondary and tertiary ones. I think the blue and black which are mostly in the left of the picture, create depth in the piece, and they contrast with the white brush strokes painted around the edges of the cubist style shapes. It's of a 3-D form, and example are the folded sheets that one of the nudes is holding. In my opinion the work consists of carefully created shapes put together compositionally perfect to make a masterpiece, although another painter of the same period Max Jacob thought it was "ragged, chaotic, inchoate, and possibly an evil study of women". Although Picasso did not commit himself to detail in it I think that if he would have the painting would have the same impact. Another thing I want to point out is that each of the figures are turned to face the viewer, occupying their own spaces at the same time, which is rather like Matisse's 'Bathers with a turtle' which was painted a year after Les Femmes d'Alger. In Matisse's you can clearly see that his figures occupy their own spaces, however instead of facing the viewer they all face the small turtle. Maybe Matisse was inspired by the Les Femmes d'Alger's style and he wanted to make his own rendition a year later?

Another thing that both artists have in common is that they were using their family, mostly their partners as models for which they studied. They explored different styles and made drawings from them wearing different clothes and in different poses whenever they could. An example of one of Picasso's explorations was in the 1920's when he made pencil sketches of Olga (his partner) then firm broad contours were drawn over them, erasing the detail what was originally drawn, leaving an image similar to a tracing. Drawings of this type were sometimes created from photographs, while Matisse on the other hand used studio nudes as well as family members all drawn from life.

To conclude this essay I think that with both artists, one couldn't help but be influenced by the other, and although at times they quite frankly did not like one another. Later on in their careers Picasso said that 'All things considered, there is only Matisse', and Matisse stated that 'Picasso sees everything'. Which to me proves that the work of each artist inspired each other throughout their careers. I think the best way to describe this is Picasso and Matisse's relationship is like the art world version of the Lennon & McCartney musician relationship. If I were to choose one artist over the other I would probably choose Picasso, I, personally think he has something which Matisse hasn't got, even though some of Picasso's works wouldn't be the way they are if it wasn't for Matisse.

