Filtered to Essentials--Matisse's Conversion of Medieval Stained Glass

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

FILTERED TO ESSENTIALS – MATISSE’S CONVERSION OF MEDIEVAL STAINED GLASS

By

Mary Alison Reilly

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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FILTERED TO ESSENTIALS – MATISSE’S CONVERSION OF MEDIEVAL STAINED GLASS

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This thesis studies the relationship between the works of French artist Henri Matisse and the medium of stained glass, with emphasis on the formal properties of his oeuvre that define his ten executed stained glass pieces. Current scholarship treats Matisse’s stained glass works as an expansion of his cutouts, or, alternatively, as conventional religious decoration.

This paper proposes to interpret the artist’s stained glass works as secular pieces that epitomize his artistic preferences, with primary focus on both his stylistic elements and the characteristics of the stained glass form, demonstrating the visual congruencies between that signature style and the medium. I indicate the artist’s stained glass works constitute an independent catalog that embodies Matisse’s distinctive artistic characteristics.

This investigation also concludes that these artworks provide archetypal examples of Modernism and advance art itself; they highlight the properties of the medium, exemplifying Clement Greenberg’s theory of medium specificity. I contend Matisse’s glass works intentionally exclude traditional religious imagery illustrating Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s supposition that art constantly moves towards its ideal form.
For my family
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INTRODUCTION

*I have attained a form filtered to its essentials.* –Henri Matisse

*Art must always be modern.* –Matthew Stewart Prichard

Henri Matisse (1869-1954) was an early twentieth-century French artist known best for his use of pure, bright colors and organic, simplified shapes. Even though he is most famous for his paintings, his unique style shines brightest through the stained glass works he created during his final years. Scholars tend to tie Matisse’s stylistic elements to earlier artistic periods, including Impressionism, Art Nouveau, and Byzantine art. No scholar, though, has yet suggested that Matisse drew inspiration from the Middle Ages, a striking omission, considering his work designing stained glass pieces. In fact, Matisse’s style owes much to Gothic stained glass. He lived his entire life in France, where he saw such work on a regular basis, and, upon close examination, there emerges a strong likeness between Matisse’s works and forms that are distinguishable in the stained glass windows he viewed in Notre-Dame de Paris and Notre-Dame de Chartres. They, like his own work, emphasize light and nonrepresentational forms, by way of strong outlines, intense colors, and flat spatial arrangement.

Matisse’s stained glass works have not to this point commanded much scholarly attention. To the extent that they have been studied, they are always understood in either of two ways. The first interpretation holds that the works merely extend Matisse’s

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1 Matisse created twelve stained glass designs, only ten of which were executed. The two works that have been addressed in modern scholarship are *Tree of Life, (Apse) (L’Abre de vie)* and *Tree of Life, (Nave and choir) (L’Abre de vie)* found in the Chapel of the Rosary. Information on these windows can be found in René Pecheron’s book: *Matisse, from Color to Architecture* (2004), and M.A. Couturier’s book: *Henri Matisse: The Vence Chapel, An archive of a creation* (1999).
cutouts, and it does not recognize the windows as autonomous artworks.\textsuperscript{2} The second holds that they are religious decorations, representations of the artist’s rediscovered Christian faith. Scholars are quick to embrace this second theory, as four of the works reside in Christian chapels, and the medium of stained glass has historically accompanied Christianity. Taken at face value, the reasoning seems sound, however, when one considers Matisse’s entire stained glass catalog, it becomes impossible to ignore that the pieces are almost completely devoid of Christian imagery, and instead communicate the values of Modernism, as defined in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{3} With regard to both religion and style, Matisse rejects both traditional imagery and traditional modes of thought. The works seem almost a parody of Gothic stained glass in their glorification of nature rather than the teachings of the Bible. Furthermore, in keeping with the insights of Clement

\textsuperscript{2} Matisse began working with cutouts for strictly pictorial purposes in 1941. He is thought to have adopted a new method of “painting” because of the physical limitations he incurred after undergoing intestinal surgery the same year. There is a record of Matisse working with cutouts as a process tool as early as 1932 when creating the composition for \textit{The Dance} (1932-3) for The Barnes Foundation, currently located in Philadelphia.

\textsuperscript{3} The values of Modernism in art in this thesis are derived from twentieth-century art critic Clement Greenberg’s essay “Modernist Painting.” In his essay, Greenberg derives his definition of Modernism from the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant, and states that the defining characteristic of Modernism is for those within a discipline to criticize the discipline itself. Greenberg mentions that Modernism is not a break with the past. Rather, it is a “devolution” or an “unraveling” of traditions to understand the discipline better so that self-criticism can take place. For Greenberg, religion does not successfully accomplish this. As a result, religion is seen as a form of entertainment in modern society.

Art’s existence is justified because the entertainment it provides is unique only to art. Specifically, it is because each medium has characteristics that are special and cannot be applied to any other discipline or form of entertainment. Greenberg specifically looks at painting and suggests that its flatness and resistance to sculpture are what make painting unique and therefore modern. He suggests Modern Art also resists realist representations that give the illusion their subject matter can exist in a three-dimensional space. He references Old Master paintings as negative exempla, because their subjects look sculptural and appear as though they can exist in reality. It is more important for art to be two-dimensional to showcase that it is flat and art for art’s sake. Flat, non-representation art would again draw attention to the limits of the medium. See Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in \textit{Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969}, edited by John O’Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 85–94.
Greenberg, Matisse highlights stained glass as a medium, inviting spectators to view his work as art, rather than as an imitation of the physical world.

Through discussion of Matisse’s biography, the writings of twentieth-century scholars, art that Matisse is known to have viewed, and Matisse’s own artwork, this paper will argue that it was the artist’s viewing of Gothic stained glass that enabled him to create his signature style, and that his stained glassworks represent the culmination of both this style and his artistic significance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Criticism on Henri Matisse abounds, with scholars analyzing both the artist’s life and work from nearly every conceivable angle. Some go as far as to suggest that Matisse research is practically complete, but art historian Jack Flam offers the view that “[Matisse] is one of [the] relatively small number of artists who are truly inexhaustible.”

I have narrowed the scope to topics relevant to this thesis, which include the artist’s life, analysis of Matisse’s works and his stylistic similarities to earlier art movements, and the master’s late works.

Alfred H. Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), composed a chronological survey of Matisse’s oeuvre in Matisse, His Art and His Public. The book provides descriptions of the works, as well as their documented critical and

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public receptions. It also includes Matisse’s republished letters and quoted observations, giving the reader more complete information on Matisse’s works. (It should be noted, though, that Jack Flam’s *Matisse on Art* is a more thorough and up-to-date compilation of Matisse’s remarks and interviews.) A disadvantage of Barr’s book is that it was first published in 1951, when the artist was still alive; therefore it cannot include Matisse’s last stained glass commissions. Also, some debate surrounds the accuracy of the book’s last chapter, which discusses Matisse’s supposed conversation with Louis Aragon over the design of a chapel. In his own book, *Henri Matisse*, Aragon disputes the truthfulness of Barr’s account, and this, unfortunately, raises some question as to the book’s biographical accuracies.

Hilary Spurling’s two-part biography, *The Unknown Matisse: A Life of Henri Matisse, The Early Years, 1869-1908* and *Matisse the Master: A Life of Henri Matisse, The Conquest of Color, 1909-1954*, attempts to correct these alleged biographical inaccuracies. Spurling presents an immensely detailed portrait of the artist, relying on the support and aide of Matisse’s family for research. Because of her access to previously unavailable resources, Spurling offers details that present to the reader an account of Matisse’s entire life, rather than a simple snapshot of his most famous years in Paris and Nice. Spurling’s books offer a firm foundation for understanding the artist, his personal relationships, and the happenings of his life. However, since her writings were

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5 Hilary Spurling’s two-part biography is the first comprehensive biography on Henri Matisse. Spurling debunks two well-accepted myths about the artist when she mentions that Matisse did not have romantic relationships with most of his models and had no involvement in the Vichy government.

purely intended as a biography, Spurling does not delve into the art historical aspects of Matisse’s works, which are equally important to achieve a complete appreciation for Matisse.

A number of publications note that the master studied certain works of art so that he might apply their formal elements and techniques to his own work. This fact is central to this thesis; I explore the possibility that Matisse utilized the forms of Gothic stained glass, rather than those of nineteenth-century painters.

One notable study of Matisse’s artworks is Jack Flam’s book, *Matisse: the Man and His Art*. Flam analyzes the works of Matisse’s early years, from 1869 until 1918. He supports the popular idea that Matisse’s formal elements of style (the use of large blocks of color) descend from Paul Cézanne’s small color planes. Flam suggests that Matisse’s works, like Cézanne’s, intended to show the importance of nature, and that they served as a way for Matisse to speak in a personal language about painting itself. To Flam, creating an expressive language is a basic tenet of Modernism. Additionally, the author posits that the inconsistencies of Matisse’s early art were the artist’s way of expressing himself. Flam also notes that Matisse seemed to have a philosophical approach to his art, and that the artist developed his first fully independent painting, *Le Bonheur de Vivre (The Joy of Life)* (1905-6), during a time of extreme personal hardship.

Art historian Alastair Wright also addresses Matisse’s style in his book *Matisse and the Subject of Modernism*. Wright studies a smaller panel of Matisse’s paintings (the works from 1905 through 1913), looking closely at the reception of these works, and at Matisse’s vacillations between traditional and modernist painting. Wright presents evidence that Matisse continued the styles of his Post-Impressionist predecessors:
Vincent van Gogh, Paul Signac, and Paul Cézanne. However, Wright concludes that Matisse, in an attempt to break away from traditional methods, systematically dismantled these artists’ techniques. Wright remarks that Matisse’s contemporaries disapproved of the artist’s early works, and he, the author, considers these criticisms to be accurate.

Wright defines key concepts of Modernist painting, principally, that Modernism is the confusion of one’s identity in modern times. He also explores the changing role of art as a commodity. Wright convincingly argues that Matisse, owing to his access to art history, manipulated past art movements, using them for his own purposes in his early work.

*Matisse: In Search of True Painting* is the most recent publication that breaks down Matisse’s process and its connection to past art movements. This exhibition catalog is a compilation of essays about the complete oeuvre of Matisse’s paintings. Like Wright, *In Search of True Painting* connects Matisse’s paintings to Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Many of the essays demonstrate that Matisse reworked his art pieces, and referenced other paintings (including his own previous works), to determine the components of an ideal painting. Claudine Grammont examines Matisse’s connection to Post-Impressionism in her essay, “Cézanne versus Signac.” Grammont discusses Matisse’s relationship with Paul Cézanne and Paul Signac. She conducts a formalist investigation of *Still Life with Purro I* and *Still Life with Purro II*, theorizing that

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7 *Matisse: in search of true painting* is published as a catalog in connection with the exhibition held at the Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, from July 14 through October 28, 2012, and the exhibition held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from December 4, 2012 through March 17, 2013. There are 29 essays (including the introduction) in this catalog. Contributing authors include: Dorthe Aagesen, Stephanie D’Alessandro, Cécile Debray, Isabelle Duvernois, Jack Flam, Claudine Grammont, Rémi Labrusse, Doina Lemny, Kasper Monrad, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, Kathrine Segel, Hilary Spurling, Rebecca Rabinow, Samantha Rippner, and Alastair Wright.

8 Previous literature connects Matisse to Neo-Impressionism (Divisionism), Cloissonism, and Symbolism.
Matisse’s first version of the still life studied Cézanne’s use of small color planes, while the second version examined Signac’s Divisionist style. According to Grammont, Matisse realized that strictly adhering to Cézanne’s or Signac’s techniques was not what made a painting attractive, but rather it was the luminosity given to the objects by means of color and contour. With this observation, another author concludes that Matisse scrutinized the art of his predecessors to further his craft.

Art historian Frank A. Trapp also believes that Matisse referenced nineteenth-century artists, and argues as much in his article, “Art Nouveau Aspects of Early Matisse.” In the article, he links Matisse’s decorative subject matter (rather than process) with Art Nouveau arabesques. Trapp discusses Matisse’s first fully independent painting, The Joy of Life (Le Bonheur de Vivre), and his analysis of this painting echoes Wright, as both men believe that Matisse work represents the conflict between Traditionalism and Modernism. Trapp examines this conflict through the lens of the Art Nouveau movement. He puts forth that this painting, like the Art Nouveau period itself, bridges two culturally disparate centuries; the painting acts as a synthesis of these centuries. Here, Trapp builds on the ideas of Emeritus MoMA curator and Matisse expert, John Elderfield, who, in The Cut-Outs of Henri Matisse, explores Matisse’s connections to the Art Nouveau movement as well, writing that the cutouts were used to portray an ideal, dreamlike version of reality – and idea that underpins Art Nouveau and Symbolist theory.

While it is important to look at literature that connects Matisse’s early style to that of previous artists and art movements, this thesis suggests that it is Matisse’s late work that best represents his artistic contribution. Therefore, it is critical to look at the literature that emphasizes his late period.
The majority of the publications that discuss Matisse’s later works focus on his cutouts, and, on this subject, the most comprehensive book available is *Henri Matisse: Paper Cut-Outs* by Jack Cowart, et al.\(^9\) The book was the first complete catalog of Matisse’s cutouts, and was composed as an accompaniment to a traveling exhibition that featured them. Important inclusions in this work are Professor Flam’s essay “Jazz” and Dominique Fourcade’s “Something Else.”

In “Jazz,” Flam supposes that Matisse’s book of the same title could be seen as his autobiography, because it bridges his easel paintings with his later cutouts. Flam also indicates that Matisse leveraged his knowledge of color and line to simplify the cutouts to basic forms, making them more signs than literal depictions. Moreover, Flam credits Matisse for creating free, mythical images by intentionally relying on memory rather than on a live model. What is most significant about Flam’s essay, though, is his discussion of the circumstances surrounding the cutouts’ creation. Matisse completed them during a chaotic time in his personal life, while World War II raged in France. Flam believes that these works reflect the memories of experiences the artist had earlier in his life, when he lived through World War I.\(^10\)

Dominique Fourcade’s essay “Something Else” focuses on Matisse’s cutouts and how they relate to drawing and color. Fourcade rejects the notion that Matisse’s were a


\(^{10}\) The images in “Jazz” are like the circus imagery in the theatrical ballet *Parade* Matisse attended in 1917. This occurred in the midst of World War I. Flam states that “the year 1917 marked the climax of what was perhaps the most innovative period of Matisse’s mature art” and that “Jazz” was a similar innovation created during 1943 after Matisse had life-changing surgery and was living through World War II. Jack Cowart, et al., *Henri Matisse: Paper Cut-Outs*, (New-York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978), 45.
new attempt to combine drawing and color because, according to the scholar, Matisse had already accomplished the connection of these elements with his earlier easel paintings. Instead, Fourcade posits that Matisse’s cutouts were a more radical, but not innovative, way to achieve the combination. Fourcade’s essay is noteworthy for its mention of the centrality of light to both Matisse’s “Nice” period paintings and his later cutouts. He asserts that Matisse originally organized his paintings with color, but that he later replaced color with light. This argument, that the artist considered light to be more important than color, is an essential part of Matisse literature.

Scholarly work on Matisse’s stained glass works has been largely restricted to the windows at The Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France, though even these publications have concentrated on the chapel’s architecture and history, typically marginalizing its stained glass windows. Additionally, Matisse’s stained glass works are almost studied from a religious perspective, with most writers concluding that Matisse used the medium to rediscover his Christian faith. Kenneth Silver’s article “Matisse at Vence: An Epilogue to Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art” is an example of Matisse’s stained glass works being understood from such a perspective.

Both Silver and Debora Silverman, in her book, Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art, respectively argue that religion plays an important role in Modern Art, analogizing the links between Van Gogh, Gauguin, and sacred art, to supposed links between Matisse, his Vence chapel, and sacred art. Silver suggests that the artist

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redisCOVERS Christian faith, but he does allow that this conclusion is ambiguous, thanks to Matisse’s many contradictory quotations on the matter. Silver also states that Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin influenced Matisse, and implies that Matisse adopted these artists’ tendencies toward religious allusion.

*Stained Glass: Masterpieces of the Modern Era* by Xavier Barral I Altet and Andrés Gamboa examines modern architecture’s renewed interest in stained glass. Altet and Gamboa write that a new fascination with modern glasswork exists today because technological advances offer a greater flexibility than has been available before, regarding both design and use of the medium. The authors identify dozens of modern glassworks, most in religious spaces, including glasswork of Matisse contemporaries Maurice Denis, Georges Rouault, Fernand Léger, and Georges Braque. Though Altet and Gamboa do not go into great detail about Matisse’s works they do name Matisse as the artist who elevated the status of stained glass in modern art, and identify Matisse’s relationship with the medium as one that deserves particular recognition. 13

*Matisse & Chagall at the Union Church of Pocantico Hills* pays specific attention to Matisse’s *Rockefeller Memorial Rose Window*. The publication gives a thorough account of the history of the Union Church of Pocantico Hills, a Tarrytown, New York church built by the children of John D. and Abby Rockefeller to commemorate their parents. The introduction, written by David Rockefeller, describes the original purpose of the chapel’s windows, which were made by Marc Chagall and Henri Matisse. Rockefeller first talks about the six windows designed by Marc Chagall, which depict biblical imagery, and writes that Chagall’s windows were commissioned to “symbolize

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13 On page 139 of *Stained Glass: Masterpieces of the Modern Era*, a stained glass window in the Maeght Foundation is attributed to Henri Matisse that is in fact the work of George Braque. This inaccuracy leads one to question the precision of Altet and Gamboa’s research.
the central importance of Christianity” to John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s life. In contrast, Matisse’s window, the *Rockefeller Memorial Rose*, depicts abstract organic shapes. Rockefeller recounts that this window was created to commemorate Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and her love of Modern Art, and it was positioned to sit opposite the main Chagall window, symbolizing the eternal union of John and Abby. The book’s authors, McKelden Smith and Lorraine H. Barstow, detail the story of how the Rockefeller family enlisted Alfred H. Barr to convince Matisse to accept the commission, and provide Matisse’s letters describing his thoughts on the window’s creation. They also include a short discussion of the window’s formal properties.

Another work that provides insight into Matisse’s stained glass is John Hallmark Neff’s article, “Matisse’s Forgotten Stained Glass Commission.” Neff discusses correspondences dating back to 1911, from Karl Ernst Osthaus, a notable German patron of the avant-garde. In these letters, Osthaus commissions Matisse to create a stained glass piece for an upcoming exhibit. Neff presents documents showing that Osthaus sent stained glass samples to Matisse, and he demonstrates that Matisse provided to Osthaus sketches of a possible stained glass work, although he does note that Matisse’s designs would not be feasible as stained glass, and that the piece was never made. Neff’s discovery is critical to Matisse scholarship because of the evidence he offers that Matisse’s workings with stained glass began earlier than anyone thought.

René Pecheron presents the most inclusive account available of Matisse’s stained glass works in *Matisse: From Color to Architecture*, a five-chapter survey of Matisse’s creations as they relate to architecture. These works include paintings made for specific buildings, paintings that deal with architecture, and works that might be viewed as
components of architecture. Pecheron references every one of Matisse’s stained glass works, and he provides images both the cutout *maquettes* and the stained glass works. He argues that Matisse used the glass medium as a way to further experiment with architecture.

The stained glass works that Pecheron explores in most detail are the windows in The Chapel of the Rosary and the *The Bees (Les Abeilles)*, a window currently installed in a nursery school in the artist’s birthplace of Le Cateau-Cambrésis, France. In his marginal entries, Pecheron briefly identifies two topics that this thesis will build upon. In the first entry “From Black Line to Lead Strip,” Pecheron notes that Matisse used black to add vibrancy to his painting, but could not use it in the same way for his stained glass works, since black lead reacts differently to light than black paint does. \(^{14}\) In the second entry, “From Medieval Stained Glass to Matisse” Pecheron refers to medievalist Alain Erlande-Bradeburg’s description of the tense relationship between cathedral contractor and stained glass designer. The tension stemmed from the fact that the two parties had to find compromise, in order to balance the wall and window spaces. \(^{15}\)

Pecheron admits that some critics find modern stained glass as a whole to be disappointing, because it has such a different subject matter than Gothic stained glass. He offers that modern stained glass should be viewed differently, because it is an end itself, more similar to a painting than an architectural work. From this point of view,


Pecheron declares Matisse’s chapel a success, owing to its balance in architecture and glass.

Though I examine these subjects in a fundamentally different way I consider Pecheron’s identification of them as a confirmation of their worth, both as topics of discussion and matters for further research. Previous scholarship has not detailed the links between Matisse’s style and that of medieval stained glass. Analysis of the artist’s lesser-known stained glass works is also missing from Matisse scholarship. The aim of this thesis is to bring these topics into the fold Matisse literature, and in so doing better understand both the artist and the importance of his works.

METHODOLOGY AND OUTLINE

I chose to explore Matisse’s connection to (medieval) stained glass for a number of reasons. The most obvious is that Matisse created one of the largest modern collections of stained glassworks. He also had many personal ties with the medium that have previously been marginalized — Matisse lived the majority of his life near Gothic cathedrals, and the artist’s contemporaries and immediate predecessors worked with the medium. Despite these connections, the current scholarship omits stained glass as an important component of the man’s art and life. The few publications that examine Matisse’s stained glassworks conclude that Matisse used stained glass to memorialize a renewal of his previously disregarded Christian beliefs. These conclusions take little
notice of the fact that the artist was not religious, and the subject matter of the work is entirely secular.\textsuperscript{16}

Matisse’s glass pieces might be deemphasized in Modernist criticism in part because his forms were not completely abstracted in the manner of Fernand Léger and Georges Braque’s quintessentially Modernist stained glass. On the other hand, neither were Matisse’s images explicitly religious, like those of Maurice Denis and Marc Chagall. Instead, Matisse’s imagery consisted of plant-like, natural, and organic shapes. Conducting a thorough investigation of Matisse’s relationship with stained glass will surely offer a more accurate understanding of his work, and may illuminate the reasons Matisse approached the medium in such a unique way.

This investigation employs formalist analysis with some accompanying examination of the artist’s biography as its key methodologies. I pay closest attention to the elements that compose Matisse’s style. It is not a strictly formal approach because I do include the artist’s biography. In doing so, I suggest the artist’s life was not separate from his stylistic choices, a theory that conflicts with Roger Fry’s definition of formalism. I use Meyer Schapiro’s definition of style, which states that style is created from constant forms and constant elements, to examine Matisse’s works and the properties of stained glass.\textsuperscript{17} This method is most effective because it is largely objective and offers clear visual evidence of Matisse’s connection to stained glass. Furthermore, I

\textsuperscript{16} However, the titles of two stained glass works have religious connotations. These include the \textit{maquette} for the first apse design for the Chapel of the Rosary titled, \textit{Heavenly Jerusalem (La Jérusalem céleste)}, 1948, and the window executed in 1952, \textit{Christmas Eve (La Nuit de Noël)}; The subject matter of the small window at the entrance of the Chapel of the Rosary is a fish. In René Pecheron’s book, \textit{Matisse: From Color to Architecture}, he describes this fish as “The Christian symbol of a fish,” in René Pecheron, \textit{Matisse, From Color to Architecture}, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Publishers, 2004), 179.

chose this method because the idea of form over content as the source of the work’s subjective appeal reflects Matisse’s own style.\footnote{Laurie Adams, \textit{The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction} (New York: Icon Editions, 1996), 29.} The content of the work consists of themes common in art; he depicts nature, figures, and well-known places. However, his color, line, and use of medium are quite original, allowing his work to be best understood through the prism of Formalism. Finally, I discuss how Matisse’s stained glass exemplifies Clement Greenberg’s ideas of Modernism. Greenberg was a prominent Formalist and his theories of Modernism are rooted in discussing Modern art’s formal elements. In order to prove that Matisse repurposed stained glass to display the most important elements of Modern Art, I must discuss the formal elements of his artwork that fit with Greenberg’s writings.

This thesis is composed of five sections. The first chapter, “A Preference for Gothic Stained Glass,” disputes earlier scholars’ suggestions that Matisse admired certain cathedrals for religious or architectural purposes, asserting instead that the artist was drawn to Gothic cathedrals because of their notable windows. The second chapter, “Formal Properties of French Gothic Glass” discusses the characteristics found in the stained glass windows that Matisse is known to have viewed, providing a lens through which to view Matisse’s later work. The third chapter, “Matisse’s Style as Exemplification of Stained Glass Elements” examines forms and techniques Matisse used throughout his career, demonstrating that the artist’s style evolved to share similarities with Gothic stained glass. I also posit that the artist’s stained glass works should be interpreted as the culmination of his oeuvre. Finally, in chapter four, “Interpreting Matisse’s Stained Glass” I discuss the works in reference to the theories of Clement
Greenberg and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, as well as within the context of Matisse’s contributions to the progress of Modern art.

LIMITATIONS

This research is a careful study of Matisse’s relationship with stained glass, but it does have certain limitations and shortcomings. First, I have not had access to the majority of the actual stained glass pieces, excepting the windows in *Notre Dame, Paris, Notre Dame, Chartres*, as well as the *Rockefeller Memorial Rose* window in Tarrytown, New York. If I could have conducted this research onsite instead of through digital images, I would have more confidence in the accuracy of my descriptions. Second, since in this thesis I exclusively read the stained glassworks by way of their formal properties, I leave out the possibility of reading these works as traditional religious pieces.

New information concerning Matisse’s connection to painter Georges Rouault has recently come to light, in the publication, *Matisse-Rouault: Correspondences 1906-1954* by Jacqueline Munck. Georges Rouault worked as a stained glass apprentice before entering the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, where he and Matisse studied under the same master, Gustave Moreau. I do not discuss Matisse’s associations with Rouault and other contemporaries who worked with stained glass; they could offer a greater understanding his style, particular with regard to the glass medium. Also, four of the stained glassworks discussed were created after Matisse’s death, leaving unanswered questions regarding the artist’s intentions.
CHAPTER 1

A PREFERENCE FOR GOTHIC STAINED GLASS

Matisse deeply admired two of France’s most famous Gothic cathedrals: Notre-Dame de Paris and Notre-Dame de Chartres, both of which are renowned for the same reasons: their celebration of Christianity, their striking architecture, and their original, thirteenth-century stained glass windows. Since Matisse had little interest in either Christianity or architecture, it seems reasonable to conclude that his admiration of these structures resulted from their notable stained glass.

Matisse was a notoriously non-religious artist. Though he was raised Roman Catholic, he was more accurately a man who went through Christian rituals without really accepting the faith. Perhaps this is because he grew up during a time when the concept of laïcité, or French secularism, was popular and had diminished the Catholic Church’s influence in France. Though religious ceremonies were still common in his community, they persisted for cultural reasons, rather than as a reflection of strong Christian faith.

In several well-documented statements, the artist explicitly repudiates Christianity. For example, in a 1952 interview with André Lejard, Matisse states that he had no religious intentions during his design of Vence’s Christian Chapel of the Rosary: “I did not feel the need to convert in order to do the chapel. My interior attitude has not

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19 Notre-Dame de Paris is known for its rose windows and Notre-Dame de Chartres is known for its clerestory windows that flank the nave.

20 The artist was baptized in Le Cateau-Cambrésis, and received his first communion in Bohain-en-Vermarnois. Matisse was baptized in Le Cateau on January 7, 1870, and received his first communion on June 26, 1881. See Hilary Spurling, The Unknown Matisse A Life of Henri Matisse: The Early Years, 1869-1908 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 431; He also attended school in Saint Quentin during the implementation of the Jules Ferry laws passed in 1882 and was most likely forced to attend religious services as a part of schooling until he was thirteen. The Jules Ferry Laws implemented laic public education.
altered; it has remained the same as it as when I was confronted by a face, a chair, or a bowl of fruit.” 21 The artist has referred to God to several times in interviews, but in those interviews he makes no particular mention of Christianity. To the contrary, he claimed that if he identified with any organized religion it would be Buddhism: “I don't know whether I believe in God or not. I think, really, I'm some sort of Buddhist.”22 These proclamations, combined with his dubious religious faith as a young man, make it unlikely that he was professionally drawn to Christian ideals or symbols.

It is also unlikely that Matisse’s admiration for the Gothic cathedral was based on its architecture. Throughout his youth, the artist had access to significant architecture from many periods in history, and that architecture met with his unambiguous disapproval. The structures to which he objected lacked the specific traits that distinguish Matisse’s own work: balance, light, and color. In his later years, during a conversation with his grandson, he said: “I come from the North. You can’t imagine how I hated those dark churches.” 23 The churches to which Matisse most likely refers are Saint Martin in Le Cateau-Cambrésis, Saint Mark’s in Bohain-en-Vermandois and the Gothic basilica in Saint Quentin.

Matisse was baptized in Le Cateau-Cambrésis, the main church of his birthplace, Saint Martin. The church, historically significant as the former Benedictine abbey of Saint André, is dark and has heavy features that lack cohesion. Though the abbey was


originally erected in 1625, its façade dates only to 1635 (Figure 1.1), although it is not Gothic it has notable architecture. Its Flemish style is marked by ornate, engraved architecture, presenting a dense and unbalanced appearance. The building’s interior (Figure 1.2) is has Gothic forms (with its rib vaults) and classical (in its aisle’s decorations), which emphasizes its rooms’ walls, columns, and ceiling. Although the church has stained glass windows, they are sparse and easily overshadowed by an intricate, dense architecture.

The second architecturally distinct church with which Matisse was familiar is Saint Mark’s in Bohain-en-Vermardois, the place in which he received his First Holy Communion. A photograph of the church’s documented street shows a windowless building, constructed in the style of either Romanesque or nineteenth-century Romanesque revival architecture (Figure 1.3). Romanesque architecture relies on rounded arches, supported by thick walls that contain small lancet windows. Like the church in Le Cateau, the building’s aesthetic importance is its physical structure rather than its windows.

When he was a teenager, Matisse also would have had access to the Gothic basilica of Saint Quentin (Figure 1.4). Throughout the 1880s, he could have viewed the structure while attending high school at Lycée Henri Martin in Saint Quentin. In its original design, stained glass dominated the walls of the building. Unfortunately, by the time of Matisse’s high school enrollment, the cathedral’s original thirteenth-century

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25 This school was originally called Lycée Saint Quentin. It was built in conjunction with the Catholic Church under the guidance of the college of cannons who wrote the rules of the school. "Collège des Bons Enfants ou des Capets," Lycée Henri Martin, http://scaramouche.free.fr/bonsenfants.html
stained glass windows had already been destroyed, and they would not be replaced until 1948. A cathedral without its windows would feel quite dissimilar from one that did contain its original windows, as stained glass is one of the defining characteristics of High Gothic architecture, and it is most often used to create a light, ethereal sensation.

Matisse spent the most time in and around Notre-Dame de Paris, commonly known as Notre-Dame. When Matisse was in his twenties, he moved to Paris to advance his art studies. While he lived in Paris, he stayed about three blocks from Notre-Dame. In a 1919 interview with art historian Ragnar Hoppe, Matisse once said that he could not live without his view of the cathedral. During his time near Notre-Dame, Matisse created six paintings of the cathedral. The most famous of these are: *Notre-Dame (1900)*, *Notre-Dame (1902)*, and *Notre-Dame (1914)*. The first two are Impressionist views, and the third painting, which came twelve years after the second, is abstract and geometric. In his essay, “Notre-Dame Between Heaven and Earth”, Rémi Labrusse convincingly argues that Matisse used his work on Notre-Dame to respond to critical doubt of his technical abilities. Critics disparaged the artist’s first renditions of the cathedral for  

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26 In 1545, 1557, and 1669, fires initially damaged the building. The basilica was further destroyed the building in the course of the French Revolution when the structure was converted into a “Temple of Reason.” Germany then bombed the building during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and World War I in 1918. “Basilique Saint-Quentin, Saint-Quentin, France,” Université du Québec, http://www.uquebec.ca/musique/orgues/france/squentin.html.


28 “I never tire of it; for me it is always new… I have lived here for many years, I’ve grown attached to it and I can’t be without the view,” in Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art*, rev. ed. (1995, repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 74.

being too decorative, so, in response, he painted the same subject abstractly. In this undertaking, he was using the cathedral as a tool to study and improve upon different techniques.

Later in his life, Matisse would confirm through his actions that he appreciated not only Note-Dame’s exterior, but its interior as well – specifically, its magnificent stained glass windows. While designing the windows for The Chapel of the Rosary, Matisse had Father Marie-Alan Couturier (a specialist in stained glass) escort him to the cathedral Notre-Dame to see the colors that the stained glass colors cast at different times of day: “Courtier was constantly at his side, escorting him to the glass-works, or to Notre-Dame to check that blue and pink make violet in the southern rose window.”30 In the end, the light from the yellow, green, and blue windows in the Chapel of the Rosary would create a wide spectrum of colors, including a purple and mauve, just like the colors cast by the windows at Notre-Dame – an effect that strongly suggests a desire to emulate, and a deep familiarity with, the great cathedral’s glasswork.

The other Gothic cathedral Matisse loved was Notre-Dame de Chartres, or, simply, Chartres. He first mentions his impressions of Chartres famed windows in 1911, during a written correspondence with one of his best patrons, Sergei Shchukin. In these letters, Shchukin compares Matisse’s work, *Still Life with a Pewter Jug and Pink Statuette (1910)* to the stained glass windows at Chartres; Matisse responds by declaring his own admiration of the windows and writes, “they are rare.”31 This response indicates that Matisse had seen the windows by 1911, and that he was impressed. In her biography

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of Matisse, Hilary Spurling provides an account of the artist referring to the Chartres’ stained glass. She writes that, in 1948, the artist referred to his cut-outs as being similar to the cathedral’s stained glass windows: “Matisse showed [Brother Louis Bertrand Rayssiguier] Jazz, explaining that the only difference between cut-paper and stained glass was that one reflected while the other transmitted light, and citing the polychromatic brilliance of the Chartres cathedral...”32 Matisse plainly found value in the windows, so much so that he would incorporate their qualities of light and color into his own future paintings and glass works.

CHAPTER 2

FORMAL PROPERTIES OF FRENCH GOTHIC STAINED GLASS

Matisse was familiar with several notable works of stained glass from the thirteenth century, including Notre-Dame’s South Rose window (c. 1260, Figure 2.1) and West Rose window (c. 1225, Figure 2.2), and Chartres’ Good Samaritan clerestory window (c.1210, Figure 2.3). Each of these was likely created the same way, and they share significant characteristics, such as their enormous size, reliance on symbolism, and use of light, as well as their combinations of bright colors and strong outlines. Each window also makes heavy use of abstracted forms and decorative elements, and each consists of multiple segments that guide an observer’s eye toward a main image – segments that the observer would have equal cause to interpret either as works unto themselves or as pieces of a complete window, as each complete window develops an understandable narrative.

In Glass Painters, Sarah Brown and David O’Connor remark that most medieval glaziers were anonymous; it was the patron, not the artist, who mattered.33 Thus, it was the patron who determined the subject of a window. In the case of Notre-Dame, it was France’s king, Saint Louis IX, who sponsored the South Rose and gave it to the cathedral. His family, after all, had been involved with the construction of both Notre-Dame and Chartres, and the windows in those buildings would hold emblematic meaning for the monarchy; they were meant not only to illustrate the teachings of Christianity and evoke

God’s presence, but also to glorify the king’s divine right to rule and confirm his own allegiance to God.

Each of the windows is a monumental artwork, purposely and prominently positioned in an important Christian structure. Each is set in the clerestory level of a cathedral, high above any potential viewer (detail 3, Figure 2.1). Combined with each window’s enormous size, this placement works to dwarf the viewer below, elevating the status of the depicted sacred figures to a place well above the mere mortal below. The size and position also enable the viewer to easily follow the window’s narrative, even though he or she stands so far below the work. The pieces engulf the churchgoer in an ostentatious display of the Church’s wealth and an impactful demonstration of godliness on earth.

Symbolism pulses through the windows’ shapes and images. Each glass’s main circle, quatrefoil, and trefoil come together to depict a scene from either the Bible or medieval daily life (detail 1, Figures 2.1, 2.2, 2.3). The windows’ shapes are vertically

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34 Notre-Dame was built from 1163 to 1345 originally under the guidance of Bishop Maurice de Sully to reflect the new Gothic architectural style seen in Abbot Suger’s renovation of Saint-Denis basilica. Notre-Dame cathedral displayed Paris’ importance as the capital of the Kingdom of France and France’s allegiance to the Catholic Church. The cathedral has thin walls filled with stained glass windows. Because of the thin walls, flying buttresses were installed to hold the weight of the high walls and prevent the walls from buckling. The most notable windows in the cathedral are the rose windows placed at its cardinal points. The South Rose was constructed in 1260 and given to the cathedral as a gift from Saint Louis IX, King of France (1214-1270). The West Rose was built around 1225.

Chartres cathedral was mostly built between 1194-1250. This cathedral is important to the Catholic community because it holds a piece of cloth supposedly worn by the Virgin Mary when she gave birth to Christ. This relic marked the town of Chartres as an important pilgrimage destination in the Middle Ages. King Philip Augustus and his son King Louis VIII of France partially funded this cathedral and provided monetary aid to construct the North Porch. St. Louis IX also donated a screen to the cathedral that was later destroyed. The cathedral is built in a typical gothic style with high rib-vaulted ceilings and includes 186 stained glass windows. 152 of these are the original thirteenth-century windows. The most famous of the stained glass windows in Chartres are the clerestory windows that flank the nave and fill the structure with blue light.

35 The diameter of the South Rose is approximately 12.9 meters, and the diameter of the West Rose is approximately 9.6 meters. Each of these windows is set in a cardinal point of Notre-Dame. The Good Samaritan window is approximately 8.13 x 2.21 meters and is located on the right section of the nave.
symmetrical, and the centering of certain figures within a dominant shape separates them from the rest of the window, highlighting their importance. Each outlined shape signifies a scene that can be read either on its own or as a chapter of a larger story, told by the whole window. One such scene has two fish swimming along, representing the astrological sign Pisces (detail 4, Figure 2.2). This image is not Biblical; rather, it represents February, and it acknowledges that a functioning society depends on the labor of every citizen.

Every one of these windows has an obvious focal point in which a thickly outlined shape surrounds an important Christian figure. In each of the two Rose windows, this point is a large circle around a center panel that holds Christ (in the South) or the Virgin Mary (in the West; detail 1, Figures 2.1, 2.2). The center of the South Rose consists of a sectioned quatrefoil. In its core appears a flattened, abstracted man, Christ of the Apocalypse, and from this core stem four petals.\(^{36}\) Four concentric rings of images emerge from the circles, trefoils, and quatrefoils that make up the rest of the window.

In the West Rose’s center circle sits an abstracted Virgin Mary holding Christ the child, and, in similar style to that of the South Rose, three concentric rings of circles, trefoils, and quatrefoils surround it.\(^{37}\) Twelve petals radiate from the center circle.

As a quick aside, the number twelve has particular importance in this setting. Twelve is a significant number to Christians, and appears throughout both the Old and

\(^{36}\) Christ is surrounded to make a pseudo quatrefoil with abstracted images of the four symbols of the evangelists (lion, eagle, ox, and angel) and a lamb.

\(^{37}\) In the West Rose, little original stained glass remains, however the panel of Pisces is original. “By the nineteenth century, the western rose—already glazed several times—was in such poor condition that most of it had to be either restored or replaced. Some of the surviving fragments dated from the beginning of the thirteenth century, for example, the month of February, represented by two fish (or the astrological sign Pisces)...” in Alain Brandenburg and Caroline Rose, Notre-Dame de Paris, (Paris: Nathan, 1991), 101.
New Testaments. Christ had twelve Disciples. Jacob had twelve sons, leading to the twelve tribes of Israel. The number twelve was also important in medieval life; the twelve signs of the zodiac represented the twelve monthly labors.

Chartres’ Good Samaritan window is a vertical rectangle topped by a pointed arch, which typifies Gothic style (Figure 2.3). The window consists of three main vertical quatrefoils. (Three is perhaps the most important number in Christianity, as the faith’s foundation rests upon the Holy Trinity of the Son, Father, and Holy Ghost.) The top quatrefoil is composed of two, smaller concentric quatrefoils surrounding an abstracted man. This figure represents God, who sits atop the piece as a symbol of the figure’s prestige (detail 1, Figure 2.3).  

In addition to numerology and physical placement, the stained glass windows’ color represents an important element of Gothic design. Every image is made up of several panes, and each pane consists of one pure color. The colors are opaque, meant to separate the sacred space of the church with the lay space of the outside town. In his book *Color in Art*, John Gage observes that pure colors were preferred to hues, because hues were seen as unstable. Moreover, the windows of Paris’ Gothic cathedrals contain only a limited palette of these pure colors: blue, red, green, yellow, white, and black, and,}

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38 In between the top two quatrefoils and the bottom two quatrefoils is a center circle and a half quatrefoil on each side. Beneath the bottom quatrefoil is a half circle and a quarter quatrefoil on each side. This is suggestive that the story continues beyond the window. The top quatrefoil stands alone, suggesting its importance. The entire window is symmetrical and forces your eye upward to the top quatrefoil.

39 There is an extensive amount of panes in each window. The South Rose alone consists of eighty-four colored panes.

40 “Hue was not stable. The only fixed points were those of light and dark.” John Gage, *Color in Art*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2006), 59.
upon viewing the windows in person, the palette appears to shrink even further, reducing it to shades of blue and red.

Blue and red, though, have strong formal and symbolic qualities. The recessive blue contrasts with the projective red, clarifying the windows’ narratives.\(^{41}\) (Detail 2, Figure 2.3) So much blue and red cause far-away observers to see Notre-Dame’s Rose windows as a bright red-violet, and to see the clerestory window of Chartres as dark blue-violet. In the Middle Ages, the colors blue, red and purple were filled with meaning: blue and red together were the colors of divine light, and blue alone represented the unknowable God.\(^{42}\)\(^{43}\) Purple, on the other hand, has long been associated with royalty and purity; Roman emperors commonly wore the color, and it was the color of the precious stone used in Byzantine royal and religious buildings. Purple was also the color of Charlemagne’s coronation mantle.\(^{44}\)

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\(^{41}\) "The windows produced by the ‘so-called’ Court School of Paris in the middle of the thirteenth century are remarkable for the legibility of their narratives and in part this depends on the optical qualities of the colors they used. Blue and red were the favored colors in their palette because of the recessive and projective qualities. The blue receded and the red visually project. And when the narrative scene were placed against it the scene itself projected forwards from the background making it more clear.” Timothy Husband, “Moguls and Museums: A History of Collecting Stained Glass in America” (lecture, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May 31, 2009).

\(^{42}\) “But in a study with the playful title, ‘What color is Divine Light?’, Patrick Reutersward discovered that this light be both red and blue.” John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 73.

\(^{43}\) “Blue was conceptually ranked as the darkest color, next to black, and there is good reason to believe that this early French glass was designed to create an impenetrable, yet light-bearing darkness analogous to the unknowable God of early medieval theology.” John Gage, *Color in Art*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2006), 23.

A thick, black lead line outlines each panel of Chartres’ clerestory window. (Detail 2, Figure 2.3) The tracery stone in which the window is set also darkens against the light, turning into a massive black line. The play of light versus dark permeates the windows. As authors Sarah Brown and David O’Connor observe, “the daily miracle of light darkness had special significance for a window concerned with good and evil,” referring, of course, to the Bible’s many turns of phrase equating light with God and darkness with evil.

The figures drawn by the leaded outlines panels are abstracted, enabling a viewer to easily identify the person being represented (detail 1, Figure 2.1). This choice of style was deliberate, as the windows were meant to serve as visual sermons for the largely illiterate masses. Conversely, the abstractedness’s same absence of detail allows different viewers to interpret the figure in different ways. One medieval believer might see the figures as biblical subjects, whereas another might see a monarch, in effect blurring the distinction between the power of Christ and the power of the king. (This tactic also appeared in medieval manuscripts, where both Biblical kings and Christ the Lord wore crowns that looked just like the crown worn by the king of France.)

The three windows share additional, essential decorative elements. (Detail 2, Figures 2.1, 2.2, 2.3) The background of each window resembles a grid, an ordered and repetitive decoration, evoking permanence. (The medieval practice was to fill in all


46 “And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.”

47 “In the Middle Ages images were used to elevate the human spirit and encourage people to contemplate the lessons of Christian life and destiny.”
empty spaces; otherwise, evil might find somewhere to slip in.) From a purely formal perspective, the grid is initially interesting, but the repetition becomes monotonous, the eye quickly refocuses to the more important figural images in the foreground.

Light is the most important element of any stained glass work (detail 3, Figure 2.1). In these pieces, light represents the benevolence of God coursing through the images, filling the building with holy light, but leaving the glass itself unharmed.48 And light was central to stained glass from the very beginning: Abbot Suger (1081-1151), who started the Gothic era of stained glass when he incorporated the medium into the Basilica St. Denis, designed the new cathedral around light and open space. With his design, he tried to be true to what he thought were the words of Saint Denis (though they were actually the work of pseudo-Dionysus): “We must lift up the immaterial and steady eyes of our minds to that outpouring of Light which is so primal, indeed much more so, and which comes from that source of divinity.”49 In order to capture this light, Suger replaced the church’s rounded arches and heavy stone roofs with pointed arches and six-rib vaulted ceilings, choice that allowed him to fit the walls with large stained glass windows while still maintaining the building’s structural soundness. Upon their installation, the windows would create a striking luminosity in the church’s interior luminous, making it into a sort of “heavenly space” on earth.

Stained glass is an art form that requires adherence to a certain discipline, because

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48 “The stained glass had metaphorical meaning as well. For example, the fact that light can pass through glass without physically harming it was equated with the Immaculate Conception and the birth of Christ from a virgin mother.” See Timothy Husband, "Moguls and Museums: A History of Collecting Stained Glass in America" (lecture, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May 31, 2009).

because panels of glass and lead almost totally delete an artist’s capacity to make representations with shading or other detail. Final composition and individual forms must be planned out in advance, in great detail.

The process of this discipline is spelled out in the writings of Theophilus Presbyter. Presbyter, a twelfth-century monk, wrote *De Diversis Artibus* (*On the Various Arts*), a volume in which he describes the procedure of creating medieval stained glass. Glassmakers melted sand and ash, and combined them with metallic oxides to create colored, nearly opaque glass. The opacity level acted as both a wall and a window; it allowed some light to enter, but it would not allow the spectator to view the happenings of the outside town, keeping him focused on the sacred space.

The molten glass was then blown and flattened. It had to be flat for two reasons: it had to lie flush with the wall, and each image cut from it had to have uniform texture and width. A previously drawn pattern, known as a cartoon, was then placed over the glass. The artisan would then use a hot iron to cut shapes from the flat sheets. Dark paint made from glass and iron mixed with either wine or urine allowed an artist to shade his images onto the glass. The fire of a kiln cemented the painted image into the glass. Finally, the artist used strips of lead to combine the images.\(^{50}\) This final “painting” was then set into the stone of structure, and was now a permanent fixture in the wall.\(^{51}\)

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\(^{50}\) Lead was used because it was strong and also malleable. It could bend around complex shapes and also offer some flexibility if hit by wind to absorb any motion and prevent the glass from cracking.

\(^{51}\) This information was retrieved and paraphrased from: Marilyn Stokstad and Michael Cothren, *Art history*, 4th ed., (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 2010), 497.
CHAPTER 3

MATISSE’S STYLE AS EXEMPLIFICATION OF STAINED GLASS

Matisse’s style evolved over the course of his career to include formal elements of Gothic stained glass windows, including monumentality and idealistic symbolism, liberal use of pure colors and strong outlines, the juxtaposition of abstracted forms with decorative elements, and certain specific practical techniques that were first practiced by medieval glazers.

Matisse’s career divides neatly into sections, with the first beginning in the 1900s, and with each subsequent section starting with the turn of each decade. From each period emerges a signature theme. The 1900s saw Matisse’s Fauvist paintings present brightly colored natural scenes.52 The 1910s were filled with still life paintings, reflecting his own personal style mixed with Cubism.53 In the 1920s, Matisse moved to Nice and painted his odalisque oeuvre, bringing him commercial success. Throughout the 1930s, the artist broke away from traditional painting and focused on drawing. It was during this time that Matisse took on his largest project, a monumental three-panel mural that would sit in the entrance gallery of a patron’s foundation.

52 “Fauvism was the first of the avant-garde movements that flourished in France in the early years of the twentieth century. The Fauve painters were the first to break with Impressionism as well as with older, traditional methods of perception. Their spontaneous, often subjective response to nature was expressed in bold, undisguised brushstrokes and high-keyed, vibrant colors directly from the tube,” in “Fauvism,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/fauv/hd_fauv.htm.

53 “Cubist painters rejected the inherited concept that art should copy nature, or that they should adopt the traditional techniques of perspective, modeling, and foreshortening. They wanted instead to emphasize the two-dimensionality of the canvas. So they reduced and fractured objects into geometric forms, and then realigned these within a shallow, relief-like space. They also used multiple or contrasting vantage points,” in Sabine Rewald, "Cubism," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cube/hd_cube.htm.
In the 1940s, Matisse took up a new form of painting called “cutouts.” With these, Matisse would construct an image by cutting forms from previously painted paper, and then pasting the shapes together on a canvas or panel. He would eventually use these cutouts as *maquettes*, in just the way medieval craftsman used cartoons. Matisse created twelve *maquettes*, intending for them to be sent to Paul Bony, a Parisian master glazier, who would turn them into final works of stained glass.

Matisse adopted the ethic of Gothic stained glass well before he worked with glass as a medium, though. To see this, it is helpful to examine one work from each period of his career. Matisse’s first fully independent work was *Le Bonheur de Vivre (The Joy of Life)* (Figure 3.1). Commenced in 1905, and completed in 1906, the painting was first exhibited at the 1906 *Salon D’Automne* in Paris, and depicts eight sets of figures partaking in joyous activities (dancing, playing music, embracing, strolling) in a grassy portion of a bright, unnaturally colored forest. Several properties congruent with medieval stained glass appear in this piece. They are: monumentality, symbolism, and color, as well as abstracted outlined forms, multiplicity, and flatness.

The monumentality of *Le Bonheur de Vivre* cannot escape even the painting’s most casual audience. The canvas is massive, measuring more than five feet high and nine feet wide. In *Matisse the Man and His Art*, Jack Flam writes that the artist sought to execute a major work, and, to this end, he prepared a canvas much larger any he had

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54 Past and current scholars contend that the painting *Le Bonheur de vivre* is a mythical memory of an ideal time.

55 *Le Bonheur de Vivre* was the only work Matisse entered into the 1906 *Salon D’Automne* in Paris.

56 The painting is currently held at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia where it is given its own room and covers an entire wall.
worked with before.\textsuperscript{57} He even had to rent a space in a convent to accommodate the canvas; indeed, the artist went to great measures to create a monumental artwork. Matisse scholar Alastair Wright wonders if the painting may have been a version of Ingres’ work, \textit{Golden Age}.\textsuperscript{58} Ingres’ painting, however, is small – it measures just over eighteen inches by twenty-four inches, tiny in comparison to Matisse’s huge canvas. The size difference communicates that Matisse wanted this painting to attract attention and send a message, and perhaps that message was that Matisse’s forms deserve to be treated with greater importance than those in Ingres’ panel.\textsuperscript{59} The giant painting, like the monumental Gothic windows, forces an observer to feel like an engulfed participant of the piece, rather than simply a passive spectator of it.

\textit{Le Bonheur de Vivre} is like a Gothic window in a second way: it reflects important values. After the Middle Ages, the artist replaced the patron as the driving force behind the ideas communicated by artwork. Matisse lived in a secularized state, so the subject matter of his work reflects personal interests rather than institutional beliefs. Matisse considered painting to be a language, and moved to express himself with it.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{57} “For at least a year he had been wanting to execute a major work with figures in a landscape; Luxe, calme et volupté, had fallen short of his ambitions. Now, with the discoveries of the summer behind him, he prepared a canvas much larger than any he had worked on before and took up the pastoral theme again. In order to accommodate the enormous canvas, he rented a space in an expropriated convent, the Couvent des Oiseaux, at 56, rue de Sévres, which he was to use as a studio until 1908,” in Jack Flam, \textit{Matisse, The Man and His Art, 1869-1918}, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 35.

\textsuperscript{58} “The theme, too, makes classical allusion, notably to the Golden Age; as John Elderfield has suggested, \textit{Le Bonheur de vivre}, bears a strong, albeit problematic, resemblance to Ingres’s famous \textit{Golden Age}, with its circle of dancers, reclining nudes, and embracing couple over to the right,” in Alastair Wright, \textit{Matisse and the Subject of Modernism}, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 97.


\textsuperscript{60} “I believed I would never be able to paint because I didn’t paint like the other. Then I saw the Goyas at Lille. That was when I understood that painting could be language; I thought that I could become a
There have been many interpretations of *Le Bonheur de Vivre*, but none deny either the artist’s appreciation of natural forms or his communication that the painting is a work of art, something different than a realistic representation. The painting introduces natural subjects like plants, animals, and nudes, all of which recur throughout Matisse’s work. Matisse associated nature with joy, likely because he experienced so little natural beauty during his childhood, which was spent in a barren section of northern France. The painting’s joyous natural scene does not come from sight, but rather from the artist’s imagination, a romantic rendering of the subject. Matisse includes nonspecific topographic features; their shapeless forms evoke harmony and suggest a peaceful, rich environment. In center of the work appears a grassy pasture, surrounded by lush trees. A thick blue line, an ocean, marks the background. In the right-foreground, the grass slopes into a hill. The sky is pink and the landscape is yellow, colors blending to create a sunny day. Goats’ silhouettes recall animals in their natural habitat. Every human figure is nude. In this work, organic subjects reach glory, and every form of life enjoys instinctive pleasures.

Matisse, the artist, created *Le Bonheur de Vivre*. No patron told him what to paint or how to paint, and he was out to recreate a little copy of his reality. Matisse wanted the world to know that. His technique highlights that the work is manmade, and it is not meant to be a perfect representation. In parts of the canvas, he reminds the

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61 “Visitors from the outside world in the 1870s and 1880s were shocked by the drabness of the town itself, and by the stark, treeless outlines of the newly denuded land round about. ‘Where I come from, if there is a tree in the way, they root it out because it puts four beets in the shade,’ Matisse said somberly;” in Hilary Spurling, *The Unknown Matisse A Life of Henri Matisse: The Early Years, 1869-1908* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 8.
viewer of this; paint is so lightly applied that the canvas peeks through (detail 1, Figure 3.1). Matisse, the artist, remains present long after the work’s completion.

Heavily outlined abstracted nudes, harkening to the abstracted figures of Gothic stained glass, populate eight scenes of the piece. The forms are outlines; they have few details and little shading. Sixteen figures exist in the piece, but only four have faces. Is this lack of facial detail a sort of modernist *sfumato*? That is, might the explanation be merely that the background objects become fuzzier as they recede into the backdrop? The shepherd in the painting’s right begs to differ. He has a face, yet he is further away than the strolling couple on the left, who have no features at all. The lack of detail is intentional. It compels the viewer to focus on the gestures that the strong lines create, and prevents the distraction that would result from unnecessary expressions on every figure’s face.

Bright planes of pure, unnatural color have contrasting outlines, like panes of glass outlined in lead. The outlines of the figures are contrasting colors (rather than black) and separate the figures from the landscape. For example, two central nudes lie on the grass. Hunter green outlines their top portions of their bodies, while red-orange and light blue highlight their bottoms. The green, reds, and blues separate the figures from the yellow background and contrast with their peach skin tones. The contours of their

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62 From the bottom left one can view the first scene of a person kneeling down and picking the grass. The figure behind this person is stretching and seems to be both part of and separated from the two nudes behind her. In the center background are figures that appear to be dancing in a circle. In front of these dancers are two nudes that are outstretched in the middle of the canvas. In the center foreground is another nude who seems to be playing a clarinet or ancient flute. To the right of the musician are two figures that are also nude and appear to be kissing. Behind the kissers stands a shepherd who is also unclothed. He stands with his three goat-like animals.

63 *Sfumato* can be defined as "without lines or borders, in the manner of smoke or beyond the focus plane" to give a more realistic view of distance perspective; in Irene Earls, *Renaissance Art a Topical Dictionary*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 263.
bodies demand attention. Movement results from line and color, even though little detail exists in the figures themselves.

Matisse uses color to light up portions of the very flat artwork. The colors project into space, lighting up the work, and almost reflecting off of the viewer. Thirteenth-century stained glass workers also used color to project their images. Medieval craftsmen played the projective properties of red off of the recessive properties blue in order to highlight certain sections of a window.  

Unlike Matisse’s earlier Fauve works, though the brushstrokes of *Le Bonheur de Vivre* are not clear, with less paint applied to large sections, emphasizing the flatness of the canvas. When comparing *Le Bonheur de Vivre* to Matisse’s *Landscape at Collioure* (Figure 3.2), the differences in the paintings’ surfaces are striking. In the center of *Landscape at Collioure* thick paint was applied in a trompe-l’oeil manner. The brushstrokes divide this Divisionist painting; each brushstroke paints a “brick” of color that works with others to form the composition. There are no such sections in *Le Bonheur de Vivre*. The “bricks” of color have given way to sections filled with sheets of carefully chosen color, sweeping across the work.

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64 “The colors are so bright they see to advance of push forward out of the picture plane (instead of creating an illusion of space behind it): As a consequence, we are very aware that what we are looking at is a flat canvas decorated with paint,” in Marilyn Stokstad and Michael Cothren, *Art history*, 4th ed., (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 2010), 1020.

65 “Neo-Impressionists came to believe that separate touches of interwoven pigment result in a greater vibrancy of color in the observer’s eye than is achieved by the conventional mixing of pigments on the palette. Known as mélange optique (optical mixture), this meticulous paint application would, they felt, realize a pulsating shimmer of light on the canvas. In the words of the artist Paul Signac, Neo-Impressionism’s greatest propagandist, “the separated elements will be reconstituted into brilliantly colored lights.” The separation of color through individual strokes of pigment came to be known as Divisionism, while the application of precise dots of paint came to be called Pointillism,” in Dita Amory, “Georges Seurat (1859–1891) and Neo-Impressionism,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed May 14, 2013, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/seni/hd_seni.html.
Color separates space within the artwork. A figure on the left that bends over is surrounded by yellow. Behind this figure stand three nudes, but they are surrounded in reddish-orange. A group in the background dances in yellow, whereas blues and greens envelop the figures in the foreground. A green haze with a bright yellow background outlines two figures in the painting’s center. One last nude finds himself contained by orange. Color keeps the scenes distinct and interesting, serving the same role as the shapes of the Gothic windows, and, just as with a Gothic window, one can enjoy each scene of *Le Bonheur de Vivre* independently, and then step back and appreciate the colors as they mix to construct a new, whole image. It was Jack Flam who initially suggested that this was Matisse’s intention.66

The colors’ symbolism is not as explicit here as it is in Gothic windows, but it is present nevertheless. Unlike his Impressionist predecessors, Matisse used unnatural shades. An example of irregular color in *Le Bonheur de Vivre* comes in the form of green tree trunks with brown foliage, along with yellow grass decorated by blue blades. In an analysis of Matisse’s essay “Notes of a Painter,” Flam describes Matisse’s colors as a showcase for the painter’s perception of nature.67 In this case, nature is no more than a series of organic forms, easily lending itself to an aesthetically pleasing artwork.

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66 “This synthetic balancing of tones and hues is part of a conception in which the picture is not fragmented, but in which, right from the beginning, the painting is conceived as a total image rather than a conglomeration of vignettes,” in Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art*, rev. ed. (1995, repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 36.

67 “Matisse’s search for color equivalence points to his desire not to reproduce direct optical sensation but rather to transfigure it, thus finding a configuration of form which, while it does not imitate nature, is an equivalence of the painter’s perception of nature…” in Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art*, rev. ed. (1995, repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 36.
Light also links the painting with Gothic windows. Although it is an opaque canvas, strong use of bright lemon yellow throughout the painting creates a feeling of light saturation, a representation of sunshine. (After *Le Bonheur de Vivre*, light colored by shades of yellow and white would become standard elements of Matisse’s work, whether his scene took place indoors or outdoors.)

As in the Gothic windows, a sense of order and symmetry defines the scene in *Le Bonheur de Vivre*. Two recliners and center nudes develop an invisible straight line through the middle of the canvas. Each side of the line contains similar forms and colors. Trees are bunched on the left and right; their foliage finds a meeting point in the painting’s upper middle region. Balance and symmetry allow multiple forms to coexist without overpowering the viewer. The observer can easily take in the narrative, because the eye is constantly brought back to the work’s central forms.

In the 1910s, Matisse’s figural and still life scenes contained many of the characteristics he introduced in *Le Bonheur de Vivre*, but incorporated new stylistic elements as well. In *Goldfish and Palette* (Figure 3.3), created in the fall of 1914, two goldfish swim in a glass container on a table in front of a window. To the right are abstracted lines that represent the artist holding a palette. The artist’s thumb protrudes through the palette, but all other figural representations of him have been reduced to geometric lines. Matisse again uses bright colors, orange and blue, this time for a large still life scene. By making two fish and a plant the work’s centerpiece, he again references nature, and by inserting an abstracted version of himself into the right side of the scene, he again highlights the role of the artist. Just as in *Le Bonheur de Vivre*, here there exists vertical symmetry.
Matisse’s style in the 1910s still involves the fundamental tenets of Gothic stained glass. Strong black strokes outline the work’s subjects. The work is flatter and the figures in are more abstract than in his previous painting. He incorporates geometric decoration into the background, calling attention to the foreground’s organic forms. He uses blue as a predominant background color; its recessive qualities serve to emphasize the forefront’s forms.

Black prevails throughout the painting, like the lead of a Gothic window. It defines the outlines of the fish, the bowl, and the wrought-iron decoration of a Parisian balcony. Art historian T.J. Clark suggests that Matisse used black to express revolutionary ideas regarding society, art, and himself. According to Clark, black represents a break with the past, and Russian art theoretician Kazimir Malevich describes black as the symbol of revolution. Clark admires Matisse’s deliberate, symbolic use of black to clearly separate the colors of his piece; a black line creates a physical and visual barrier between bright shades.

Clark also believes that Matisse used black as a metaphor for his own personality. Matisse was anxious and vivacious, and black might be the somber and cold side of his personality, whereas bright colors are the other side, sensual and lively. Though the psychological aspects of color are of course subject to interpretation, the functional

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69 “Black, in Modernism, is always lurking on the other side of reds and yellows blazing. Matisse the cold calculator—‘the anxious Matisse, the madly anxious Matisse’, as a friend described him in 1904—is the same man as Matisse the sensualist,” in T.J. Clark, "Madame Matisse’s Hat: On Matisse”, London Review of Books 30 (2008), accessed May 17, 2013, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n16/tj-clark/madame-mattisses-hat.
aspects of it here, that is, the separation colors with a thick black line, is consistent with Gothic stained glass and would quickly become a regular element in Matisse’s works.

Goldfish and Palette also seems more two-dimensional than Le Bonheur de Vivre. The flatness results in part from the piece’s strong black outlines, but also from the removal of paint from several areas, most notably, the right side of the fish bowl. Matisse scratched off the paint here so that the white of the canvas could appear as a reflection of the glass. This technique causes the white portion to represent light; a light source seems to reflect off of the bowl’s glass surface. The raw, white, exposed piece of canvas shouts a reminder to the viewer that work is art, not an actual goldfish bowl.

The figures in this piece are much more abstracted than the nudes of Le Bonheur de Vivre. They are, however, still filled with bright colors. In the 1910s, Matisse also began to include geometric design in the backdrops of his work, helping to focus attention on the organic figures in front. In Goldfish and Palette, repetitive semi-circles that represent the scrollwork in the wrought iron serve this function, receding as the organic forms of the fish, orange and plant take center stage. The living subjects evoke nature and outdoors even from within an obviously interior scene. The two fish at the center are just essential lines.\textsuperscript{70} Their oval bodies offer the idea of the fish, rather than a literal representation.

As in Gothic stained glass windows, the important forms are more brightly colored. (Figure 3.3; detail 1, Figure 2.1) The fish and orange on the table are painted in

\textsuperscript{70} The subject of fish is a recurring theme in Matisse’s works and call to mind the Pisces panel of the West Rose of Notre-Dame. (Detail 4, Figure 2.2) In both pieces, the fish are flattened and composed of basic outlines that allow the viewer to understand they are looking at an unrealistic version of the subject. Matisse's fish almost certainly indicate his personal love of nature. The fish in the Gothic rose window most likely are a message from the government or Church reminding the lay people to partake in the labors associated with the month of February.
bright, vibrant oranges, and the plant is the only accent of green in the work. The geometric fence, however, is a recessive blue and black, like the blue geometric background of a thirteenth-century stained glass window.

Throughout the 1920s, Matisse painted over seventeen versions of *odalisque* images. They depict a single woman in limited clothing in front of decorative background. The works still include Matisse’s signature formal properties of bright colors, black outlines, and natural figures, and though the decoration in their backgrounds is comparable to Islamic tile or tapestry, it also calls to mind the complexity and colors of a Gothic window’s lattice geometric background. The *odalisque* about to be discussed in this paper is called *Seated Odalisque* (Figure 3.4). It was created in 1926, and it portrays a topless woman sitting crossed-legged in front of blue and red decorative background.

Matisse’s *odalisque*, sitting in front of blue and red geometric crisscrossed shapes (Figure 3.4), evokes the center medallion of the Notre-Dame’s West Rose (detail 1, Figure 2.2). In the West Rose, the Virgin Mary also sits in front of a bright red background and blue lattice decoration. Vibrant shades and thick black outlines comprise the backgrounds of both works (detail 2, Figure 2.2; detail 1, Figure 3.4). Both works’ female figures have natural skin tones. Intricate backdrops in both pieces warrant momentary attention, but quickly invite the viewer to return to the organic figure. Matisse

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71 *Odalisque* is a genre term that can be defined as a female slave or woman found in a harem. The *odalisque* paintings were completed in his new home in Nice. The paintings appear to be Matisse’s version of the Moorish culture he witnessed on his trips to Morocco in 1906 and 1912. He also viewed Islamic tile in the Alhambra palace in Granada, Spain during a 1910 visit.

may have unintentionally painted tiles that came to be as a result of glass techniques. The tiles in the background of *Seated Odalisque* could be lusterware, a reflective, metallic tile, and the technique used to make it probably descended from Islamic glassmakers.\(^{73}\) This connection to glasswork is probably coincidental, but there is nothing coincidental about the painting’s heavily outlined, ornate geometric background. The intentional similarity between it and the Gothic Rose window is unmistakable.

Matisse’s largest completed work, *The Dance*, features essential lines comparable to those of Gothic stained glass windows (Figure 3.5).\(^{74}\) Finished in 1933, the three-panel mural was created for Dr. Albert Barnes, to be displayed in the entrance gallery the Barnes Foundation. Barnes, Matisse’s long-time patron, personally requested a work of the artist’s choosing, one that would be a monumental painting. The painting consists of a woman shown in five different dance poses.\(^{75}\) It suggests a person frolicking across three half-circle panels, presenting qualities that one would expect from a work of Gothic stained glass, including apparent limitations of color and line. In its creation, the artist, like a medieval artisan, introduces new techniques, ones made necessary by the size of the piece.

*The Dance* presents a repetitive figure and only four colors. Vibrant blue and pink geometric shapes fill the background, leading the eye to the foreground’s whitish-gray figures. The white figures against the colored background emphasize light; the

\(^{73}\) “In the ninth century, potters developed a technique to produce a lustrous metallic surface on their ceramics. They may have learned the technique from Islamic glassmakers who had produce luster-painted vessels a century earlier,” in Marilyn Stokstad and Michael Cothren, *Art History*, 4th ed., (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 2010), 277.

\(^{74}\) In the 1930s Matisse began to emphasize drawing in his works.

\(^{75}\) Matisse painted similar dance figures several times in his career, most notably seen in *Le Bonheur de vivre* (1905-5), *The Dance* (1909), and *Nasturiums with the Painting “Dance”* (1912).
figures glow, as if spotlight shines upon them. Further, Matisse outlines each figure with a thick black strip, juxtaposing light and dark. The black traces the figure’s contours, demanding that attention be paid to their movement. The limited color palette also works to bring out these lines, making the piece more similar to stained glass than to a more realistic Old Master painting. Ann Temkin, the chief curator at the New York’s Museum of Modern Art, offers that Matisse, in an earlier painting of the same subject (*The Dance (1909)*, Figure 3.6), operated within such limitations so that he might conjure a feeling of grace, using form and line rather than elaborate detail. The *The Dance* was created on the scale of a Gothic work, and this scale compelled Matisse to employ unfamiliar techniques. Because of the mural was to be so big, he needed to use cartoons to arrange the composition’s foreground figures. He also hired outside help, housepainters, to paint the large sections of color.

To this day, *The Dance* sits in the upper portion of the Barnes Foundation’s main gallery (detail 1, Figure 3.5). In order to view the painting, one must look up, as if looking toward a window in a Gothic cathedral. This might have been Matisse’s intention. In a sense, the viewer pays homage to joyous natural forms, in much the same way a medieval parishioner paid homage to sacred religious figures.

In the 1940s Matisse’s broke with traditional painting, leading him to create a new medium with which he would become associated forever. This medium was called *gouaches découpés*, more commonly known as “cutouts.” During this time, personal and

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56 Ann Temkin chief curator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York suggests symbolism in the work when she quotes Matisse in 1908 saying, “Suppose I want to paint a woman’s body, I view it with grace and charm. But, I know that I must give it something more. I will condense the meaning of this body by seeking its essential lines. The charm will be less apparent at first glance but it must eventually emerge from the new image which will have a broader meaning—one more fully human.” See Ann Temkin, "Henri Matisse, Dance I," The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Audio lecture, http://www.moma.org/explore-multimedia/audios/290/64.
environmental problems plagued Matisse. World War II had been underway for some time, and the Germans occupied his home country of France. He separated from his wife of thirty-nine years. An invasive surgery for intestinal cancer left him bound to a wheelchair. In *The Cut-Outs of Henri Matisse*, John Elderfield argues that the artist probably would have created a new style whether or not he suffered these hardships. Elderfield writes, “It is commonplace that greater artists, in the later stages of their careers, often develop a new style which is barely predicated in their earlier work.” In two cutouts that Matisse created in 1946, *Polynesia, The Sea* (Figure 3.7) and *Polynesia, The Sky*, (Figure 3.8), it is apparent that the new format retains the artist’s signature style. He still uses vivid planes of color, geometric backgrounds still highlight anterior organic subjects, and the scale of his work is still large. In 1951, Matisse noted this continuity of style: “There is no break between my early pictures and my cutouts, except that with greater completeness and abstraction I have attain a form filtered to its essentials…” Though his style is constant, by the 1940s Matisse’s methods are new, reduced to the basic necessities of painting. New for him, that is – his process is remarkably similar to that of creating a Gothic-period stained glass window.

*Polynesia, The Sea* and *Polynesia, The Sky* are both immense works, and both contain stylistic characteristics that are classically Matisse. As in much of the artist’s previous work, the works’ forefronts contain organic forms, and vivid geometric shapes fill their backdrops. Seaweed and fish fill *Polynesia, The Sea*, and seaweed images with birdlike bodies appear in *Polynesia, The Sky*. The forms and colors are limited, just like

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the mural he created thirteen years earlier. Jack Flam writes, “Whereas in his earlier paintings he abstracted directly from what he saw, in the cutouts he abstracted more from what he knew.” The cutouts were borne of the artist’s memory, representing only his abstracted version of the natural subjects. The birds and fish that works’ titles describe as Polynesian were actually based seagulls that Matisse remembered from the beaches of Nice.

Intense, bright paints and white color create the pieces’ lighting. In fact, Matisse’s gouache paints were so bright that he had to protect his eyes by working in a darkened studio. The pieces’ white figures recall The Dance’s nudes, and serve the same function. Their lack of color suggests a light source emanating from within them, though the work contains no shadows or shading. Both works also contain bright geometric backgrounds, created from ten sheets of large alternating aqua and navy blues. Matisse once said, “Colors win you over more and more. A certain blue enters your soul.”

Perhaps, like a stained glass window, color here has a symbolic purpose. Perhaps, instead of aligning humanity with heaven, Matisse’s blue ties nature to the figures within it.

To make the two cutouts, Matisse used techniques similar to those employed by thirteenth-century glaziers. He relied on cartoons – fragmented parts, which are then fused together to create a whole picture. He made his color thicker by having his assistants mix gum base with the gouache paints. He cut directly into sheets of pre-

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colored paper, just as a stained glass worker would cut directly into planes of pre-colored glass. His geometric backgrounds are essentially whole sheets of pure color, and, like a medieval artist, Matisse arranged the different colors to form whole compositions.\textsuperscript{82}

Throughout Matisse’s career, his style reduces to the most basic forms of art: line, color, light, and simple forms. His minimalistic style enhances his message and creates art that intrigues. His works almost always contain biomorphic abstract forms, understandable in the same ways one understands the forms in a Gothic stained glass window. It is a natural step, then, that Matisse would come to work with stained glass itself, a medium that highlights each and every element of his distinct style.

\textsuperscript{82} Matisse or his assistant would pin the shapes to a wall to construct the composition before adhering the forms to a canvas.
CHAPTER 4
INTEPRETING MATISSE’S STAINED GLASSWORKS

Matisse created ten stained glass windows, and scholars have debated whether he created them for religious decoration, architectural purposes, or as an extension of his cutouts. Although many of the windows were commissioned for religious spaces, they all depict natural, organic imagery, rather than traditional Biblical icons. In removing Christian representations from a conventionally religious medium, Matisse’s glassworks demonstrate the progress of Modern Art. The works also showcase stained glass as a medium, and are thus more than an extension of the artist’s cutouts – they are better understood as integral parts of Matisse’s oeuvre, as the constrictions of stained glass coincide with Matisse’s stylistic preferences.

Matisse first worked with stained glass by making three windows for the Chapel of the Rosary, a small chapel he designed in Vence, France. Two of the windows are called Tree of Life (Apse) and (Nave) (Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4), and they depict blue, yellow, and green plant life, while a clear, untitled window at the chapel’s entrance presents a white fish with a cobalt blue star (Figure 4.5). Matisse designed two other maquettes before deciding on the “tree of life” motif for the chapel. The first was an abstract geometric composition, Heavenly Jerusalem (Figure 4.7). The second set contained abstract plant imagery in Pale Blue Window (Figure 4.8), and geometric bumblebees in The Bees (Les Abeilles) (Figure 4.9). The Bees would eventually become
a stained glass window (Figure 4.10) in a nursery school in the artist’s birthplace of Le Cateau-Cambrésis.

John Elderfield sorts the remaining six of Matisse’s stained glass designs into two general groups: designs that belong with “a series of vertical cutouts of 1950 to early 1952, where images are placed on top of a grid-like arrangements of colored-paper rectangles; and those of 1953, where the imagery is laid out across an open ground…”

The members of the first group, the two grid-like works, are Chinese Fish (Poissons Chinois) (Figures 4.11, 4.12) and Christmas Eve (La Nuit de Noël) (Figures 4.13, 4.14). Chinese Fish is a window made up of plant and animal abstractions, and it was created for the Villa Natasha in St. Jean Cap Ferrat, owned at the time by Matisse’s publisher, Tériade. Christmas Eve is a lively assortment of organic and star shapes that Life Magazine commissioned for the 1952 Christmas Eve celebration in Rockefeller Center. The second group, the open compositions, includes The Vine (La Vigne) (Figure 4.15), Ivy in Flowers (Lierre en Fleurs) (Figures 4.16, 4.17), and Wild Poppies or Pomegranate Blossoms (Les Coquelicots or Fleurs de Grenadier) (Figures 4.18, 4.19), and the Rockefeller Memorial Rose Window (Figures 4.20, 4.21) – the final work of Matisse’s life. In each of these, vegetal shapes lie on large flat surfaces, suspended in space. Every window Matisse designed showcases bright biomorphic abstractions, and each of these shapes is re-emphasized, traced by black lead.

Matisse’s stained glassworks share a medium with their Gothic predecessors, but they do not share a message, for the newer windows contain no religious imagery. Their secular images both fit Greenberg’s definition of Modernism and Hegel’s dialectic of

moving toward a new ideal. This absence of Christian imagery illustrates Greenberg’s definition of Modernism. In his essay “Modernist Painting”, the art critic writes: “[Art] may mean a devolution, an unraveling, of tradition, but it also means its further evolution.” The original subject matter in Gothic stained glass works was religious, and it functioned as a narrative for the community. Removing the narrative imagery, replacing it with purely aesthetic forms that do not tell a story, devolves this function.

The Hegelian dialectic is a good method by which to understand this devolution. In *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel suggests that an idea can be best described in terms of its opposite, by creating a synthesis of the original idea and the opposing idea. This synthesis moves the original form toward the “spirit”, or the ideal version, of that form. Here, Matisse takes the original idea of stained glass and removes its function. By producing a stained glass work that is non-religious, he negates the medium’s original function, and synthesizes a new function. Matisse was fully aware of this synthesis, stating that “he wanted to create a synthesis of his designs and the Chartres windows.”

The synthesis of the Gothic medium and biomorphic imagery highlights stained glass as art in itself, as opposed to a means of spreading a religious message.

Matisse first used the medium for the windows of the Chapel of the Rosary, a building he designed. He agreed to work on the chapel, an obviously religious structure, but dismissed attempts to create religious decoration in his windows:

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86 In a conversation with Brother Rayssiguier “He brings up the Chartres windows again: the ones he ahs in mind are the ones above the entrance. ‘My drawing is a synthesis.’ But he offers no further particulars. ‘To suggest all colors with just a few of them. What counts is the proportion; it’s the proportion that does it,’” in M.A. Couturier and Henri Matisse, *The Vence Chapel: An Archive of a Creation*, trans. Marcel Billot (Milan: Skira, 1999), 45.
Matisse did not want to include religious art in the work: [Brother] Rayssiguier (a key player in the Chapel of the Rosary) wanted to bring Matisse to religious art, as Couturier had done with Léger at Assy; Matisse simply wanted to pursue his own oeuvre. The painter’s interest in religious art was so slight that sometime earlier he hadn’t even bothered to reply to an invitation from Abbé Devémy to work on the church at Assy.\footnote{M.A. Couturier and Henri Matisse, *The Vence Chapel: An Archive of a Creation*, trans. Marcel Billot (Milan: Skira, 1999), 13.}

When Matisse originally designed the *Apse* windows, he came up with the abstract color arrangement, *Heavenly Jerusalem* (Figure 4.7). After a conversation with Father Couturier, in which the priest explained a passage from the Book of Revelation, Matisse considered a more symbolic approach, and worked on a new design.\footnote{“The text, which goes on to describe the Holy City glittering like a rare jewel, was apt, for it offered Matisse an equivalent of the chromatic variety and profusion of his gouache cutouts. Moreover, the symbolism of the passage freed him from the limitation of representation and justified his decision not to use narrative forms...To him stained glass meant chiefly color, and he thought of light merely as serving to modulate color or a most to amplify it through the color reflections it projects,” in M.A. Couturier and Henri Matisse, *The Vence Chapel: An Archive of a Creation*, trans. Marcel Billot (Milan: Skira, 1999), 17.} He chose forms that lent themselves to symbolism without being explicitly religious, allowing him to maintain his own style, continue to work with natural subjects, and please his more religious peers, Father Couturier and Brother Rayssiguier.

From this second effort emerged the *maquettes Pale Blue Window* (Figure 4.8) and *The Bees* (Figure 4.9). The *maquettes* were meant to bring the style of the chapel into line with that of Matisse’s earlier easel paintings, but chapel’s physical supports did not match their needs, so, instead of reshaping the windows, Matisse delivered yet another design, the *Tree of Life* (*Apse and Nave*) (Figures 4.1, 4.3). This, the final design, was to represent a garden as the backdrop of the chapel. The *Tree of Life* finds leaf shapes against a green background, recalling the leaves of the palm trees outside his house, La Rêve, in Vence, and creating the same serenity, as they let light filter through.
The chapel’s windows are pure Matisse; they celebrate the same natural subjects that appear throughout Matisse’s entire oeuvre.

One of the chapel’s windows does seem overtly religious, but upon closer examination of its genesis, it reveals its secular roots. This window, untitled, appears near the entrance of The Chapel of the Rosary. It depicts a fish in a basket with a blue star. Some interpret the fish as a religious image, a metaphor for Christ, but it is in fact the same geometric pattern and organic form that Matisse had drawn earlier in his career. This window’s initial design was a simple rectangle filled with a crisscross pattern. (Figure 4.6) The evolution of that design continues Matisse’s tradition of having a placing an abstract organic form against a geometric background. Here, the foreground has a fish. The fish is a traditional symbol of Christ, and the window does decorate the door of a church, but a purely religious interpretation of this image is likely not what the artist intended.

Matisse had made use of aquatic forms in many prior works, always for purely secular purposes. Both Goldfish and Palette and Polynesia, the Sea, for example, deployed sea creatures as representatives of nature. The geometric forms in the untitled window also continue Matisse’s habit of using of basic lines as a backdrop. The window was initially supposed to be a simple series of crisscross forms, and was to have few colored panels, echoing his previous works, many of which relied on basic shapes and limited colors. Matisse added organic elements at the top of the window for aesthetic

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89 In a letter from Henri Matisse to Father Couturier, April 1950 “I want to make simple stained glass window—consisting of simple white diamonds…I want to know if I can get slightly tinted blue or pink glass to insert in a few square, in order to liven up the windows in a certain order,” in M.A. Couturier and Henri Matisse, The Vence Chapel: An Archive of a Creation, trans. Marcel Billot (Milan: Skira, 1999), 317.
reasons, so that it would not so plain as to appear to be a tradesmen’s entrance.\textsuperscript{90} The idea of making a fish one of those elements came about in a conversation between the artist and Brother Rayssiguier. The priest noticed one of Matisse’s earlier sketches, which depicted an Eskimo woman whose smile looked like a fish. Matisse recounts, “I sketched her from a photograph...Her smile, you see, resembles a fish.”\textsuperscript{91} After this exchange, the window’s design came to include a fish and a star. Matisse probably knew that many would interpret his re-contextualized image religiously, but it seems just as likely that his choice of an older image also allowed him to stay true to his secular, artistic values.

Matisse not only took the Church’s imagery out of the traditionally religious stained glass medium, he literally took the medium out of the church, by putting his stained glass work in different kinds of buildings. \textit{The Vine (La Vigne)} and \textit{Chinese Fish (Poissons Chinois)} were windows for Matisse’s publisher Tériade’s Villa Natasha in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, France. \textit{The Vine} showcases a plant with leaves that suggest the villa’s scrollwork, and \textit{Chinese Fish} depicts a manatee-like animal, the larousse, surrounded by abstracted begonias and other geometric forms.\textsuperscript{92} These works are entirely secular, and they consisted only of the kinds of organic shapes Matisse had created throughout his career.

This is not to say that Matisse excluded the religiously affiliated from his subsequent works of glass. He certainly did not. Among the pieces he developed for religious settings were: \textit{Ivy in Flowers (Lierre en Fleurs)}, \textit{Christmas Eve (La Nuit de...}


\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 319.

Noël), Wild Poppies or Pomegranate Blossoms (Les Coquelicots or Fleurs de Grenadier), and the Rockefeller Memorial Rose window.

In 1953, Matisse designed *Ivy in Flowers* (Figure 4.16) for the widow of advertising giant Albert Lasker, to be placed in Lasker’s mausoleum in Sleepy Hollow, New York. The large leaf-shapes on the square background represent ivy, a root plant known to survive difficult environments. Matisse probably chose this motif because the Laskers owned his 1941 painting *Ivy in Flowers*. Once again, the artist references his own past work, and eschews traditional Christian forms, even in a burial setting.

The artist also remains true to his natural subjects in his 1952 work, *Christmas Eve* (Figures 4.13, 4.14). Matisse was asked to create a glass piece for the annual Christmas celebration in Rockefeller Center. One might ordinarily expect a piece for such an occasion to include quite a bit of unambiguous Christian imagery, but none appears here. This piece focuses on cultural traditions rather than on religious iconography. The window was a monumental work, eleven feet tall, hanging in the lobby of the Time-Life Building. It depicted a “Christmas Eve sky over a landscape of organic shapes.”

Large planes of blue and a bright yellow star make up the sky; context of the event aside, the presented scene is not necessarily a Christian one. It could represent any set of festivities, one of any of the winter season’s holidays.

In 1954, Matisse designed *Wild Poppies or Pomegranate Blossoms* for a Dominican convent. The window was never installed, and it currently resides in the Detroit Museum of Art. The piece’s religious patrons apparently did not demand that it contain Christian forms (for it does not), and the artist once again proved that his

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strongest faith lied in his own style, which remained constant, regardless of the art’s function, patron, or physical location.

A further window, the Rockefeller Rose Memorial window, was created to memorialize Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. In *Matisse & Chagall at the Union Church of Pocantico Hills*, Rockefeller’s son, David Rockefeller recalls that his family chose Matisse to create the window because he represented Modern Art, which was one of Abby’s great loves. Mrs. Rockefeller had known the artist personally, and she helped found the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. She also helped put on Matisse’s first one-man exhibition at MoMA.

The Rockefeller Rose Memorial window, which decorates a small chapel in Tarrytown, New York, represents both the abstract quality of Modernism and the feelings brought forth from shapes, colors, and light. It is distinct from the chapel’s nine other windows; it is the only one that does not present a Biblical story. The Rose window hangs over the apse, composed of bright green, organic shapes, which observers have described as lily pads, plants, and even fetuses (Figure 4.21). In the center of the Rose is a small circle, with radiating yellow petal shapes that looks like sunrays. The background is a pale blue, the summer sky of New York, a place Matisse had visited several times in his life.

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95 The window is placed in a small chapel called The Union Church of Pocantico Hills in a small suburb of New York City. The chapel was dedicated to both John D. Rockefeller Jr. and Abby Rockefeller because they had a beloved home in the town. John D. Rockefeller was a devout Baptist and his religion was very important to him. Therefore, the other nine windows in the chapel were created to show Biblical imagery. Marc Chagall, an artist well versed in Old Testament imagery designed these windows.
Matisse’s pieces are more than architectural extensions. In fact, one glasswork, *Christmas Eve*, was never even a functional window; from its inception, it served as the centerpiece of a great celebration, hanging like a painting in a building’s lobby. The image was always meant to be treated as art. When *Life* magazine made the work a part of its Christmas card, it served as the company’s temporary image. The piece can now be found at MoMA as part of its collection, not part of its edifice.

Some say that Matisse’s stained glassworks are nothing more than an extension of his cutouts. This interpretation ignores the fact that Matisse specifically chose the stained glass medium to achieve a visual effect that he had previously found impossible. In *The Vence Chapel: An Archive of a Creation*, Matisse openly considers his cutouts failures. While conversing with Rouveyre, a French satirical draughtsman and Matisse’s good friend, the artist laments that he could not effectively reproduce the color of a *maquette*. Matisse mentions that his cutouts were a failure because the color could not be transformed effectively from a *maquette*. With *Jazz*, he tried to turn his cutouts into a book, but felt that the colors and effect of the *maquettes* were lost in the conversion. Stained glass allowed Matisse to bring new life to his work, to enhance colors and improve brightness:

> Stained glass window making was a completely new art for [Matisse]; he was in no way prepared for it and had never, in fact tried his hand at it before. To him stained glass meant chiefly color, and he through of light merely as serving to modulate color or at most to amplify it through the color reflections it projects. It was a view that gave a

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96 Matisse states his dissatisfaction with his cutout book *Jazz*. His statements are further examined in the book *The Vence Chapel: An Archive of a Creation*: “‘It’s a complete flop.’ [Matisse] wrote to Rouveyre on Christmas day 1947, after the book was published. The reason he gives for its failure—the loss of power in transposing the originals to reproductions...suggests that *Jazz* did not measure up to what he expected from the gouache cutout medium he was still working with at this time. See M.A. Couturier and Henri Matisse, *The Vence Chapel: An Archive of a Creation*, trans. Marcel Billot (Milan: Skira, 1999), 13.
strictly decorative role to stained glass, one that played down its ‘spiritual function—as if he attached no symbolic significance to light in a religious edifice. 97

These qualities of the new medium explain why Matisse shifted his works from paper to glassworks.

The constraints of stained glass complement the most important elements of Matisse’s style. By now, these characteristics are familiar: monumentality, craftsmanship, strong outlines, abstracted forms, and bright colors. Together, they illustrate Clement Greenberg’s definition of Modernism, and are a particularly good example of his “medium specificity” theory as formulated in “Modernist Painting.” The theory states that Modernism “used art to call attention to art.” 98

To Greenberg, Modernism highlights the limitations of its medium, such as the flatness of a canvas, to reiterate that the artwork is art, not an attempt to reproduce the physical world. Matisse’s stained glassworks call attention to the limitations of stained glass, strengthening Greenberg’s theory.

Each of Matisse’s ten stained glassworks is a monumental artwork. Every window is an orchestra of light, and each dominates the room in which it resides. The Christmas Eve window, for example, filled the reception center of the Time-Life Building at Rockefeller Center. Standing over eleven feet tall, it was the lobby’s unmistakable center, a show in itself. Matisse would say, “the window itself [is] like a musical score and its performance by an orchestra.” 99

Additionally, each glass

97 Ibid., 17.


composition is intricate, composed of many different colored glass panels. The fragility of the glass combined with the thickness of the lead makes the medium better suited to large works. An artist must balance the ratio of lead to glass, and he must ensure that the glass panels are large enough to be cut into the shapes he imagines.

Matisse created his works in the same way a traditional Gothic stained glassworker would have when he made cartoons to use as a template. Once he had his design ready, he needed a professional glassmaker to help create the final glass works, and the man he chose for this undertaking was Paul Bony of the Hébert-Stevens Studio in Paris. A pamphlet on the Rockefeller Memorial Rose Window notes this fact, declaring:

On October 28th, Matisse wrote to Mr. Barr and told of his progress of the window design. ‘The work is complicated because each framework calls for sections in different glasses. Therefore, I think it is imperative that the glass should be made in Paris by the master glazier (Paul Bony) who is accustomed to working with my designs.’

Matisse trusted Bony to execute the complexity of his designs, while retaining the colors of his gouache maquettes.

Throughout both Matisse’s stained glassworks and paintings, he uses black lines to separate space and color. Geometric designs fill backgrounds of Matisse’s works,

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100 In a letter from Father Couturier to Henri Matisse: “Please send us the cartoon for the side windows immediately, so we can get all the different glasswork under way,” in M.A. Couturier and Henri Matisse, *The Vence Chapel: An Archive of a Creation*, trans. Marcel Billot (Milan: Skira, 1999), 325.

101 Though the exact process of the glass making is not known, it is known that all of the glass for Matisse’s windows were cut and assembled with lead outlining by Paul Bony. The connection with Paul Bony and Matisse is likely through Father Couturier, the Dominican priest with whom Matisse designed the Chapel of the Rosary. Father Couturier attended Paris Académie de la Grande Chaumière and studied Sacred Arts. He was acquainted with Jean Hébert-Stevens and Pauline Paugniez who opened a stained glass studio Hébert-Stevens that became a meeting place for artists. This studio would be passed down to Paul Bony who is Matisse’s glazier for all of his stained glass projects.

highlighting the forms at the fore. In Matisse’s glass, he uses lead to separate panels of color. Each panel must be pure, because each piece of glass must be blown with a different oxide. For this reason, shading is almost impossible to achieve in stained glass. Lead connects the panels, separating each color with a black line. To achieve structural soundness, the tracery is the same simple geometric as the work’s background, which holds the rest of the window’s many parts. In this regard, it is important to remember that ‘flatness’ was key to Greenberg’s medium specificity theory. He describes flatness as unique to the medium of painting, but, in fact, it is also an important quality of stained glassworks. The strongly outlined stained glass subjects are fundamentally two-dimensional, and Matisse let it be known that he wanted his glass to be flat, to avoid any *trompe-l’oeil* effect. Matisse emphasized flatness even further by using compressed three-dimensional subject matter.

The *Tree of Life (Apse)* window depicts a prickly pear cactus common to Southern Europe. The cactus develops in three-dimensional forms, as cladodes grow from its stem in several directions. If one were to take a photograph of the real plant, each cladode would seem to have a different shape; some would face to the front, and others might show a thin profile. In the *Tree of Life (Apse)*, the cladodes are all the same. Matisse makes no attempt to display their three-dimensionality. Instead, the shapes present a stylized abstraction of the plant, rather than a realistic rendering.

The same flattening of three-dimensional objects takes place in *The Bees*. In *The Vence Chapel: Archive of a Creation*, art collector Dominique de Menil posits that the

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multiplication of forms suggests a prism, an inherently three-dimensional object. In a prism, two flat surfaces angle toward each other, separating light, and bring forth a spectrum of color. In *The Bees*, Matisse flattens this prism, placing about different panels of color, shining light after it has been refracted.

Matisse’s glassworks most effectively highlight the nature of the medium through their use of transparency, which creates striking effects on light and color. Light and color extend from the flat glass out into space, touching the viewer and becoming part of the world. Like the Gothic windows in Notre-Dame and Chartres, the sun makes the glass’ colors more vivid and transforms one color of glass into a new color of light. *The Bees* stands out for this effect. In its background, small diamond and square panels of blue, red, yellow, and brownish gold stand side by side. Together, they create a violet glow. Squares of white, representing bees’ wings, shine as the background’s colors blend together.

In *Matisse, The Man and His Art*, Jack Flam argues that Matisse, in his early easel paintings, unsuccessfully tried to solve Roger Fry’s problem of “the dual nature of painting.” Fry’s theory was that a painting is attempts to show a three-dimensional world, while it is at the same time inherently a two-dimensional work. The paradoxical nature of stained glass does successfully solve this dual nature. A stained glass window is

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105 “Fry’s Henri Matisse, written in 1930 accepts as its premise what he calls the “dual nature of painting, where we are forced to recognize, at one and the same moment, a diversely colored surface and a three dimensional world to that in which we live and move.” See Roger Eliot Fry and Christopher Reed, *A Roger Fry Reader*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 321.

106 Though many would argue that stained-glass is a different medium than painting, in *Glass-Painters*, Sarah Brown and David O’Connor state: “in the English language the term ‘stained glass’ is used in a very wide sense for what might, more accurately, be referred to as ‘painted glass.’”
typically a completely flat art piece, but, at the same time, the glass’s transparency allows color to extend into three-dimensional space. The observer of Matisse’s stained glass in fact views both the physical world and the art piece simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

All of Matisse’s work draws attention to its medium and functions as art for art’s sake. His stained glass works are no exception; rather they epitomize these fundamental tenets of Modernism. His abstract designs were made to mix with natural light, projecting vivid colors, inspiring debate over what exactly his shapes mean, placing art in a real-life spotlight. He took stained glass, a medium loaded with religious meaning, and turned it into a monument of his own Modernist values.

Contemporary artists have taken Matisse’s principles even further, as in minimalistic Light Art. Take *Untitled (to Henri Matisse)* by Dan Flavin (1964): four florescent light bulbs of stained glass, each one glowing, illuminated a bright blue, yellow, pink, or green. (Figure 5) The piece’s minimalist qualities highlight its glass medium, and simple forms showcase that the function of the art is art itself. The artist completely removes subject matter; all that remains are light, color, and the simple vertical shapes of the light bulbs. Matisse’s work was the catalyst for this, the greater reduction of art to its barest essentials.
APPENDIX: FIGURES

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

Figure 1.3
Figure 2.1

Detail 1, Figure 2.1

Detail 2, Figure 2.1
Detail 3, Figure 2.1
Detail 3, Figure 2.2

Detail 4, Figure 2.2
Figure 3.1

Detail 1, Figure 3.1
Figure 3.4

Detail 1, Figure 3.4
Figure 3.5

Detail 1, Figure 3.5
Figure 3.6
Figure 4.3

Figure 4.4
Figure 4.9

Figure 4.10
Figure 4.11

Figure 4.12
Figure 4.15
Figure 4.18

Figure 4.19


Freed, Barbara. "A Model for Matisse." First Run Features. DVD.


