

The Fauves

Early 20th Century 'avant-garde', the name "**Fauve**" translates literally as "**Wild Beast**" and, again, was given to a group of like-minded painters by a French art critic, **Louis Vauxcelles**, reviewing the work grouped together at the **1905 Salon d' Automne in Paris**. As you can imagine, this, like the "Impressionists", was not intended as a compliment.

Indeed, the room that contained these 'wild beasts' was named "the cage" by the same, witty writer!

The group were **Henri Matisse, Andre Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck, Georges Roualt**. They did not have any theoretical basis to their way of working, they were simply a group of friends who shared an enthusiasm for violent, arbitrary colour, (**Strong, bold colours that were unrealistic and not used in the 'right' places**).

The process was not actually as arbitrary, (random), as it at first seems. This very **expressionist** way of working created what seem at first to be **decorative patterns**, but upon closer examination, it **becomes apparent that a great deal of thought and effort has gone into creating a balanced composition in all of these paintings**. No one colour or area of pattern **dominates the painting and your eye is drawn around and around the canvas, not resting or settling**.

The group produced its most cohesive work around 1906-7, after which the individuals began to drift away into other styles of working.

Henri Matisse (1869 – 1954)

Portrait of Andre Derain, 1904-5

A companion piece to the Derain portrait of him, this painting is like a masterclass in why the Fauves were so controversial. Even today the colours are striking, shocking perhaps? Try matching up the opposite colours. The textures are made up of the thick, impasto paint with their brushstrokes not smoothed off or disguised but left, bold and brazen, for all the world to see. Despite this riot of colour and texture, there is a strange calm about the subject of the portrait, This is perhaps the most striking thing about this most striking of images.

The Pont Saint – Michel, Paris, 1900 (Built Environment)

Strong use of **opposite colours** such as lemon yellow for sunlight, and pale lilac for shadow (top left); bright red and moss green in foreground under bridge. The colours, such as the red building to the right of the composition, above the bridge, are almost certainly **not realistic**. There are hints of the innovations of earlier French painters that Matisse will undoubtedly have experienced, e.g. **Degas in the cropping** of the left hand side by what we suppose is a window frame ; and perhaps the treatment of the sky and the blue section of the river displaying a version of **Seurat's Divisionism**, where the colours are not so much mixed as sit alongside one another giving the illusion of mixing?

Rooftops, Collioure, 1904 (Landscape)

In the summer of 1904, Matisse and Derain travelled **South** from Paris to **Collioure**, a small fishing village on the mediteranian coast of France, about 10 miles from the Spanish border. The **light** here was incredibly clear, lending colours a **vibrancy** that

Paris could not compete with. This view is from the hills as you come down to the village, overlooking the terracotta tiled roofs itself.

(See also **Open Window, 1904** and **Red Beach, 1904** as well as **Andre Derain**).

Andre Derain, (1880-1954)

Portrait of Henri Matisse, 1904-5

The stylistic touches of the landscapes painted during the day are transferred into this portrait, possibly painted in a relaxed moment in the evening. The blank spaces again allow the canvas to show through, and the bold, “wild” use of colour is evident here. Strong red, (sunset?), on the face of the sitter is contrasted with the green of the background; the purple on the right set against the yellow/orange of the tunic. The brushstrokes are not only clear, like Van Gogh’s, but used to make up the structure of the face with no attempt to hide the artist’s ‘craft’. Audiences and critics at the time viewed this as simply an unfinished work.

Rooftops, Collioure, 1904 (Landscape / Built Environment)

In style, Derain is not quite so ‘loose’ as Matisse and his colours do not seem quite so far removed from reality. Indeed this image is quite **reminiscent of Van Gogh’s** later work. The colours used only seem tame when viewed in comparison with Matisse’s version of a similar scene. Again lots of **opposite, seemingly random colour** applied. The **composition**, however, is **perfectly balanced**. The diagonal of receding houses balancing the shoreline that takes your eye back to out to the left. The searing **heat** of the yellow- orange **cooling** when it meets the strong blue of the water and cool blue/green/lilac of the sky.

Compare also **Boats in the Port, 1904 with Matisse’s** treatment of the same subject. These are not painters in competition with one another, are they?

Mountains, Collioure, 1904 (Landscape)

The use of incredibly strong, **contrasting colours, sinuous lines** and **brushstrokes of texture** make a bold, patterned composition that seems almost **to wriggle** on the canvas. The colours and marks **jostle for your attention** and the effect is of tremendous **energy**. It is quite like Van **Gogh’s** skies and Olive groves, however, takes the **experimentation with colour** even further. The thickly applied, (**IMPASTO**) painting style is also reminiscent of the troubled Dutchman. Derain is, however, much more **controlled and deliberate** here. I think this image shows very clearly that the Fauves were not just throwing down colour onto canvas in the wild, uncontrolled fashion that they were accused of. Everything has been **placed carefully** and for a reason and the overall effect, although quite brutal, has a **balance and harmony** to it. Despite the initial shock of the vibrant colour, this could even be quite a quiet, calming painting?

The Table, 1904-5 (Still Life)

Less typical of the Fauvist style, we see Derain here starting to move away from the tighter, more **measured application of paint** into a much more **expressive**, even aggressive painting style. The paint is still thickly applied, (**IMPASTO**), but seems to have been put down far more **quickly** now. The concern is less for a convincing representation of the objects, more for **capturing the essence** of the scene. The balance of Visual Elements becomes the most important thing now. There are Horizontal, vertical and diagonal **LINES** in equal measure. Areas of flat **TEXTURE** are balanced with very rough looking brushstrokes. **COLOURS** are balanced with Hot, advancing colours offset with Cold, receding ones. **SHAPES** vary from very sharp and triangular to soft and round. **TONES** are used less, giving everything less **FORM**. This makes it harder to make out the actual items being painted with any certainty. In fact, it almost looks like a slightly abstract painting at first glance. There are hints here at the possibilities for future generations of artists.

Maurice de Vlaminck (1876-1958) *Landscape and Still Life, (in this period)*

Barges tied up on the banks of the Seine, 1906 (Landscape)

Most **Van Gogh-like** of all the Fauvists, Vlaminck style is to use much more of the thick, **impasto** paint, to create **line and texture**. The direction that the paint has been applied is very clear, and the **compositional balance** is created by complimenting the **horizontal** strokes of the barge, bridge and buildings with the slightly **diagonal** of the towpath in the foreground and , more especially the **verticals** of the river and the reflections in it. The colours lack the vibrancy of Matisse and Derain's Collioure studies, but do not be confused by this: closer examination will reveal, with bare tree in the foreground, that this is almost certainly the late autumn or early spring and the subject is the river Seine, near Paris – much further north than Collioure

Banks of the Seine, Chatou, 1906 (Landscape)

Displaying quite a strong **Cezanne** influence, here, Vlaminck is experimenting more now with **structure** in his painting as the **colour becomes more muted** and **line** begins to take over. Painting mainly scenes around Paris and Northern France, Vlaminck's work can often lack the strength of colour used by his fellow Fauvists, but the unusual choice of colours is still a very strong feature.

The Blue House, 1906(Landscape)

Placing the house **centrally** here, as a composition, should **not** work. However, with bold and brave use of **opposite, (complimentary) colours** – the rust and orange colours with rough **texture** in the foreground versus the **flat** strong blue on the house – allows the whole arrangement to stay **balanced**. This is not easy to achieve. The **vertical** lines of the house and the trees also balance the strong black **horizontal** outlines of the windows and doors on the house. The small figure is also quite centrally placed, again a **compositional crime**. The cool, **flat** mint green of her dress sings out from the hot reds and ochres of the heavily **textured** pathway. This takes away from the actual position of the figure and makes a visual link between her and the cool blues and whites of the house. Makes you think it must be hers.

Still life with Oranges, 1906-7 (Still Life)

*Vlaminck is at the height of his Fauvist period here. The colours are **distinct**, clear and crisp. He has taken all that he has learned in the more experimental work and **distilled it** into this style. The colours are still composed to **play opposites off of one another**, but these are less contrived now and more realistic. The objects have been selected carefully and placed to give best effect. The paint is applied in a **flatter, more controlled manner** and the finish is more highly polished and **realistic**. The objects still have **black outlines**, separating them from their neighbours, but this, again is now more **controlled** and less noticeable. The overall effect keeps the striking and **luminous** quality of his earlier Fauvist paintings, but Vlaminck seems more settled and sure of his work now.*

See Also **Georges Roualt**, (Figure Composition & Portraiture)

Clown with Big Drum, 1906-7 (Fig. Comp.)

Portrait of Guy de Chaentonay, 1908 (Portraiture)