

**The Woman in the Purple Robe**  
**By Henri Matisse**  
**(FAME III December 2006)**

*(Presenter can wear the purple top provided on the FAME cart or one of own.)*

Today, we are going to look at an artist and a style of painting very different from our lessons this year. He is one of the two most famous painters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the other one is Picasso). He has been referred to as a “wild beast!” Can anyone guess who this artist is?

*(Turn over artist portrait)* His name is Henri Matisse (pronounced On-ree Mah-tees). He didn't paint wild beasts, but his style made others describe him this way. What characteristics of his paintings might cause this description of a “wild beast?” *(answer: energy, strong or vibrant colors, bold lines).*

**Fauvism**

In 1905, there was an important Paris art exhibition in which Matisse and many similar artists were displayed. Matisse had been traveling within Europe and particularly liked the light and color of the Mediterranean region. His style had changed to reflect his love of these colors. At the exhibition, Matisse had paintings that were “wild with color,” not just in the intensity of the hues he used, but in their juxtaposition: orange against blue, red against green, yellow against violet. His work was hung in one room with other young painters with similar energy and color in their paintings. This caused the first great scandal of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. People actually got angry and felt that the outrageous use of color was an insult! They were called “Les Fauves” (le fōv) – wild beasts—by a leading art critic. The name fauve stuck and came to apply to all artists who used unrepressed color. This art movement is called Fauvism.

**The Woman in the Purple Robe**

Now let's look at Matisse's painting *(turn over painting)*. Matisse was considered a master of two elements of composition. What do you think they are? *(color and line)*. Color is one of the elements Matisse used to convey emotion. What feelings do you get from his use of color in the painting? *(wild, bold, noisy)* Let's look at line in this painting. Does line convey an emotion also? *(maybe happy, jumpy, wild, crazy, interesting)*. Why do you suppose he outlined in black? *(to emphasize)*. The lines almost seem like an afterthought to the color. The outlining of the figure, the wall covering's bold red and swirling white, and the designs on the green table appear to have been painted to emphasize the brilliant color.

We learned that an artist could use line, color and light to bring our eyes to a focal point. Where do your eyes go first? *(no wrong answer)*. Is there one focal point? *(no)* Matisse makes our eyes move all over the painting, helping us to see it as a whole. The painting is very bright – is there a light source? *(no)* There are no natural effects of light, no light source, and no shadow. Matisse's paintings are very “flat” because of this. The properties of the color itself create light.

Can you see emotion in the woman's face or eyes? She is staring, but her face and eyes do not convey much feeling. She is like a still life. We would only have to guess her internal thoughts. The emotion of the painting is in the gaiety of line and color. Does this feeling about the woman change as we remove the vase of flowers? (*no*) It is like two paintings are placed together – a still life and a portrait. Matisse was famous for both. (*cover vase first, then cover woman to emphasize point*).

When an artist paints objects that sit still and are arranged in an interesting manner, the painting is called a still life.

### **Biography**

Henri Matisse was born in France in 1869 to a middle class family. He studied law and received his law degree from the University of Paris at age 20. He began to work as a French country lawyer, but had an attack of appendicitis and had to stay in bed, recuperating for almost a year. During this time, his mother gave him a box of oil paints and a do-it-yourself book to help him pass the time. What started as a hobby soon became his passion. This was a turning point in his life!

Matisse remembered this time – “When I started to paint, I felt transported into a kind of paradise... In everyday life I was usually bored and vexed by the things that people were always telling me I must do. Starting to paint I felt gloriously free, quiet and alone.”

He went to Paris to study art and became a student with painter/teacher, Gustav Moreau. Because of Matisse's “different” style, Moreau was the ideal teacher. He encouraged his students to explore their own styles and never imposed his style upon them.

Matisse married and had 3 children. He later separated from his wife but she acted as a model in many of his paintings. He had some early financial struggles, but this turned around when he sold one of his paintings, “Blue Nude,” to the wealthy Rockefeller family for \$10,000. This sale also provided some status for him as an artist.

Matisse concentrated on 3 major subjects in his paintings: the still life, the figure, and the landscape. While he did sculpture, painted opera sets and designed fabrics and clothing, he is best known for his paintings and paper cut-outs, the latter which he focused on towards the end of his life when he was sick with cancer, repeated surgeries and bedridden. After many years of poor health, he died in his apartment in Nice of a heart attack in 1954.

Matisse had a unique and constantly evolving style. He explored many art movements – Realism, Impressionism, Classicism, Cubism, Expressionism, but is most known as the leader of Fauvism.

### **Optional Art Activity**

Have students take out colored pencils or pens and do a still life with the bold colored flowers in a large vase (materials on cart). A still life is a painting of objects that sit still and are arranged in an interesting manner.