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# Still Life with Lemons (whose forms correspond to a drawing of a black vase upon the wall)

RISD Museum

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My name is Ellen McBreen. I am an art historian and professor at Wheaton College in Massachusetts. We are looking at *Still Life with Lemons* from around 1914. It's by Henri Matisse. This is a painting that shows that even really simple paintings or paintings that seem to have been easy to execute, are actually based on a lot of labor and decision making.

In this painting, we know, for example, that Matisse shifted around the movement of the three main elements: there's the blue glass with the lemons, the book, and the lemon with the smaller dish. When you look closely at the painting, you can also see how many layers or how many different processes Matisse is using. On the whole right side of the painting, he first put down a layer of ochre, which you can see peeking through some of those turning brush strokes in the green. You can also see it between the green and red along where the spine of the book is. That under layer of ochre gives this color much more complexity.

On the left side of the painting, he's doing something much different. He's actually putting down a lot of blue pigment and then scraping that pigment off, so much so that you can almost see white spots as in the weave of the canvas coming through.

The different techniques that Matisse is using for all of these different zones of the painting have the effect of making them all seem to hover separately, almost as if we're looking at a collage of elements rather than a painting.

But despite all the separateness of forms, Matisse really brings everything back together again through what he would refer to as 'a living harmony of colors.' Each color in this painting and each color in all perception is really much shaped by the color that surrounds it. For example here, that red wedge with the yellow and orange is much warmer than the cooler blue and green which is next to it, which makes the cooler colors almost recede back into space. In that way, Matisse is using this relationship between colors to create a sense of depth. Those colors allow those objects to breathe in the colored space that he's created for them.