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## **HENRI MATISSE'S *ECRITS ET PROPOS SUR L'ART*. A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY ON NATURE, FEELING AND ORIGIN**

### **1. Matisse and the aesthetic translation of feeling**

According to Henri Matisse the act of painting begins by pursuing stability and permanence in opposition to the variable flow of reality's perceptions. In the first pages of his *Ecrits et propos sur art*, and in particular in the *Notes d'un peintre* written in 1908, he describes art as

Un art d'équilibre, de pureté, de tranquillité, sans sujet inquiétant ou préoccupant, qui soit, pour tout travailleur cérébral, pour l'homme d'affaires aussi bien que pour l'artiste des lettres, par exemple, un lénifiant, un calmant cérébral, quelque chose d'analogue à un bon fauteuil qui le délasse de ses fatigues physiques. (Matisse 1972, 50)

The same idea is present in the preliminary sessions of his paintings, capable of lasting many hours or even days in order to determine the exact position of the model, that aimed at fixing on canvas the guidelines from which the subject of the picture could emerge. Matisse used many traditional techniques to maintain the same dispositions, relations and sizes between parts in the succession of poses: from the method of plumb lines, the utilization of fixed vertical lines as a reference of alignment, to the chalk marks of the artist's feet on the floor to resume position and exact inclination of his body and look.

In those same years – at the *Salon d'automne*<sup>1</sup> (1905), where the first exhibition of Matisse's group of painters took place, dur-

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<sup>1</sup>It has been founded in 1903 by the architect Franz Jordain with Bonnard, Matisse, Derain's support to help and defend new art. From 1903 to 1906 Gauguin, Cézanne, Toulouse-Laurec, Renoir, Puvis de Chavannes, Manet and Ingres exhibit there, in this way anticipating the following fauvist revolution.

ing which the criticism voiced by Louis Vauxcelles was heard through the corridors of the Louvre: 'Donatello au milieu des fauves!' – the fragmentation of reality in the colors of fauvist paintings was subverting the traditional ways of thinking art, by resting upon the artistic research of the second half of the XIX century, from the impressionist movement to Paul Cézanne, as well as the symbolistic poetry, that could be seen as the neglected birthplace of every non academic and avant-garde theory of art.

It is possible that the sharp contrast between a 'static' and a 'revolutionary' reading of Matisse that can be found in the wide variety of interpretations concerning his theory and practice of art is a product of an approach that is limited to a direct confrontation of his work, thus leaving out the idea that these two sides form an inner and necessary contradiction on which his paintings as well as his aesthetic thought is built upon. As a matter of fact it is possible to identify several faces of the author's work in relation to his themes or techniques: Matisse as a post-impressionistic painter, as an expressionist, as an interpret of emotional interiority, as the investigator of Mediterranean light through colors, as the headmaster of the short-lived movement of Fauvism, as a decorative painter – especially for his latest works, the *Gouaches découpées* (from 1947 to 1954) and the *Chapelle du rosaire de Vence* (1948-1951) – and finally as an interpret of exoticism, oriental art and ancient mythology.

None of these claims are false *per se*, but considered on their own without the rest they are unable to show the whole organic complexity of his meditation concerning the problems that artistic interpretation, creation and fruition involve.

This paper intends to view Matisse's art theory and art work – despite the impossibility of encompassing the totality of his production – by connecting the author's own reflection with the phenomenological description of artistic creation and the way in which it addresses the problem of the experience of vision – which, as we will see, grasps subject and intentional object in their eidetic dimension – that is implied in the process of sense-creation through shapes and colours.

If we refer to Merleau-Ponty's own words, according to whom «La phénoménologie, c'est l'étude des essences, et tous les problèmes, selon elle, reviennent à définir les essences» (Merleau-Ponty 1945, I), then the work of art could be considered as a stratification of sense and as a convergence of the operative capabilities of

the artist constrained into the limits of the aesthetic object. These complex empirical objects can be referred to the ‘objects animated by spirit’<sup>2</sup> Husserl speaks about in the second volume of *Ideas on a pure phenomenology and on a phenomenological philosophy*, and therefore can be seen from a phenomenological point of view for which there is no preliminary truth before its temporal realization in the experiential field, in order to show that there is also no art theory that can be abstracted from material embodiment.

For this reason, a phenomenological standpoint on Matisse’s work does not intend to offer any kind of normative explanation by arbitrarily posing a unitary principle, on the contrary it aims at presenting an operative description that rests upon phenomena and their laws – in our case represented by what Matisse wrote and painted – in order to question the very own condition of possibility of phenomena themselves. This kind of description therefore addresses the problem posed at the beginning of this article regarding the coherence of Matisse’s work by showing that the way in which he expresses and interprets nature remains the same, despite the various possible readings of his art and the obvious stylistic changes – the different faces mentioned above – that occurred during his painting-devoted life.

The French painter’s idea for which art revolves around the research of calm and stability hinted earlier allows us to determine what is meant to be the heart of his aesthetic theory; considering especially what is written in his *Notes d’un peintre*:

Souvent, quand je me mets au travail, dans une première séance je note des sensations fraîches et superficielles [...] Si je m’en contentais aujourd’hui, alors que je pense voir plus loin, il resterait une vague dans mon tableau: j’aurais enregistré les sensations fugitives d’un moment qui ne me définiraient pas entièrement, et que je reconnaîtrais à peine le lendemain [...] Sous cette succession de moments qui compose l’existence superficielle des êtres et des choses, et qui les revêtet d’apparences changeantes, tôt disparues, on peut rechercher un caractère plus vrai, plus essentiel, auquel l’artiste s’attachera pour donner de la réalité une interprétation plus durable. (Matisse 1972, 43-45)

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<sup>2</sup> Husserl speaks about the unity of the living body with spirit in the act of comprehension and he establishes the possibility of connecting phenomenological research to artistic creation: if physical objects are seen, the *Leib* lives into the comprehension of sense and in the construction of sense starting from his experience of the *Lebenswelt*. We are considering art, in this sense, in its eminent aesthetic characteristic, as the poetic process that describes a living relation with experience itself.

Matisse's conception of artistic creation is directly connected to sensations and impressions, or, better yet, it takes the immediate experience of the external world as its starting point. The opposition between superficial, vague and fugitive sensations and the greater stability of the painting itself underlines the author's distance from the aesthetics of Impressionism, even though in the early years of his artistic formation the contact with impressionistic landscapes represented a possible painting method of outer world that escaped the strict rules of Academies.

At the beginning Matisse studied the colors of the impressionistic palette, but soon rejected – from 1897 with the painting *La table servie* – this kind of poetry that tried to depict the time stream by using rapid brush strokes, in the attempt to freeze one of its moments, portrayed in the weather conditions present in the painting. It is important to notice that the problem of time is not absent from Matisse's art, but, as we will see, its development follows a different path. As a matter of fact the aim is not to represent how the material surface of the outside world is dissolved by time and movement, but rather painting becomes the meditation on what is involved in the creation of an artistic object which entails a union between the world's becoming and the temporal consciousness.

Referring to the previous quotation, it is important to underline the artist's urge for a 'complete definition' that emerges from a 'translation' of that 'condensation' of impressions and sensations into the picture. The act of creation originates from a prior relation with the world and nature which are comprehended instinctually by the artist who is deeply submerged in its fleeting qualities. In this way, these transitory states are reflected in what we may call a process of non-diminutive simplification, which exhibits, through a particular motif of lines and colors, not their mimetic appearances, but their essence.

In Matisse's theory of art, to return to the essence means to derive from inner reflection that particular form in which the artist's feeling can be defined and translated. From this point of view 'lower' instinctual perceptions can't be separated from an 'upper' reflexive moment: for Matisse these two opposites are conceived as interchangeable because he considers art in general as the achievement of what we will soon see as a pure order from the subject's direct activity, whose outcome is necessarily an imme-

mediate representation that is both abstract and non mimetic. This means that any Cartesian distinction between subjective reasoning and the mere objectivity of an external world perceived by said subject have to be set aside. For Matisse, art is the translation through pure and immediate means – not submitted to the figurative representation of a real object and its *milieu* – of the artist's feeling, which is directly related to the *Lebenswelt* and its sense, finding its possibility in the open field of the experience.

The way in which Matisse attempts to translate feelings into a work of art may be seen as a radical and solipsistic form of psychologism or even sentimentalism. How can such intimate reflection represent the basis for any kind of artistic translation, where a tacit communication is always implied?

In earlier studies of phenomenological aesthetics (Scaramuzza 1976 and 1996), the problem concerning the way in which emotions and feeling of pleasure originate during the experience of a work of art has always been connected to the identification of what is considered 'beauty' (as beautiful) during the fruition.

In this context, we depart from this perspective in order to rather focus on the relationship where a phenomenology of experience and a theory of artistic creation are intertwined. In fact, the phenomenological assumptions of the necessity of an interpretation of nature, coupled with the neverending interrogation of the obviousness of the *Lebenswelt*, allows the description of artistic creation to achieve the rigour of a theory of knowledge, therefore returning to the original and founding meaning of Aesthetics as *gnoseologia inferior*. The gnoseological aspect of artistic creation lies in its sensible and experiential origin, where, in this context, the return to the Baumgartenian definition means to comprehend the fundamental ambiguity of sensible experience as a specific domain of truth in which it is valid, as something that has its own proper sense.

In this sense, art is not the outcome of a categorical gaze over reality, but is part of the human capability to intentionally interact with the voiceless sense of experience. In phenomenology, subject is constituted as a *Leib* through his relationship with the alterity and with his perceptive field, and becomes the centre of possibilities, pure capability to model the world – through visual and practical knowledge, different from any theoretical attitude – creating new qualitative sense.

Matisse goes in the same direction by offering a research that is a meditation on life, passing through the interpretation of nature and what feeling arises in front of a particular sensible configuration; confronting the infinite possibilities of world's multiplicities, the look of the painter chooses that stable and finite organization of forms and colors that are able to condensate the essence of that feeling, which is never a mere subjective emotion, but a feeling of life. As he says: «Je ne puis pas distinguer entre le sentiment que j'ai de landscapes vie et la façon dont je le traduis» (Matisse 1972, 42).

In this phenomenological inquiry to talk about feeling of life means to talk about its condition of possibility, its eidetic features which rely on the necessary intentional unit of *Leib* and the affordances of the *Lebenswelt* that are both conjoint and submerged in the stratified ground of the dynamism of experience.

For Matisse, feeling does not reveal any private emotion, it rather corresponds to what we may define as an 'interiority not separable from exteriority', which necessarily strives for its own expression that coincides with the artist's self-expression, or, from a phenomenological perspective, it is the very expression of a particular existential stylization of the lifeworld. As Matisse says:

[L'artiste] doit avoir cette simplicité d'esprit qui le portera à croire qu'il a peint seulement ce qu'il a vu [...] Les gens qui font du style par parti pris et s'écartent volontairement de la nature sont à côté de la vérité. Un artiste doit se rendre compte, quand il raisonne, que son tableau est factice, mais quand il peint, il doit avoir ce sentiment qu'il a copié la nature. (Matisse 1972, 51-52)

Truth – together with the possibility to question it – dynamically lies in a ceaseless interpretative effort that arises directly from nature itself, due to the constitutive 'condemnation to sense' Merleau-Ponty speaks about in *Phénoménologie de la perception*<sup>3</sup>. And, as François Fédier suggests, in Matisse's expressivity there is the union between feeling and its very need to be translated (Fédier 2001, 228).

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular: «Parce que nous sommes au monde, nous sommes condamnés au sens, et nous ne pouvons rien faire ni rien dire qui ne prenne un nom dans l'histoire» (Merleau-Ponty 1945, XIV).

Merleau-Ponty again, in his lessons at *Collège de France*<sup>4</sup>, defines expression as «la propriété qu'a un phénomène, par son agencement interne, d'en faire connaître un autre qui n'est pas ou qui n'est pas pour autant véritablement donné» (Merleau-Ponty 2011, 48). If non mimetic painting is considered as a pure construction moving from the interpretation of nature and as an expressive object, the excluded middle then will be the original proceeding of that expression to join sensibility and corporeal subjectivity, phenomena and thoughts in their mutual constitution.

Therefore the meaning behind Matisse's choice of words is the attempt to describe the construction of the unity of painting – from instinct to reflection – in order to deal with «l'éternelle question de l'objectif et du subjectif» (Schneider 1984, 60): the author shows in his paintings, especially in the fauvist period, some figures that describe this unity and communality between feeling and nature, so that – as suggested by Pierre Schneider<sup>5</sup> – the aesthetics of *mimesis* were substituted with the aesthetics of *metessi* (participation), not by simply rejecting any reference to objects' appearances, but by bending them through a coherent deformation and stylization of feeling.

Subjectivity and objectivity refer to each other in Matisse's paintings; they only seem opposed, but the aim of the author is to show how they actually tend one to the other in their juxtaposition.

Especially in the earlier works of the fauvist period, critics notice that Matisse utilizes two different painting methods: an impressionistic one linked to the representation of landscapes and one related to indoors settings with the use of flat and uniform colors stand. As a matter of fact, if one observes closely, the landscape lines tend to be wavering, representing in this way the flickering movement of reality, while rooms and lounges are constructed with static and structural lines. We could take as an ex-

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<sup>4</sup> In this text Merleau-Ponty faces the themes of expression and language in order to operate a new definition of consciousness and sense that goes further the separation between subject and object and also that goes further the separation between the expression and its sense or meaning. Here expression becomes a sort of faculty that rises from the empirical structure of an object, by which a new meaning is able to appear or better to emerge from what is already known. Merleau-Ponty talks about figure-ground relations taken from the Gestalt theory of perception, using them outside from the psychological background and in relation to the concept of «écart» that he elaborates later on into an ontological dimension in the text *Le visible et l'invisible*.

<sup>5</sup> The quotation appears in a letter written by Matisse to his son Pierre Matisse from Nice on June 7, 1942.

ample *Fenêtre ouverte, Collioure* (1905). Inside and outside, and therefore, as we will see, interiority and exteriority, are put into contact by allocating a window in the painting. Here, as Schneider notices, what is exterior deforms what is inside and next to the window, as it is shown by the flowers on the balcony. In Leon Battista Alberti's *De pictura* the painting was considered as an 'open window to the world', as a symbol of the human gaze on the spectacle of the world and of representational perspective on a two-dimensional surface. In Matisse's paintings the window is far from being the metaphor of the contemplating distance between subject and an external world, on the contrary it denotes their very connection in the construction of a work of art. As a matter of fact the window is a figural device through which subject and object meet, a sort of 'passage' through which the artist translates a feeling that, as we said before, arises from nature and that then goes through the stability of reflection that emerges in the process of artistic translation or creation.

A perspective that describes the creative process as an interpretation of nature where the role of reflection is reduced to a final synthetic moment, expression is thought to truly manifest itself only in the last moments of this process. Although this point of view is compelling, nevertheless in this particular context we intend to pursue a different path that considers expression phenomenologically. In fact, according to Merleau-Ponty, expression is the profound meaning of the phenomenological analysis of experience, due to its role in sense-constitution. As Merleau-Ponty writes in *Le langage indirect et les voix du silence*, there is no possibility of conceiving sense as completely separated from carnal existence. In later writings he stresses this point by showing how the creation of new sense – in language as in silent representations – coincides with the poietic process itself in which sense emerges as its final realization. Expression is not a mere translation of a previous thought – Matisse's using of the word 'translation' could be misunderstood<sup>6</sup> – but it is the construction of

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<sup>6</sup> Usually the word 'translation' refers to the proceeding of simply modify the external appearance of a meaning that remains the same. As an example the linguistic translation allows to change the word 'dog' into the French 'chien' or into the Italian 'cane', without any modification of the meaning itself. On the contrary the translation Matisse talks about must be seen as a complete transformation or even better a transfiguration of the external appearances of phenomena, by which, through the artist's stylistic filter, a new object with a new meaning can rise.



thought as it is put forth by its necessary incorporation. In this sense we might the image of the window to Merleau-Ponty words: «il n’y a pas à choisir entre le monde et l’art, entre ‘nos sens’ et la peinture absolue : ils passent l’un dans l’autre» (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 74). The interpretation of the lifeworld is necessarily connected to poetic creation, and in modern painting the link between things and their appearances is broken in order to represent – if representation in its traditional meaning of ‘making something real appear again on canvas’ is still possible – the connection between subject and object through feeling. From this perspective we can understand and describe a kind of painting that shows a non-mimetic truth and a non-superficial sense of experience, in order to show its transcendental genesis.

Matisse’s paintings illustrate the connection between outside and inside, representing the passage of nature – portrayed in the outdoor impressionistic landscape – through the artist’s feeling and act of stylization, which is usually depicted as the indoor artist’s *atelier*<sup>7</sup> or as a room that communicates with what is outside. This dialectical process that we showed in *Fenêtre ouverte, Collioure* is also present in other works and taken to the extreme, to the point that the indoor space becomes a complete decorative surface<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Building by arabesque and color

Defined the perspective we intend to pursue, we can now proceed by analyzing some of Matisse’s own statements and aspects of his work in order to describe the complexity and depth the problem of expression and the possibility of its formal solutions or configurations.

By insisting on the theme of the window and on its role in describing the ‘eternal question of subjectivity and objectivity’, it is possible to investigate the relationship between indoor and outdoor landscape that occurs in a pure decorative space: in other words to investigate not the relation between the realistic (or, in

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<sup>7</sup> Gustave Courbet has been the first painter to insert an ‘outer’ landscape in his paintings. In the painting *L’atelier* (1854) he represents his own atelier where it is possible to find another picture portraying a landscape.

<sup>8</sup> Matisse’s evolution towards decorative painting can be seen by considering the change that occurs between the realistic painting *Atelier sous les toits* (1903) and *Atelier rouge* (1911) where the perspective is merely sketched by using white lines that define the furniture on a complete flat and red surface.

Matisse's conception, impressionistic) reference to nature and the reflection on it in the pictorial space, but the internal and pure relations of decorative image, in which landscape and closed spaces appear on the same level.

If in the painting *Fenêtre ouverte, Collioure* nature appears as an element of disorder, anarchy and as a source of light that can be seen only by the mediation of the window – or other means like the balcony and the curtains – in later paintings like *La déserte: harmonie rouge* (1908), the landscape is part of the decorative order, of that 'space of liberty' (as Werner Haftmann calls it) ordered under the artist's discipline, in which spirit, the artist's subjectivity, can realize itself by together balancing and composing the arabesque in a separate space apart from the conflict between subject and world (Haftmann 1960, 99-103). This particular interpretation put forth by Haftmann correctly describes Matisse's art as research for formal equilibrium and restfulness, but nevertheless it is important to remember how a 'spiritual' or 'conceptual' art is very distant from the French artist's own aesthetic theory: there is no representation of a pure and free order of the spirit – those Cartesian clear and evident truths – which could justify his declared research of tranquility in art, but at the same time art in order to be decorative or subjective doesn't need to depart from the order of nature and of the external world.

On the contrary, the creation of a decorative image, with its broad consequences we are about to see, roots the subjective meditation into the stratified sense of nature. In this way, by being part of nature's constitutive sense-making, it purifies the forms so that only the essential motif remains, thus making the expression of non solipsistic feeling possible by comprehending the constitutive compromise with its otherness.

In analyzing the function of decorative art, Matisse presents the urge to ask what does decorative (and ornamental) stand for, and precisely how does it formally relate to the previous theme of the polarity and connection between spirit and nature.

Ornamental and decorative art should be read from a different angle than the common and well-known *Art déco*, whose is identified in the extreme adornment of figures, missing of any essential modification of the inner representative and figurative purpose of the work. In this way, by labeling Matisse's art as 'decorative' we do not mean that in his artistic endeavor he tried to make the superficial attempt of rendering traditional representa-

tion more complicated by using any sort of dense textures or inlays. «C'est commettre une grave erreur de jugement que d'attribuer un sens péjoratif au mot décoratif... Il faut être d'abord décoratif. La substance ne suffit pas, il faut aussi une enveloppe» (Matisse 1972, 308); this is what Matisse wrote to André Lejard who understood the problem and considered as 'decorative' anything that departed from a naturalistic illusion. And, in reference to Somerset Maugham's statement according to which he used to buy paintings «pour fleurir la maison», Matisse answered «Ça c'est la décoration. Ça n'a aucune importance» (Matisse 1972, 308). Despite he utilizes the word *décoratif* both positively and negatively, it is clear that what Matisse had in his mind and what he eventually put into his art was something different from the flowery motifs that were so common in his time.

To clarify this crucial point, Fédier (Fédier 2001, 95, 225) suggests to recall the etymological meaning of the words 'decoration' and 'ornament'. Ornament is not something external from a substantial 'what' that is adorned; the verb 'ornament' must be related to the Latin *ornare*, and to the medieval French expression *à orne* whose actual meaning is the act of sequencing or arranging something in line or in a circle: in this sense the ornament is the particular ordered configuration in which something presents itself.

On the other side 'decoration' comes from the Latin verb *de-cet* or the noun *decus*: both referring to 'decency' and to 'convenience'; therefore it means that there is decorum and decency when everything finds its correct place – *cum venio* – and contributes to the overall harmony.

Saying that Matisse's painting becomes an entirely decorative surface means having to deal with all of the meaningfulness and complexity of this notion.

The harmony of the painting is something built by the decoration which finds its specific necessity in the way in which it arranges itself. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that this decorative order of the work doesn't stand for something else – it has no mimetic reference to an external object – but it autonomously presents itself, even though, as we mentioned above, it never escapes from its rooting in the experience and in the complexity of the lifeworld.

In his work Matisse describes the transition from representation to image, which coincides with the passage from vision to the construction of something in compliance with decoration. In

this sense, decoration fully corresponds to the expression of a feeling, which is not possible without an intense preparation in contact with the model or the subject and «qui vient non pas d'une chose simple, mais d'une chose complexe et qui s'est simplifiée par l'épuration du sujet et de l'esprit de celui qui l'a traduit» (Matisse 1972, 127). The motif of the painting and the artist's spirit that normally acts upon it are both simplified and depurated in order to permit the realization of a non mimetic translation of feeling, an artistic object which maintains the essential aim of the creative process into pure formal means.

Going back to the figure of the window, we can see that, in the painting *La desserte: harmonie rouge*, the outlines of the decorative motif of the red table cloth do not match with the edges of the table, on the contrary, it overflows into the walls of the entire room: the painting completely becomes a decorative surface in which the objects that are still able to refer to their real use (as the two chairs, the woman, the fruits and fruit bowls) seem to be implanted in a two-dimensional pattern, losing any spacial reference traditionally given by the perspective and thus obtaining the value of an ornament that for Matisse means to build the inner harmony of the image. Inside this pattern the window appears with all of its bulk and heaviness as a part of it. The reference to Nature is now incorporated into decorative surface with all of its shapes and colors that now appear simplified and reduced to figures with no depth. In this way, the role of the window as a reference to the reality of nature is compromised, but its figure still remains even though it is reducible to a framed painting hanging on the wall, in the same way as the actual painting in which is in. In this case – more clearly than in the attempts of the previous years – the painting itself repeats through decoration the process that brings from nature or from a model the expressive translation of feeling, by showing nature itself as a part of the decoration, as a moment of the constitutive artist's participation in the stratification of sense of the lifeworld. For Matisse, painter of decorative images, «Expression et décoration ne sont qu'une seule et même chose, le second terme étant condensé dans le premier» (Matisse 1972, 308).

Expression, read through phenomenological lens, allows us to consider the concept of decoration together with Matisse's statements about the process of creation as a unique and organic meditation on art. In this way, talking about meditation and reflec-

tion does not automatically imply any speculative theory of art that considers its objects only after they have been completed (merely as objects of fruition); on the contrary, art is first of all a form of 'making' than a form of 'being' or, to put it differently, no artifact can be considered without its process of material realization and its construction of sense stemming from the expression of life-feeling. So, an art who represents its own proceeding is, from a phenomenological point of view, art of the transcendental conditions themselves and, at the same time, shows the inner principle of movement that makes any experience, as well as the translation of feeling that it implies, possible.

Matisse, in the first two decades of XX century, explores the possibilities of decoration and takes them to the extremes. *Intérieur aux aubergines* (1911) could be considered as a radicalization of decorative space, as the interior environments are multiplied, all dissolved in a unique decorative pattern. Passages, doors, window, screens, frames divide the pictorial space and are completely submerged into the decorative motifs of the main room. The window appears as a natural painting without any depth compared to other elements in the picture such as the three glimpsed rooms; even the objects on the table – representing the other traditional academic disciplines of still life and of copying from sculptures – lose their weight and concreteness, as they seem floating and disappearing into the pattern.

In this painting we can witness the power of two-dimensionality in transforming the reality seen through the window and the doors into the reality of paintings themselves, helped by the rectangular or squared frames and shapes, taking on the role of the whole artistic creation itself. The painting is divided into surfaces of different patterns each containing one another. This figurative expedient could be seen as the attempt to reduce representation into a play of interchanging points of view, or into a complete separation of 'pure' imagination from vision. On the contrary, the painting depicts the complex meditation on vision, which has to change its inner structure, since it cannot rely on any exterior objectivity (*per se*), by showing its complex network of references between consciousness and alterity. In the pictorial surface, alterity – the nature, the room and also other works of art, which refer to the custom of that time of studying them at the Louvre Exhibitions – is brought back into the constitutive connection of subject and object. Every squared shape in the painting is a

synecdoche: it brings a part of the real inside the painting's decorative harmony. In this way the entire painting is the description of the process of creating art, by expression and simplification which entails the deep intentional unity of the polarities of experience.

After all, if in Impressionism and in Realism copying nature meant studying and representing effects of light or depth in relation to the light of atmosphere, now painting doesn't mean anymore 'imitating sun' but directly 'being sun' (Schneider 1984, 150). So, on one hand, the explosion of colors and light doesn't appear in relation to what the artist sees, but in relation to what he feels, directly from the decorative surface of the painting. On the other hand, the organization and harmony of the arabesque is represented by the color, the real protagonist of fauvist revolution: pure color against local tone (caused by the atmospheric light) and shaping.

An analysis of the complex function of color in Matisse's theory of art needs to step back to his masters and influences – here partially reported – in order to establish a connection between color and both of its functions we have just seen: manifestation of an expressive bond and construction of a pure artistic space as we saw for decoration.

According to Gaston Dihel's report of 1943 these two aesthetic conceptions are found in Matisse's statements<sup>9</sup>: «Je sens par la couleur, c'est donc par elle que ma toile sera toujours organisée. Encore convient-il cependant que les sensations soient condensées et que les moyens utilisés soient portés à leur maximum d'expression» (Schneider 1984, 195).

Feeling, as the condensed and simplified essence we talked above, is strictly linked to color. Matisse could have been influenced by Gustave Moreau, his master during his formative years at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, who suggested innovative approaches to painting, less bound to the academic copy of models, and who turned to the unity of technique and spirit in the sense of inner feeling sparking in touch with the reality for guiding inauthentic and false sensations, But Matisse's first experiments with the use of color don't seem to follow such systematic guidelines.

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<sup>9</sup> Even if these words belong to a later period (1943) and are distant from his fauvist years, here Matisse is referring to his studies conducted in that period on arabesque and color.

In 1898, the contact with the Mediterranean landscape and the light of Ajaccio in Corsica constitutes the artist's experience to what is emphatically called the 'revelation of the South' which corresponds to the revelation of sun and of that 'devouring god' that is color, as Schneider defines it (Schneider 1984, 114). The experience of the sun as a matter of fact separates Matisse from Moreau's dark and gloomy symbolistic realizations – even though he probably learnt the deep potential of the poetry of feeling from his master.

In the following years Matisse casts his new achievements with the use of color into different kind of compositions such as still life, landscapes, nudes; we could take *Modèle masculin* (1900) as an example, in which flaming orange brushstrokes interrupt the harmonic composition of the skin tones.

In his early years the artist still did not react against impressionistic and realistic laws of painting, so he had not attempted a use of color that could destroy mimetic representation in order to create its own disposition of shape yet. For this reason, he was most likely searching for a particular technique that could allow him to find a compromise between the permanence of object figuration and the explosion of pure colors on canvas, a solution that he could have possibly found in Paul Signac's pointillist theory. After the death of Georges Seurat, the authority of Signac was declining until his book *De Delacroix au Néo-impressionisme* had been published on the *Revue blanche* in January 1989. Its great success brought a lot of young painters to look into the pointillist theory. Matisse's need for a use of color escaping mimetic representation was able to be coupled with the arrangement of objects possessing realistic forms thanks to the intuitions put forth from this very style of painting.

In his work *Buffet et table* (1899) Matisse experiments with this technique, but his colors appear very distant from the scientific accuracy of pointillism, that was well known for its juxtaposition of the complementary colors of the prism in order to create the colored surface. Matisse seems undecided in following a use of color close to an expression of feeling or rather another one that is informed by chromatic theory. For this reason, according to Schneider, Matisse creates a picture which doesn't possess neither the freedom of feeling nor the rigor of theory, despite his initial enthusiasm towards a technical and scientific method of painting:

Cette nouvelle technique fit une grande impression sur moi: la peinture avait enfin été ramené à une formule scientifique; on rompait avec l'empirisme qui l'avait précédé [...] mais en réalité je savais très bien que qu'une oeuvre exécuté selon les moyens qu'offrait cette méthode était limitée par une trop grande adhésion à des règles strictement logiques. (Matisse 1972, 131)

The way in which he references to empiricism with a negative connotation means once again that Matisse distances himself from both the Impressionistic Movement and its prosecution represented by Neo-Impressionism: the pointillistic scheme for him is not able to give a proper material foundation to the elements of the image, but still remains 'external' to it by reducing itself to crossing its surface in the same way as the impression of light does.

In this way Matisse, by abandoning the methods of Neo-Impressionism, also abandons the pursue for verisimilitude to real appearances, because for him what is crucial in the image is the representation of the relation between the object and the artist's subjectivity, the power he has in organizing his feelings and emotions.

In following this principle the artist refers to nature not to copy it but to find what could impress him directly<sup>10</sup>. For that purpose Collioure, Nice, Saint-Tropez – and, in his later voyages, Algeria and Morocco – become the source of light and colors from which to draw, taking to the extreme the use of traditional local tone, to the point of being completely substituted by pure colors.

We are not in the presence of an attempt to completely abandon nature and real things, but rather the will of representing things through expression, a unique way to perforate the surface of real appearance by consequently revealing the compromise between things of the world and the artist. In this sense Matisse wants to get deeply in contact with nature, by expressing the feeling of inner unity through a painting which refuses any artifice of apparent depth, because, contrary to Neo-Impressionism that em-

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<sup>10</sup> This point is also confirmed in the dialogue between Matisse and Moreau in: «En un mot je voulais me comprendre moi même. A la sortie du Louvre, en traversant la Seine sur le Pont des Arts, je voyais d'autres sujets à mon art. 'Eh bien, que cherchez vous donc?' me demanda un jour mon maître Gustave Moreau. 'Quelque chose qui n'est pas au Louvre, mais qui est là' ai-je répondu en montrant du doigt les péniches sur la Seine. [...] En fait, ce que je voyais au Louvre n'agissait pas sur moi de façon directe» (Matisse 1972, 81).



phasizes the subject of the composition by overlapping secondary planes, for Matisse, «le sujet d'un tableau et le fond de ce tableau ont la même valeur [...] seule compte la composition, le patron général [...] combinaison qui a pour résultat de créer une expression» (Matisse 1972, 131-132). We are at the intersection between color and decorative painting. Colors and arabesques have therefore become the actors in the construction of the painting:

Construction par surfaces colorées. Recherche d'intensité dans la couleur, la matière étant indifférente. Réaction contre la diffusion du ton local dans la lumière. La lumière n'est pas supprimée mais elle se trouve exprimée par un accord des surfaces colorées intensément. [...] La couleur était proportionné à la forme. La forme se modifiait selon les réactions des voisinages colorés. Car l'expression vient de la surface colorée que le spectateur saisit dans son entier. (Matisse 1972, 94-96)

This correspond neither to Paul Gauguin's colored and passionate surfaces which lack a deep meditation on the inner structure of the painting, nor to Van Gogh's way of expressing violence and pathos through color. Matisse is much closer with two main points of Paul Cézanne's theory of art and technique: the construction of the image as a relation of forces and the representation of light through equivalent colors, considering art a parallel of harmony in nature.

As a matter of fact, Cézanne wanted to express nature by constructing an image in which things are reduced to their structural and geometrical elements that never directly appear in nature, so in this way, by emphasizing them, he could reveal the essential aim of nature. From his point of view the creative act, which wants the deep and hidden reality – in the sense of concrete structure – of the world to emerge, truly becomes the same act that expresses a subjective pictorial style in contact with the surrounding nature and inexhaustible possibilities that can arise from looking at it.

The artist's hand and mind aren't hidden anymore, so that while he wants to investigate and uncover the architecture of the world, he is led to construct an image, a pure creation of spirit in touch with nature.

«Tout est, en art surtout, théorie développée et appliquée au contact de la nature. On parle plus en effet de peinture et peut-être mieux en étant sur le motif, qu'en devisant de théories purement spéculatives, – et dans lesquelles on s'égare assez souvent»

(Cézanne 1937, 253). Cézanne shows the primary connection of the world's sensitive material and consciousness that do not submit the first to his categories, but meet the implicit meaning of an experience made of qualitative affordances, construed as colors and shapes before being quantitative and measurable things. Merleau-Ponty in the essay *Le doute de Cézanne* shows that Cézanne paints landscapes as a 'nascent organism', revealing the object in its essential appearing into experience, the common and essential ground to any possibility of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty 1966, 27-44). Cézanne tries to translate this meeting with nature by concealing any reference to a simulated depth in the two-dimensional construction of colors and lines; in other words he tries to register nature not as it appears through perspective and in this way he obtains an image in which objects are deformed under the two contrary forces of conservation of depth and of the artist's innovative constructing intervention on the canvas' surface.

Matisse deeply understands Cézanne's lesson and, while Cézanne appears still indebted to the representation of a model, pushed inside the polarity of the object and its copy, Matisse instead follows a similar logic of color and of arabesque that will bring him to decorative art.

Color organizes the entire composition that is expression of the strength of lifeworld qualities stemming from the artist's expressive *Leib*. The subject stands in an expressive unity with his object – the dynamic fullness of sense – and cannot escape from its perennial interrogation. From this point of view, the sense that arises from experience doesn't proceed through prepositional language or concepts: it is ambiguous and opaque, because it is always changing its stratification as it is in touch with the dynamic potentialities of the body. The only authentic way to grasp this sense is to fix its origin into the dynamic configuration of the work, which, as we will see, implies temporality.

*Madame Matisse, portrait à la raie verte* (1905), a painting of the fauvist period, offers an example that is able to clarify the assertions made above. The painter's wife, the realistic subject of the image, appears only through an order determined by colors. Therefore there is a process of simplification of the model, in the sense that the figure doesn't emerge from lines or defined forms, but is becomes completely 'consecrated' to color. The sacredness of this simplified model is highlighted by Schneider who compares the hieratic majesty of Madame Matisse to a sort of goddess who

projects light from within. The image shines thanks to the strength of colors and appears as something that originates from a direct contact with reality, but which is now completely separated and existent only as a colored surface: as a matter of fact the entire figure comes harmonically to life from the non-realistic green surface, taking the place of the *chiaroscuro* of the nose.

Building a decorative image means organizing the composition through arabesque and color in order to express the deep feeling of life that unifies subject and object and that sees nature, or even better, experience, as the original source of sense.

### 3. Art of the sacred, art of the origins

Pure colors, arabesque, simplification of the motif, condensation of impressions and stability of feeling in touch with nature: this is Matisse's approach towards expression.

As Schneider suggests, the significance to Fauvism is the construction of images and at the same time the destruction of representations, looking at that particular decorative painting in which laws of color and shapes substitute the laws of making a preexistent object present in picture.

With Matisse we tried to demonstrate, or, even better, to describe in what sense the poetry of Realism and Impressionism represents the shimmering external appearances of reality, while the poetry of expression – that mostly represents indoor environments and human figures that resist to the flowing of nature – tries to grasp the inner emotional sense of the relation with nature. Nevertheless being in touch with the possibilities grounded in the natural world, which we phenomenologically call intentional relation and alterity constitution, doesn't mean to refute dynamism and temporality.

The stability of sensations through the eidetic simplification of the motif doesn't coincide with any poetry of the static. As in Cézanne the landscape is seen in its original movement like a rising organism that turns towards the spectator, Matisse's painting is the search for the harmonic movement of forces and not a static organization, corresponding to the powerful and musical harmony resulting from the encounter of arabesque and color<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact it is not coincidental that Matisse's intention to attempt a form of painting as a dynamic structure of forces has been formulated while looking at Cézanne's painting *Trois baigneuses* (1879-1882), bought in 1899 during his stay in

In both cases painting is a way to represent the constitutive movement of the unity between subject and object that occurs within experience, and, as we mentioned in the first paragraph, its temporal dimension. If in Cézanne time and movement are strictly connected to the particular way of representing nature in its proceeding of formation, in Matisse the question becomes: how to make the dynamic rhythm of the arabesque composition bring what we may define as a 'sacred' stability and reconcile the tensions present in the painting?

A first answer could be the fact that letting pure pictorial means live by themselves in the decorative order is – as for the theme of the window – a way to make the pictorial work talk about its own creation and its temporal origin.

The long-lasting studies on the model we mentioned at the beginning, as a method through which the structure of the object is grasped even when it is not there anymore<sup>12</sup>, is the proceeding of the artist in which his temporality is penetrated and submerged by the temporality of the lifeworld, allowing this temporal genesis to be expressed in the instantaneous view of the decoration.

This point becomes even more evident when a particular feeling experienced during the artist's voyages is painted. For example, *Le nu bleu, souvenir de Biskra* (1906) is about the short period spent in Algeria represented directly through the artist's recollection. For Matisse the dimension of voyage is not the occasion to find new subjects for his art, but a way to call into mind and to accumulate sensations through the living time of consciousness that will then allow to express them later. It is significant for this point that nothing in Matisse's *Nu bleu* is typically exotic or even referable to an exotic atmosphere: the painting has been completed once he got back to France, by meditating on the memory of the meeting of that 'wonderful light' and 'inhuman nature', as he described them. From this perspective temporality is not removed, but it is reacquired in a new sense, since for Matisse art must describe the original temporality of experience. This tem-

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Toulouse. See in particular: «[Les Trois baigneuses] est savoureuse de couleur et de métier et par le recul elle met en évidence la puissance de l'élan de ses lignes et la sobriété exceptionnelle de ses rapports» (Matisse 1972, 134).

<sup>12</sup> See in particular: «Il faut que je sois si pénétré, si imprégné de mon sujet, que je le puisse dessiner les yeux fermés [...] Mon travail consiste à m'imbiber des choses. Et après ça ressort» (Matisse 1972, 227).

poral dimension is precisely where perception itself originates, emerging as the constitutive relation of expression.

Matisse's discovery of the temporality of the origin – as the condition of possibility of experience - found in Eastern art, coincident with his discovery of pure colors, does not come from a direct contact with the East *per se*, but from a conceptualization of it, in which Islamic, Persian and Byzantine cultures and their artistic styles are brought together in the artist's memorial recollection, not to simplify their specificity, but to grasp their common elements in opposition to Western stylistic features.

Referring to this last point, it has to be kept in mind that during Romanticism it was not uncommon for artists to travel towards the East and paint what they had seen. In this way the exotic elements present in romantic paintings depicting oriental scenes and subjects were only a way to remember them, or to show them once the artists got back from the voyage. These scenes can be defined as merely folkloristic: they represent the Orient through a typically western realistic style of painting, without ever meeting the oriental principles of artistic creation.

However, around 1870 – and, paradoxically, when the Suez Canal opened in 1896 – many painters lost interest in travelling and representing realistic exotic landscapes or scenes to concentrate solely on an artistic research based on pure pictorial means, Paul Gauguin possibly being the only exception. This applies also to Matisse, since he is not concerned in going towards exotic places to find new representational objects. Some of the greatest influences from the East on the French painter is represented by Japanese drawings thanks to some printings he had in 1890, and most of all by some Islamic artifacts from North Africa seen at Universal Exhibition in 1900. Indeed, from Matisse's standpoint, there is no point in travelling, since it is nothing more but another way of seeing things from an external point of view, while artistic creation needs to live and to feel the temporal and original relation with things.

The centrality of oriental iconography represents another answer to our question regarding the possibility to connect the temporal dynamic with the search of stability. As a matter of fact, painting the time of origins, as the Golden Age of humanity, and inflecting this theme into extremely decorative figures represent a second way to conciliate the stability of the form with the dynamic essence of time.

Islamic art is characterized by mobility and lightness – the very signs of their nomadic ancestry – freed of any kind of weight or restraint of the rhythm of the composition, which therefore expands and dissolves on the surface of the image.

Any realistic figure is abandoned since it refers to its own meaning of ‘depicting something existent in reality’, while the purpose of abstract, zoomorphic and floral motifs is to link the earthly dimension to the sacred one through the recreation of the Garden of Eden (this is particularly common in several Eastern cultures, not only the Islamic one). On this specific point decorative arabesques are characterized in way that they refer to something completely separated from everyday life and in this way they achieve the stability of the temporal dimension of the sacred.

Considering the deep meaning of oriental decorative art is important to understand how Matisse revisits it by then permeating the fauvist aesthetic achievements on feeling and on the construction of arabesque and pure color with this sacred art. From the iconographic point of view, the critic Georges Duthuit points out that the heavy presence of decorative surfaces in Matisse’s paintings could be seen as a reference to Persian carpets. From this point of view, decoration, from being the counterpart of the realistic depiction to being the representation of subject-world unity, completely invests the work that therefore becomes the surface of a Persian carpet or miniature, as, for example, in the painting *La famille du peintre* (1911).

For Matisse it nearly seems that life itself has a religious meaning: «Tout art digne de ce nom est religieux. Soit une création faite de lignes, de couleurs: si cette création n’est pas religieuse, elle n’existe pas» (Matisse 1972, 267). Consequently, if, as we said before, the process of artistic creation stems directly from a feeling of life, it is for this very reason that for Matisse any true art is art of sacred and of religion. Certainly he doesn’t mean any historical religion, even though he does refer to Islamic iconography. On the contrary, his *poiein*, his expressive operations on the material, is a form of questioning what does the painting stand for and what does it refer to, since in oriental art decoration refers to the divine through the creation of an edenic space that is then accessed in the viewer’s experience.

Working on the possibilities of decorative schemes and patterns – which means working on the relation between arabesque and color – Matisse *religat*<sup>13</sup>, connects, unifies the perception of lifeworld together with its sense-building to the capabilities of intentional subjectivity.

Matisse's non conceptual reflection on composition is the subjective contribution to get the order and stability that art requires to completely express a religious feeling of life.

The painter sees the Eastern pictorial style as an expressive gesture to rediscover in any painting the origin of art and the origin of experience. The art work seen in its unified totality, in its being a construction of the mind constitutively united with the lifeworld, could be then considered as a set of forces and structural lines that create a pictorial organism in which each part refers to the totality and not to any external content.

So the totality of the picture becomes a symbol, a non-dialectical unity of the opposites that searches for stability at every attempt put forth by the act of painting. The symbol indicates a sense that goes beyond itself and, referring to what Merleau-Ponty says in *Le langage indirect et les voix du silence*, if representation shows a sense that existed before the act of painting it, decorative – as well as symbolic – art reveals through its organic order the condition of possibility from which a new sense could emerge into the field of vision; this new sense being the original relation of feeling that can unify the lifeworld with the corporeal subject.

From this phenomenological perspective, the theoretical – but also ideal and spiritual – side of art is embodied in the non-figurative work that refers to the creative process of decorative pure lines and colors, and what is revealed is the complexity that lies beyond the origin of Matisse's decorative art, which symbolically depicts the origin of the rising sense of experience.

In this sense, paintings become icons (Franzini 2008) of the original and indicate the borders of the sacred space of expression and of the sacred time of the Golden Age, as we see in *Le bonheur*

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<sup>13</sup> We refer here to one of the many etymological roots of the term 'religion' that is the Latin verb *religo* which means to 'connect', to 'relate' the material with the spiritual. Applied in the field of art we are examining in the present research, it refers to the connection between the processual birth of the work of art's external appearance with its ideal and eidetic content.

*de vivre* (1905-1906). Here Matisse re-elaborates the myth of the Golden Age of humanity figuring edenic joy, happiness and tranquility. Here he doesn't simply revisit this myth but he also creates a decorative structure in which the feeling of the origin – that of experience where, as we have shown above, subject and object are united – could be condensed, purified, enabling it to refer to the permanent and immeasurable time of the Eden, that is for Matisse the source of any kind of creative act. In this way, only decoration can make present the dimension of the sacred, since decorative art, for Matisse, is a kind of meta-reflection on the creative process of art itself, that renders possible a form of reactualization of the origin.

If truth finds its foundation in the ambiguous ground of the experience, always building and destroying phenomena through temporality, the permanent and stable time of the origin indicates the time of eidetic and theoretical reflection on the possibility of experience and human activity, firmly rooted in the temporality of the lifeworld. For this very reason, Matisse speaks about the courage of leaving everyday appearances in the painting, because

ce courage est indispensable à l'artiste qui doit voir toute choses comme s'il les voyait pour la première fois: il faut voir toute la vie comme lorsqu'on était enfant [...] C'est un premier pas vers la création, que de voir chaque chose dans sa vérité, et cela suppose un effort continu. (Matisse 1972, 321)

*Le bonheur de vivre* is the first attempt to conciliate decorative shapes with the theme of the sacred, but from 1906 to 1910 Matisse takes different details and singular scenes from this painting and creates individual pictures out of them. It is possible to see this in *La danse* (1909-1910) and in *La musique* (1910) where the extreme simplification of lines and the use of limited colors in flat surfaces creates numinous images that irradiate towards the viewer as if they were an epiphany of the divine. The first two panels of a triad commissioned by the Russian collector Sergei Shchukin that were intended for decorating the staircases of his home in an ascending order, outline a sort of edenic passage from the dancers' physical activity to the singers' interior activity.

Even though this project had not been completed, a third panel has been identified by critics in the first version of the painting *Les baigneuses sur une rivière* (1909, final version in 1916), that was carried out with the same colors of the first panels and



then covered. Later on it had been instead individuated with the absolute stillness and contemplative activity of the *Café arabe* (1913).

It must be noted that in this context contemplation doesn't refer to a speculative reason or abstract thought, but to the original activity of the subject in creating a decorative work of art.

The painting *La conversation* (1911) could be seen instead as a *summa* of Matisse's aesthetic theory. The theme of the 'window-picture' is still proposed in a complete flat surface which hosts an everyday life scene: a dialogue between Matisse himself and his wife. This painting should be rather called 'an interrupted dialogue', because external nature bursts inside the room – acquiring a decorative style, as we described above – and discloses the dialogue with the lifeworld seen as the foundation of any painted conversation. Nevertheless here the window appears as the intervention of the sacred, that 'religious feeling of life' that interrupts any prosaic conversation between the two main characters who are contemplating objects that could be found in a traditional still life (fruits and fishbowl). But now both characters and objects are incorporated into decoration, realizing the same contemplation we saw in the *Café arabe*.

Through the window, the field of experience (which is not grounded merely on vision but on the correspondence of all senses which generate the feeling of life) can appear on the painting, reinstating a new dialogue between the lifeworld and the artist, translating itself into the construction of a creative gesture. Figuring the dialogue or creating pictorial symbols doesn't solve the dichotomy between the disorder of nature and the order of mind: *poiesis* is situated between the two poles and only in this very interspace it is possible, fluctuating and balancing between necessity and fortuity.

In *La conversation*, through the bright, numinous and prominent outward window, and also in *La danse*, through the stretching of the hands of the two dancers who are trying to close a circle that consequently remains open. These symbols correspond to an incomplete synthesis in which Matisse hints to two different openings to the lifeworld, that both correspond to the possibilities of creation stemming from the feeling of life and from the connection with the various stratifications of alterity.

This same point is stressed by Matisse himself: «Ce qui importe ce n'est pas tant de se demander où l'on va que de chercher

à vivre avec la matière, de se pénétrer de toutes ses possibilités [...] respecter la grandeur et le caractère sacré de toute chose vivante» (Matisse 1972, 195-196).

As a matter of fact, in this context, possibility, as it arises from sense and time in the lifeworld, corresponds to the excluded middle that expression can bring to light and translate into the silent language of painting that goes in two directions. One, as the possibility of escaping, which is an outer movement that follows and penetrates nature through instinct and feeling; the other, its inner correlate, as possibility of returning, since feeling is already a kind of reflection that is constituted through the artistic construction of a new sense, thus describing that double movement that is the expression of the origin.