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# Henri Matisse's "The Red Studio": Art as Real/The World as Illusion

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Alyssa Johnson

*Henri Matisse's The Red Studio: Art as Real/the World as Illusion*

Throughout the history of art, imitation has been favored over all else. This tradition dates back to Plato and his insistence on *mimesis*, or imitation, and *techne*, or hand skill, as the only characteristics that made art remotely worthwhile. Plato's distaste for art comes as no surprise; his entire system of philosophy revolved around the Forms – perfect, unreachable ideals which earthly things may imitate and in which they may partake, but can never fully achieve. The things of this world, for Plato, were mere shadows of the Forms, and therefore, depictions of things in art were shadows of those shadows. Although numerous positions have been taken against this view in the history of art, Plato's insistence on *mimesis* has remained one of, if not the, most influential ways of viewing art. We see evidence of this in contemporary exhibits which offend, as well as in the opinions of those who disregard abstract art because “their five-year-olds could have made it.” In his *The Red Studio* of 1911, Henri Matisse shatters these norms and expectations when he depicts a room with only the color red and utterly simplistic line. This is certainly not classic *mimesis*, and thus, Matisse is making a deliberate break from tradition; in fact, he states very straightforwardly in an essay, “I had to get away from imitation.”<sup>1</sup> The only items in the room that are rendered in a realistic way and in full color are the artworks, art objects, and art tools therein; in a move of irony and brilliance, and against all tradition, Matisse has depicted artworks, which have throughout history been considered mere shadows of real life, as the only “real” aspect of the room.

Henri Matisse is known for his radical relationship with color and edge – his works tend toward bold lines and outlines and all-encompassing, unapologetic color. This turn toward abstraction begins fairly early in his career. Although Matisse was formally trained and highly skilled, he never showed any particular fondness for direct mimesis, instead choosing to focus on brilliant color and bold line. In fact, when the term “Fauvist” was applied to Matisse and his paintings, instead of being offended that people thought he painted like an animal (as the word implies), Matisse embraced the name and began self-identifying as such. His subject matter was often chosen based on its potential to contain the patterns and colors that he desired, and it is often suggested that everything else in his artworks – including human beings – were simply props that allowed him to play with these patterns that he so adored. Even when, in old age, Matisse found himself unable to paint, he turned to *découpage*, which allowed him to maintain his propensity for vibrant color and bold line even after his original medium was no longer an option. One early example that exhibits Matisse’s particular love of color is *The Red Studio* of 1911.

*The Red Studio* is covered in a deep, cool, rich red, which contains slight variations within it but does not change in hue or saturation to denote the changing planes of the room (i.e. floor to wall or floor to table). On this red background, Matisse has made several thin white lines in order to indicate the distinction among objects in the room. He differentiates between the wall and the floor with one line, outlines the table with another, uses a third to depict the outline of a stool, and so on. Although these lines are mostly white, there are some areas with a blue or yellow hue; this adds interest to the line and some slight suggestions of depth without detracting from its simplicity or efficacy. Instead of placing a line between the two converging

planes at the corner of the walls, Matisse places a large painting in the corner directly where the planar shift takes place. This makes it clear that although the line between the floor and the wall is certainly useful in telling the viewer where one plane ends and another begins, Matisse would be able to depict a convincing sense of solid three-dimensionality even without this tool by the careful use of perspective and placement of objects. None of this is accidental. Matisse himself states, in his essay “The Path of Color,”

I had to get away from imitation, even of light. One can provoke light by the invention of flat planes, as one uses harmonies in music. I used color as a means of expressing my emotion and not as a transcription of nature. I use the simplest colors. I don't transform them myself, it is the relationships that take care of that. It is only a matter of enhancing the differences, of revealing them.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, he does include the thin, basic lines, and he delineates all of the structural aspects of the room and all of the functional furniture in this manner.

Matisse greatly complicates spatial illusion within this painting by demonstrating the way in which one color and simple line can be used simultaneously to depict and suppress the three-dimensionality of the room. There is a very clear and solid sense of perspective in this painting despite its unconventional rendering. Similarly, the objects in the room all seem to rest firmly on the ground plane and in many ways contain mass despite their being mere outlines of forms. Matisse is able to use a single, thin white line to differentiate between floor and wall, and to depict a tablecloth. At the same time, however, the line is broken in very small ways, causing the floor to “bleed” into the tablecloth and vice versa. Similarly, if the furniture along the back wall were not set lower on the ground plane in order to depict their three-dimensionality, they would become mere decorations on wallpaper.

The only aspect of this room that is not depicted in simplistic color and line are the items pertaining to art in some way: the artistic tools on the table, the artworks hanging on and stacked against the walls, the sculptures, vases, the other three-dimensional decorations placed around the room, and the empty frames leaning against the back wall. As this is Matisse's studio, all of the artworks shown in this painting are his own works from the recent past. Some of the most famous of the pieces depicted in this painting include *Le Luxe II* of 1907, *The Young Sailor* of 1906, and *Nude with a White Scarf* from 1909. In these works, the viewer sees the capabilities of Matisse; it is important always to keep in mind that the simplistic rendering of the room is an intentional break with realism, not one due to lack of hand skill. The simultaneous calm background and lively paintings, along with the precise and skillful perspective lines, the defined palette, and the rendering of his own paintings in the painting all speak to his abilities. Although Matisse, in the artworks, uses more of a full-ranging palette as compared to the rest of the studio, the most space even in these full-color aspects of the painting is taken up predominantly by variations on red, blue, and yellow hues.

It should not be overlooked that these three colors – red, blue, and yellow – which are the only colors used in rendering the structural aspects of the room and are emphasized in the decorative items, are primary colors. Although the exact reasons for this use of vibrant primary colors are uncertain, his interest in color is not. According to Hilary Spurling, “Humiliation, failure and rejection gave depth and passionate urgency to his vision of radiant, liberated light and color.”<sup>3</sup> These three colors also have more strongly connoted emotions than other colors do – red for anger or passion, blue for sadness, and yellow for happiness. Although the painting is primarily red, it is a cool, stable red whose particular tonality seems to encourage calm thought

rather than violent passion. Perhaps, then, it is the combination of these three colors – and their extremely different emotional associations – that should be taken into consideration. By combining these primary colors and their seemingly opposing emotional implications, Matisse is able to convey a surprisingly convincing sense of balance and stability in this work. Just as he has very carefully selected and mixed different styles that could easily be considered contradictory, Matisse has also carefully selected for his palette highly contrasting colors with distinct, divergent associations, and has successfully created a harmonious image with them.

*The Red Studio* is further illuminated by comparing it to a similar work of Matisse's, *Harmony in Red*, of 1908. Much like *The Red Studio*, a rich, cool red covers the majority of the painting. Once again, there is little to no color shift from the red of the wall to the red of the table. Furthering this illusionistic ploy, Matisse repeats the same blue, organic decorations on both the tablecloth and the wall. Only a thin line, this time blue instead of white, delineates the meeting of the wall with the table, except where a nondescript blonde woman bends slightly over the table to set it, thus separating the wall and table with her placement between them. To the other side of the table is a single chair, pulled back from the table. This chair leads the viewer into the painting, almost as if it were offering him or her a seat. Behind this chair is a framed outdoor scene which presents a very similar conflation of two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality as the rest of the room. Extending this enmeshment of flatness and perspective, another chair back can be seen behind the table, which is ostensibly pressed against the wall; however, the only way for this to exist in the space in which it is set is for it to be mere decoration on the wallpaper. This suggestion does not seem so odd when one considers the

flower vases, quite similar to those resting on the table, that grace the wallpaper so high that they could not exist in real space without floating. Although flowers and vases are typical wallpaper motifs, whereas chairs are not, the curving blue line which runs up the wall just over the chair stops abruptly at the chair's top – something which would not happen if the chair were a three-dimensional object in the room rather than a decoration on the wallpaper. There is also the same predominance in this painting as in *The Red Studio* of the primary colors: yellow, blue, and red. These similarities between the two paintings should come as no surprise to the knowledgeable Matisse scholar, as he once said that “nothing prevents composing with a few colors, as in music that is built on only seven notes.”<sup>4</sup> This is a particularly revealing statement with regard to this second work, which is even called a “harmony.”

Although similar in concept, *Harmony in Red* and *The Red Studio* handle their spatial complication in very different ways. There is a clear sense of three-dimensionality in the table where it juts out in front of the woman in *Harmony in Red*, yet as the items regress into space, they become less and less three-dimensional; in *The Red Studio*, there is no attention paid to a different handling of those items in the back of the space versus those in the foreground. Instead of focusing on the position of the objects as the key to their two- or three-dimensionality, Matisse makes this decision based on the nature of the items themselves. This is very different from *Harmony in Red*, in which all of the objects in the room – not only those related to art – are portrayed in a more-or-less realistic way.

What is particularly significant about this comparison is the outdoor scene that Matisse paints in full color on the otherwise wholly red wall. This space has often been thought to

represent a window, but in light of *The Red Studio* of only three years later, it is vastly more intriguing to entertain the possibility that this is a painting hung on the wall; in fact, this interpretation seems more viable than its alternative. Whether or not Matisse is working in 2D or 3D in one area or another of this painting, he uses the same slightly stylized, yet still predominantly realistic, treatment. If he were attempting to depict an outdoor scene, why would everything in it – trees, ground plane, strip of flowers – be devoid of the lifelike handling that Matisse gives to the rest of *Harmony in Red*? It seems very much more likely that this framed section of the painting is handled so differently from the rest of the artwork and looks so much like proto-abstract art simply because that is what it is. In addition to this, the branches of the trees in this space almost exactly mirror the organic designs on the tablecloth, further promoting this notion that the tablecloth and the colored space on the wall belong to the same category: art.

Another important feature of this space is its frame. According to Meyer Schapiro, “When enclosing pictures with perspective views, the frame sets the picture back into depth and helps to deepen the view.”<sup>5</sup> Although this frame is not necessarily enclosing a picture with a convincing perspective view, this statement of Schapiro’s is working with the assumption that the scene around the painting is a museum or other physical space with real perspective, and thus, the frame is meant to differentiate between the perspectival world of the museum and the perspectival world of the painting. The same holds true for Matisse’s *Harmony in Red*, but with a twist – instead of differentiating between two scenes with convincing perspective, the frame is differentiating between two scenes with a similar lack of perspective; the artwork in Matisse’s painting is delivering a true representation of the world it inhabits. In the words of Schapiro, “It [the frame] is a finding and focusing device placed between the observer and the image.”<sup>6</sup>



Although the comparison of *The Red Studio* and *Harmony in Red* sheds light on many distinctive characteristics of Matisse's works, in general, and of *The Red Studio*, in particular, it does not account for the brilliance of the shift in reality that Matisse employs in this 1911 work. The application of the semiotic methodology, with a special emphasis on deconstruction, will allow for this aspect of *The Red Studio* to be uncovered. Semiotics assumes that art, language, and other cultural aspects are made up of signs that often have additional connotations beneath their literal denotation. This movement began with Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who developed a foundational theory about the structure of language which includes the *Signifier*, the *Signified*, and *Signification*. The *Signifier* is the symbol that represents the word, the *Signified* is the concept which that word represents, and *Signification* is the process of combining these two aspects of the term. According to Saussure, the relationship between the word itself and its meaning is completely arbitrary. In the words of Laurie Schneider Adams, "The real arbitrariness lies in the fact that language evolves according to its cultural context, rather than according to *a priori* concepts. In other words, language does not reflect reality; it constitutes reality."<sup>7</sup> According to the traditional semiotic theory which evolved from Saussure's work, language and art are made up of binary pairs, one of which is usually perceived as superior to the other. For example, in the pair light/dark, light is culturally favored. Similarly, in the pair real/fake, real is favored. In terms of art, it would perhaps be best to use a pair such as mimetic/abstract, wherein traditionally, the mimetic has been vastly favored over its partner and opposite.

Deconstruction is literally that – the taking apart of these binary pairs that must occur in order truly to understand the language or art at its most fundamental level. The purpose of

deconstruction is to shatter the preconceptions that one has about anything and everything. The very basis of this methodology is the fundamental fact that nothing can be pinned down as belonging firmly in a single category or even as having any specific meaning or purpose. The human mind seeks to grasp information by compartmentalizing it and honing in on the “essence” of the item which it is studying. Deconstruction insists that there is no such essence. To say that something has inherent meaning is merely a way for the human brain to attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible.<sup>8</sup> One of the most famous deconstructionist linguists is Jacques Derrida. Before delving into the highly complex aspects of Derrida’s linguistic theories, theory scholar John Caputo gives a summary of deconstructionist thought and methodology. This summary concludes with the following:

Whenever it runs up against a limit, deconstruction presses against it. Whenever deconstruction finds a nutshell – a secure axiom or a pithy maxim – the very idea is to crack it open and disturb this tranquility... One might even say that cracking nutshells is what deconstruction *is*. In a nutshell.<sup>9</sup>

Essentially, when one comes across one of these binary pairs which semioticians have recognized as permeating the everyday language and art of the world, one must take them apart – deconstruct them – or at the very least recognize that in any binary pair, one term will be consciously or unconsciously favored over the other.

Matisse, consciously or otherwise, is deconstructing many of these binary pairs. It is exactly this “disruption of tranquility” which Caputo speaks of that Matisse is after. In *The Red Studio*, not only is the realistic/unrealistic binary pair examined and turned on its head, it is utterly shattered. The two exist at once, in the same painting. That which is traditionally thought of as “real” is portrayed as “unreal,” whereas the art in the painting, which has

throughout history been viewed as something insubstantial and secondary to life, is depicted as the most solid, substantial, primary thing in the room. It is important to note that the artworks within the studio are not illusionistic, but are also abstracted from reality; thus not only a painting, but an *abstract* painting at that, is depicted as more “real” than the room itself.

There is also a twist to the content of the artworks within this painting – the art, which has traditionally been thought of as apart from the “real” world, is extremely organic in both the way it is depicted and in the things that it, itself, depicts. The most ambitious of the paintings visible in *The Red Studio* contain human figures, and of those, only one is clothed. These figures mimic each other in terms of their positions, leading the viewer’s gaze up and around the painting in a clockwise motion. All of these figures are gently twisted or otherwise mimic the organic curves of the plant in the foreground. In this way, the art in the studio is not only real, but is *alive*. Of the alive/dead binary pair, alive is surely the favored of the two, and Matisse both utilizes this to promote the art over its surroundings and dismantles this in its reversed application. Furthering this conflation of the organic with the inorganic is the fact that this living vine that curls around the non-living sculpture is one of Matisse’s paintings that has literally come to life. *Le Geranium* is a painting from 1910 in which a very similar vine is depicted. Although this could simply be the still-life that Matisse used for his painting – this is his studio, after all – it is not unreasonable to suggest that he is quite plainly making his art real. Here, then, Matisse is depicting the “unreal” as “real” even more blatantly than in the inversion of the room and its art.

Matisse does not stop with reversing the main binary pair of real/unreal in this painting, but instead permeates the entirety of *The Red Studio* with the reversal of any and all binary pairs therein. One such inversion takes root in the conventional associations of the color red, which has traditionally been used to suggest anger, passion, or violence; this painting is almost entirely red and yet shows a calm, quiet scene. This idea is enhanced by the writings of Hilary Spurling, who states, “Matisse required from art the serenity and stability life could not give... he wrote in 1908 that he dreamed of an art that would console the mind and sustain the spirit as a good armchair relieves physical tension.”<sup>10</sup> Another reversal in this painting is the binary pair of white/black. In the original *Le Luxe II* of 1907, the three human figures are Caucasian, whereas in *The Red Studio* of only four years later, those same three figures are depicted with dark skin. With all these challenges to the traditionally privileged views of his subjects, including the traditional associations of red, the white/black binary pair, and the favoring of the organic over the inorganic, Matisse is not only calling into question the notion of art as mimetic and the traditional valuing of the “real” over art, but is also taking everything that the viewer has learned to expect and reversing it.

This shattering of norms that Matisse embraces in *The Red Studio* is a deliberate one. He was an extremely intelligent, well-educated man, and his art is a clear reflection of that intellect. He was formally trained both in art and in the law, and he knew a great deal about the world around him. However, he, like many other artists of the time, claimed to subscribe to the widespread notion that truly to behold the world, one must view it through the eyes of a child – a clean slate. In his essay entitled “Looking at Life with the Eyes of a Child,” Matisse writes,

The effort needed to see things without distortion demands a kind of courage; and this courage is essential to the artist, who has to look at everything as though he were seeing it for the first time: he has to look at life as he did when he was a child and, if he loses that faculty, he cannot express himself in an original, that is, a personal way. To take an example, I think that nothing is more difficult for a true painter than to paint a rose, since before he can do so, he has first to forget all the roses that were ever painted.<sup>11</sup>

Although this claim is understandable in the context of the times in which he was living, it is clearly only that – a claim. This twentieth century emphasis on naivety came about as a way to battle the notion that there could be no more originality within a tradition that seemed to have exhausted itself; it was a very popular idea to support publicly. However, to look through the eyes of a child is not to seek originality, just as much as to wish for a fresh, personal perspective is not to wish for a complete annihilation of all one has learned. Matisse's sophisticated handling of the conflation of two- and three-dimensionality in these two paintings speaks nothing of innocence but rather screams of skill, ingenuity, and a true understanding of his subject matter, all three of which are difficult to associate with the truly innocent. Much as he may wish for it, or at the very least claim to wish for it, there is no getting away from the issues of a world and of an art tradition that have for all time favored a type of art – strict *mimesis* – which Matisse is not interested in embracing. Even if he is seeking a fresh perspective which he can truly call his own, within that viewpoint there remains a clear challenging of cultural and historical norms. It is perhaps only in seeking to disable and deconstruct the traditional assumptions of art's binaries – literally, not to see it – that Matisse can claim “the eyes of a child.”

Although Matisse is certainly defying convention in *The Red Studio*, it is not possible to assert that he is a true “deconstructionist.” At the time of these paintings, the movement did not

yet formally exist; Jacques Derrida, who is attributed with starting the deconstructionist movement, would not begin to formulate his theories until the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> That is not to say, however, that Matisse is not pulling apart aesthetic expectations. Saussure's linguistic theory was contemporary with Matisse,<sup>13</sup> and as a well-educated man, it is probable that Matisse would have known about his important linguistic and philosophical movement; at the very least, semiotics would have been "in the air" and likely to have attracted artists interested in the rejection of traditional notions of reality. Thus, even without the deconstructionist movement with which to ally himself, Matisse is deconstructing before his time as the point and purpose of paintings like *The Red Studio* and *Harmony in Red*.

Ever since Plato discredited all art that was not mimetic, artists have struggled against this preconception as the appropriate form and role of art. Despite this, it is the classical ideals that have largely prevailed in both art history and in the eyes of the general public throughout the centuries. In *The Red Studio* of 1911, Henri Matisse makes another attempt to shatter these norms when he depicts a room using only the color red and utterly simplistic line. Yet Matisse does this in a particularly skillful way – he does not make a complete break with reality. By maintaining a sense of perspective and using familiar objects, Matisse forces the viewer to question his/her expectations of art in a non-confrontational way. This is often much more subtle and effective than an obvious attempt to prove a point. In a brilliant and somewhat ironic move, by making a deliberate break from tradition and depicting the artworks in the painting as the only "real" aspects of an otherwise "unreal" room, Matisse is able to call into question all of the prejudices against art while still maintaining his audience – a truly impressive feat and key to his great importance in the emergence of a fully modern art.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Matisse and Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1995), 178.

<sup>2</sup> Matisse and Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 178.

<sup>3</sup> Hilary Spurling, "Two for the Road," *Art in America* 91, (2003): 81.

<sup>4</sup> Matisse and Flam, 178.

<sup>5</sup> Meyer Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," *Semiotus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History* 6, (1972): 7.

<sup>6</sup> Schapiro, "On Some Problems," 7.

<sup>7</sup> Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 135.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 31-32

<sup>9</sup> Derrida and Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Spurling, "Two for the Road," 81.

<sup>11</sup> Matisse and Flam, 218.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Klages, *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 57

<sup>13</sup> Klages, *Literary Theory*, 32.