

# Matisse Wins!

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Matisse and Picasso, the two biggest lions of modern art, go head to head in the recently opened *Matisse Picasso* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in its temporary headquarters in Queens, New York. Although there have been a few earlier Matisse-and-Picasso exhibitions, this one, with 132 works, is the largest and most magnificent exhibition of its kind ever mounted. (The show appeared in somewhat smaller form last year in London and Paris.) The art in the show spans a period from 1906-1961, but the exhibition concentrates on paintings from the 1910s and the 1920s, when the rivalry between Matisse and Picasso was most public and people who knew and cared about modern art came down strongly on the side of one artist or the other.

The artists' works (mostly paintings) are hung side by side according to their supposed affinities. The curators say they're presenting the exhibition not as a competition between Matisse and Picasso, but rather as an opportunity to see their reciprocal influence. The curatorial concept is that the intense artistic rivalry between these artists—often involving a specific picture painted in direct response to one the other had just painted—fueled the artists' individual artistic drives, propelling them toward

ever greater brilliance and originality. I asked Kirk Varnedoe and John Elderfield, the American members of the six-member curatorial team that put together the exhibition (there were also two in London and two in Paris), who they thought was the better artist, Matisse or Picasso. "In five years, the question never came up," Mr. Varnedoe answered, and Mr. Elderfield, nodding in agreement, repeated, "The question never came up."

Although this curatorial approach doesn't preclude judgment, it deliberately avoids it. For us painters, however, the question of who's the better artist is the heart of the matter. When we were young and in art school, of course, we slogged through art history courses using our professors' apples-and-oranges approach to art: "Here's Michelangelo, here's Raphael. See how similar and yet how different they are from one another, and yet both are equally great." Art historians recoil from making judgments about who's a greater artist, always maintaining their aesthetic distance. But once we're let loose and on our own, we painters think about art in terms of who's good, better and best. We work from gut feelings. To look at paintings non-judgmentally through iconography, biography, source quotations, social issues, formal

issues, structuralism, post-structuralism, visual culture—you name it—and never judge them is to squeeze the juice out of art, to become Nietzsche's eunuchs guarding the harem, robbed of raw feeling for the sensuousness right before our eyes. We painters have to find other ways to get at paintings besides disinterested comparison.

And that way is to feel our personal taste. In both making paintings and looking at them, we painters always begin from our own taste. What keeps us from becoming complete aesthetic bigots is that we're always on the alert for art to surprise our given taste. And it often does. It was the ur-minimalist painter Piet Mondrian, for example, who insisted to Peggy Guggenheim that she show Jackson Pollock in her Art of This Century gallery in the 1940s. He explained to her that just because he painted a certain way didn't mean he expected everyone else to do the same. As an artist, I owe my entire painting structure of flat synthetic-cubist space to Picasso; my personal taste is generally for crisp, small brushmarks over loose, messy ones and clean over mushed edges. You'd think I'd emerge from this exhibition, then, preferring Picasso to Matisse. But I emphatically prefer Matisse!

Matisse is a natural at painting—the kind of artist who seems to have been born with a brush in his hand (even though he didn't begin painting until he was twenty). He concocted the kind of nuanced colors that almost can't be labeled. His loose and open brushstrokes flow around and across bounded shapes, as if they're exploring while they travel. Matisse

never tried to drive out nature from his pictures, but instead stayed with nature by bringing out its organic roundness no matter how much Picasso influenced him, and no matter how close he got to abstraction.

Picasso, on the other hand, strikes me as more of a sculptor than a painter. He's aggressively insistent that his invented shapes, which are often jagged and spiked, are the most important things in his paintings. And his paintings often consist of unmodulated graphic design colors of black, white, red, blue or yellow. Compared to Matisse's, Picasso's paint application is pretty stiff. Picasso's drawing talent (he famously said that he could draw like Raphael when he was 14—and he could), OMIT COMMA never translates fully into painting talent. He draws and sculpts naturally, freely and brilliantly, but he paints as if he's struggling to subdue a slippery, recalcitrant medium with sheer graphic inventiveness.

In the New York version of the show, Picasso's *Desmoiselles D'Avignon* (1907), and Matisse's *Three Bathers with a Turtle* (1908) hang side by side. Picasso's painting shocked every avant-garde artist of the day, including Matisse. In normal, rational terms, the space in the painting is incomprehensible. Everything in it is shard-like and psychologically aggressive. The ladies of the bordello areas are most of Picasso's painted women—grotesque and gawky. Moreover, they're painted in clashing styles as if collaged from wildly different sources. *Desmoiselles's* color is more or less an aside—a monochrome idea given a few flesh tones for flavor—and the paint application

is inconsistent and confusing.

Picasso never totally ignored nature by painting fully abstract pictures. "You always ought to keep an eye on real life," he said in 1935. But his art was based on shredding nature to bits, and then picking up its pieces to make his own frenzied constructions, his own crazy new world. Today, nine decades after Picasso's cubist revolution, most of us routinely approach nature like Picasso did. We refuse to see it as a whole, but instead consider it to be something to be taken apart and put back together according to our own personal tastes or theories. In other words, we, too, try to construct our own nature.

Matisse refused to join Picasso's revolution, even though it would have been a smart career move at the time. In his *Three Bathers with a Turtle*, nature defiantly rules. Of course, being thoroughly modern, Matisse bends nature—but doesn't break it—by looking inward toward his subjective experience and his own desires. The nudes in Matisse's painting are as deformed in their own way as Picasso's, but for all their deformity and gawky strangeness, they remain within the bounds of nature. They're round, they're painted with the complexity and nuance of nature's own color, and they're posited in space in such a way that we instantly understand what they're doing—sleeping, lounging, or posing coquettishly.

So, is my emphatically preferring Matisse to Picasso a simple case of my clinging timidly to a kinder, gentler modernism in the face of Picasso's aggressive avant-gardism? Well, I admit, partly. But I'm also gripped by Matisse's

profoundly painterly philosophy of the human condition. The nude standing in the middle of his *Three Bathers* carries—as round and naturally flesh-toned as she otherwise is—a deathly gray face. The ultimate impact of *Three Bathers* quite startlingly contradicts Matisse's own rule that a good painting should be as restful as an armchair is to a businessman at the end of a hard work day. Restful? This painting? This nude? She stands hunched over, gnawing incomprehensibly on her fist while she gazes down in terror at a cute little turtle crawling gently on the sand. Her horror is utterly inexplicable; the turtle isn't a monster but rather a small, slow, benevolent creature. What's Matisse's point? I think the painting ridicules the idea of anyone—perhaps even Picasso—ever completely understanding nature, let alone controlling it. In Matisse's view nature wins; nature always wins, and a true painter must acknowledge this.

"In the end there is only Matisse," Picasso said. A lot of people think his remark was disingenuous, and that Picasso nevertheless thought himself the better artist. But perhaps it was Picasso's rueful acknowledgment that, for all his artist's hubris, he'd come to terms with the fact that nature could never be driven out, even if the great Picasso himself wielded the pitchfork. Nature would always come back in. On this much, I side with Picasso: In the end, there is only Matisse.

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