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Henri Matisse and His Women Before the Window

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HENRI MATISSE AND HIS WOMEN BEFORE THE WINDOW:
A CONSIDERATION OF HIS NICE-PERIOD PAINTING

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Preface

Across the vast expanse of his nearly half-century career, Henri Matisse revealed his pursuit of both self and self-expression through a remarkably diverse collection of compositions that refuse formulaic classification. Honoring nothing other than his own rules and rhythms, Matisse looked to line, composition and color to offer his inimitable fingerprint and to articulate his emotions, his sensibilities and his analyses of bourgeois society and its actors.

Henri Matisse's Nice Period output (1918-1929) reveals a commanding theme of synthesis. During a moment of transition, the artist navigated the turbulent terrain of post-war Europe by way of his paintings - reconciling a host of the artist's musings upon a single canvas - from the his public commentary on bourgeois society in the wake of the Great War to very private, intimate considerations of his emotional condition. The distinct quality of duality survives as a guiding force throughout the course of Matisse's production of this decade in the South of France. However, despite the polarized conversation between the internal and the external, a unique and mesmerizing sensation of harmonious satisfaction permeates Henri Matisse's post war art. Marked by femininity, delicacy and a deliberate return to naturalism following a brief affair with abstraction, the sensual products of Nice boast cohesion between the internal and external, achieved by means of the window – a central motif throughout the collection. The dynamic integration of iconographical and symbolic elements provokes a great deal of curiosity, as the open window ushers in not only light, but also a host of open

interpretations. An exploration of the questions that both exist at the foundation and rest on the surface of Matisse's Nice Period paintings demand an intense consideration beneath the delightful facades, and into the historical and artistic context, as well as the artist's personal and artistic biography.

Chapter I: An Introduction to Matisse's Nice-Period Art

The kaleidoscope of Henri Matisse's varied work has eluded the confines of genre categorization. Though the artist pioneered a key aspect of the modernist movement in the early 20th century through his experimentations with bold color palettes and abstract form, his contributions to the evolution of the contemporary aesthetic could be considered to be more coincidental than anything else – he sought not to set trends, but to explore the depths of his own creativity. Arguably, Matisse looked to the future with a hunger for invention, while preserving a lasting loyalty to tradition and history. Beginning in 1905 with his iconic *Woman with a Hat (*figure 1), Matisse's fauvist compositions, marked by an intensity of saturated color, wild brushwork and simplification of forms, instigated a progressive energy that electrified the art world of the early 20th century.

However, in the wake of the Great War and the following decades, the momentum of modernism would evolve in myriad directions, from Cubism and Constructivism to Expressionism and Futurism, without the original innovator: Matisse. In fact, during his retreat to the South of France, Matisse was criticized for the allegedly degenerative qualities of his artistic output during his post-war Nice Period (1918-1929). His work of the time reflected the influence of Impressionism with a concentration on light, atmosphere, spontaneous brushstroke and leisurely subject matter. But, as was the case in much of Matisse's career, the judgments of art critics did not influence the artist's output; rather, with a commitment to realizing his own visions, Matisse continued to frame his reflections of the South of

France within his decorative interiors. As a result, the artist offered an extensive resume of his Nice-period art, replete with delectable color palettes, contemplative women and provocative questions.

In the reactionary years of post World War Europe, Matisse sought both physical and artistic refuge from the chaos that was consuming society. It was at this moment that the art community sought to reconcile the cruel complexities of warfare with a visual language that would mimic their internal disorder – a notion demonstrated specifically throughout the Dada movement. Alternatively, Matisse, who revealed in 1908 his dreams of creating "an art of balance, of purity, and serenity, devoid of troubling and depressing subject matter,"[1] retreated from the forefront of the art world in 1918, and at the height of his career, he extended a vacation in the South of France into a lifestyle. Escaping to Nice in search of psychic freedom, Matisse relished the intimate quarters of his hotel room-turned-studio where he explored his newly discovered – and certainly enhanced - reality, divorced from the agitated unrest of the post-war avant-garde art scene of Paris.

Having explored the depths of his radical creativity since 1913, as seen in the geometric simplicity, dark color palettes and abstracted forms of his experimental wartime compositions, by 1917, Matisse was eager for change,[2] a craving demonstrated in *Bathers by the River*, completed in that year (figure 2). The artist's desire for harmony and warmth brought a renewed sense of order and continuity to

[1] Catherine Bock-Weiss, *Henri Matisse: Modernist Against the Grain* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State Univeristy Press, 2009), 11.
[2] Radical Invention, Charting a New Course

the rudimentary, deconstructed organization that characterized his previous, more radical work.[3] In a marked departure from his earlier, large-scale decorative canvases and abstract constructions, Matisse's Nice Period paintings allowed for a reengagement with naturalism and unlocked the door (or window) to a modern, utopian world characterized by intimacy and transience. The French windows of Matisse's studio in Nice, poised above beaches and sea, ushered in blankets of pastel, northern light and the reigning atmospheric majesty of the Mediterranean, as demonstrated in his 1917 *Interior at Nice* (figure 3). Matisse's new setting had a tremendous influence on his style: his hybrid realist-impressionism[4] technique boasted a fluid, painterly manner marked by a sense of delicacy, purity and intimacy – sentiments that were echoed in his choice in subject matter. In a simultaneous investigation of interiority and surface aesthetics, the artist repeatedly paid homage to the motif of the contemporary woman, consumed in thought, as she gazes reflectively - either through the windows of her bourgeois interior or through the surface of the painting: at the viewer.

Matisse's compositions of the Nice Period were constructed according to a formula that united portraiture, landscape and interior genre scenes on a single canvas. The great visual success of the artist's output from this period, can be credited to his recycled blueprint, which was conceived around the iconography of the window. It is the window that invites the blond tonality of the Mediterranean light, which floods Matisse's canvases, and is achieved through a non-committal,

[3] Stephanie D'Alessandro and John Elderfield, *Matisse: Radical Invention, 1913-1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 310.
[4] Bock-Weiss 103.

sketchy application of paint. The sensation of detachment communicated through Matisse's spontaneous brushstroke simulates the condition of the modern young woman placed, though seemingly temporarily, within the decorative interior. The artist leaves us with the sensation that, should we turn our attention for the briefest of moments, she would have already escaped the confines of the frame and our gaze. The window proved itself, more provocatively, to be an essential device that provided an organizational structure for both the composition and the narrative as it married the interior and the exterior – or, more figuratively, the internal and the external.

Critics have repeatedly asserted of Matisse's Nice period output that the painter abandoned his role as the commanding figure of modernism in favor of the beautifully serene, yet superficial and empty compositions marked by an allegiance to leisure, aesthetic pleasure, and utopian fantasies, rather than provocative and progressive expressions. However, upon deeper consideration, Matisse's Nice paintings suggest an "art for theme's sake"[5] – investigating the very real juxtaposition of freedom versus confinement, explored through his renderings of the rootless female, who, despite her commitment to a social milieu through her hair and wardrobe styling, defies any definitive classification. She is contained within an interior, yet has access to the tangible world just beyond her window frame during a moment of unprecedented freedom for women, as her modern social role granted her increased liberty following the Great War. She is surrounded by the possibility of activities, as seen in *Woman with a Mandolin* (figure 4) yet involves herself only in

[5] D'Alessandro and Elderfield 316.

her own contemplations. Like Matisse's art, she reveals a duality: reconciling her responsibility as a simultaneous symbol of theatricality and absorption[6]. The woman is on-view, available, attentive – interacting directly with the viewer, but she is also adrift and absorbed in the prosaic setting of the boudoir, as well as the exclusive setting of her imagination.

The sensual beauty and wonder of Matisse's compositions intoxicates the onlooker through the mix of ephemeral sensations, and as a consequence, initially distracts him from a deeper investigation of subject matter. However, aesthetic and intellectual successes are not mutually exclusive -- in fact, the art's visual questions necessitate a more thorough reading of Matisse's work. Upon closer examination, the canvas quickly reveals that the artist employs the window and the contemporary female to pictorially translate the challenges and questions with which he had been struggling. Like the women that ornament his canvases, Matisse, too, confronted the dichotomous conversation of the human condition: the internal reality versus the external representation and how they might live harmoniously. Consequently, he looked to the window as a symbol of this discourse: "windows have always interested me because they are the passage between the interior and the exterior."[7] In spite of his attention to the internal, Matisse refused to relinquish control of the external - his image, (that of himself and his canvas) as he maintained a reigning sense of authority through his deliberate creations: the canvas and

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[6] Michael Fried, *Absorpotion and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.
[7] Martine Blanche, *Poetique des Tableaux chez Proust et Matisse* (Birmingham: Summa Publications, 1996), 88.

paintbrush were tools used to craft a picturesque world for the two realms of the psychic and the façade, connected by the window, to coexist.

Existing before and surviving after Matisse's sojourn in the South of France, the window maintained a critical role throughout the history of the artist's compositions, appearing in nearly 100 of his paintings.[8] Despite the unpredictable momentum of Matisse's diverse career, he continuously looked to the window as a powerful symbolic and compositional icon - from his fauvist oil paintings of the early 20th century, *Harmony in Red* of 1908 (figure 5) to such mid-century Vence interiors as *The Black Fern* of 1948, (figure 6). With an enduring respect for tradition, Matisse recognized the power of the window throughout the history of art, from the Renaissance to Romanticism, and explored the full range of expression that this iconographical program had to offer.

In *Rooms with a View*, Shirley Neilsen Blum considers the iconographical program of the window across the great expanse of Matisse's career. According to Blum, Matisse departs from visual tradition by employing the window as neither a gateway of the spectral nor of the spiritual[9], but instead, as a liaison between the interior and exterior world. Abandoning any notion of longing or nostalgia[10], the window does not tempt with distant promises of the world beyond the window, but instead, marries the figure and nature in one satisfyingly complete whole. In the process of pictorially translating the domestic interior, Matisse enhances the

[8] Shirley Neilsen Blum, *Henri Matisse: Rooms with a View* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2010), 11.
[9] Blum 15.
[10] Blum 16.

composition with his expressive reaction to the scene, which consequently transforms a mundane vision into an intoxicating paradise.[11]

Blum asserts that the commanding sensations of intimacy, buoyancy and harmony were devices to relieve the public from reality's tragic darkness.[12] Therefore, Matisse's art operated as a visual panacea for the challenges of contemporary social and political climates – a solution in and of itself (a notion specifically applicable to the artist's postwar Nice period products.) For Blum, the women, who punctuate the majority of Matisse's compositions in the South of France, are simply "self-absorbed, expressionless"[13] figures. She belittles them to the status of accessories – ornamental aspects that insignificantly occupy the domestic space, as if they were a vase of flowers. While the window undeniably works as a tool of cohesion to enhance the palpable sensations of a harmonic utopia, Matisse's Nice period paintings assume a greater responsibility than merely an opportunity of visual respite. Instead of explicitly announcing answers, Matisse's art of the postwar moment are questions begging to be uncovered – and the women, rather than vacuous details, take on a critical symbolic role, as mirrors of the expressions of both Matisse's mind and art.

Despite the frequency of the window throughout Matisse's prolific career and the complex issues it raised, the art of his Nice Period went widely unrecognized – and the little attention that they did receive was often negative. What was it that

[11] Blum 17.
[12] Blum 17.
[13] Blum 112.

was so disappointing about Matisse's graceful canvases? It could not have been the beautifully rendered interiors – or the engaging women that inhabited them. Perhaps it was Matisse's command of the color palette that managed to do justice to the perfect Mediterranean light? But that mastery deserved celebration, not condemnation. In their denial of the depth of emotionally communicative sub-layers that enhanced Matisse's decorative interiors, critics dismissed the Nice collection as vapid and regressive. However, the appreciation of both the formal and the expressive significance of Matisse's creations of the post-war era necessitates an extensive contextual consideration. Only when one understands the motif of the window throughout the history of art and in Matisse's own oeuvre and post-war milieu, can one celebrate the misunderstood brilliance and mystery of Matisse's Nice period masterpieces.

Chapter II: The Motif of the Window throughout History

The motif of the window, whose shape echoes the angularity of the canvas[14], has invoked significant representational license for centuries. Technically, the window within a painting operates as a framing device that grants pictorial access into both nature and the process of artistic creation. From allusions to the divine to subtle articulations of confinement and longing, the window has offered crucial exposure to the human condition, as well as the human's place within society.

A renewed interest in classical order and idealized form emerged in the age of the Renaissance. This rediscovered allegiance to pictorial illusionism welcomed the window as a tool to render focal point perspective and imitate the natural world on a two-dimensional surface[15]. Beyond its capacity as an illusionary agent, the window adopted religious associations during the 15th century: "as a natural source of light, the window easily lent itself to such metaphoric interpretation."[16] Robert Campin's *Merode Altarpiece* of 1425 (figure 7) transplants the scene of the Annunciation into bourgeois Flemish living quarters, suggesting great attention to perspectival illusionism through the complex architectural setting. The open windows, which expose vast, heavenly expanses and divine illumination, decisively enunciate the biblical references of the subject matter and welcome God's holy rays that magnificently impregnated the Virgin. In the case of the *Merode Altarpiece*, Campin looks to the window as a device to celebrate God's miracles through the

[14] Sabine Rewald, *Rooms with a View: The Open Window in the 19th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 5.
[15] Blum 6.
[16] Blum 7.

penetration of light, rather than as a division between the interior and exterior or the conversation between confinement and longing.

The religious symbolism of light and luminous windows survived as a commanding device well into the 17th century. Artists such as Michelangelo Caravaggio and Rembrandt van Rijn looked to the window as an architectural motif to emphasize the realism of the setting, though it was not always the window that allowed for divine illumination of sacred objects and moments. Caravaggio's *The Calling of Saint Matthew* of 1599 (figure 8), which portrays the biblical scene of Jesus calling upon Matthew as his disciple, highlights the figures' interaction through a typically "Caravaggesque" or tenebrous lighting scheme. At left, the tax collectors congregate about a table in a stark interior, as Jesus, who is accompanied by a stream of light that hones in on Matthew, enters at right. The artist suggests a riddle within the composition: the visual articulation of the window is not the host of light, but rather, the source of luminosity emanates from Christ and God's divine mandates. Light survives as a religiously empowered feature in Italian Baroque art of the 17th century, though divorced from the architectural structure of the window, which maintains a crucial role in perpetuating the illusionism of Caravaggio's created space. In the case of *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, it is the light, not the window that is ennobled with symbolic significance.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Baroque master, Johannes Vermeer explored the pictorial and symbolic potential of the open window in his painting *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657-1659) (figure 9). In his rendering of a realistic

interior, achieved with the use of a camera obscura[17], Vermeer posits the young woman, deep in contemplation, before an open window, which offers a reflection of the figure in the lower right hand corner of the frame. The ambiguous nature of the composition grants the artist license to unite myriad genres – from an interior setting, to figural portrayal to still lives (as seen in the bowl of fruit at the foreground.) Vermeer relies upon fabric to further develop the composition's pictorial illusionism: the window treatment, tablecloth and curtain at the foreground of the canvas all react to contact and light in the most convincing way. Furthermore, fabrics offer here practical hints of the contemporary moment: the color palette and print of the material were typical of the Northern aesthetic during the 17th century[18]. Detailed renderings of the young lady's dress, the chair and the architecture of the window reveal Vermeer's interest in communicating the contemporary fashions: a stylistic commentary that later artists would explore, as well.

While Vermeer utilizes the window as a technical device, it takes on new meaning in his depiction of a contemplative woman. The wide-open window suggests a sentiment of longing: the woman cannot penetrate the restrictive confines of her room (or her position within society), yet the open window tempts her with the possibilities of the great beyond. The curtain that exposes the interior space separates the young woman, who is unaware of our gaze, and assigns the

[17] Philip Steadman, *Allegory, Realism and Vermeer's Use of the Camera Obscura,* (Early Science and Medicine, Vol. 10, No.2, Optics, Instruments and Paintings, 1420-1720, 2005), 287.
[18] Steadman 290.

viewer a voyeuristic capacity, as we surreptitiously observe the scene. Unaware of her audience, the subject abandons her obligation to her societal role and allows herself to become consumed by the letter, thoughts and the window before her. In a marked departure from the religious premises of many Renaissance compositions, northern Baroque paintings introduced new themes of the contemporary moment, the individual and their societal roles.

Caspar David Friedrich's iconic *Woman at the Window* of 1822 (figure 10) perpetuates the motif of a modern woman, submerged in contemplation before an open window. Though Friedrich stages the scene in an artist's studio, he offers no intimations of the setting through props or other paraphernalia[19]. Rather, the majority of the composition is devoted to the rendering of the vast window and figure. Friedrich relies upon a strict linear system to articulate the symmetric architectural space of the interior: from the wainscoting, to the floorboard to the ledge, the composition is marked by a harsh sense of angularity that is interrupted by the serpentine and sensual curvatures of the woman's figure: a juxtaposition that compels the viewer's attention to the center of the canvas. The intense, rich color palette of greens and browns lend a dark sensation to the interior[20], which starkly contrasts with the luminous scene beyond the window frame. In the framed landscape beyond, Friedrich uses a softer color palette to suggest the picturesque qualities of the poplar trees, sailboats and sky.

[19] Rewald 36.
[20] Rewald 38.

The iconography of the woman resting on the perimeter of the somber, dark interior and the hope-filled, illuminated exterior, point to the contemporary Romantic allegories of longing. The window operates as a critical device to separate the confinement of the interior space (and inner psyche) from the boundless, outside world.[21] Though the open window grants the woman visual access to the freedom of what lies beyond the studio, (like the fleeting boats) she is inhibited by the sill, an imposing barricade that offers only a ledge where she can rest, gaze and dream of the liberties of a limitless world.

George Friedrich Kersting's *In Front of the Mirror* of 1827 (figure 11) grants us access into the private realm of his wife.[22] Unaware of our gaze, the woman is caught in a moment of grooming as she coifs her hair before her dressing table and mirror – though without the air of sensuality,[23] typically evoked by such scenes. Behind her sits a table covered with her clothing and accessories – suggesting clues to the contemporary fashion and offering contextual support to the timeless motif of a female caught in a moment of private domesticity. The open window is situated directly to her right, though she does not engage with it or the nondescript landscape beyond. Rather, exploring its function as a source of the cool Northern, natural light, Kersting employs the window as a tool of optical illusionism. The artist celebrates the sunlight, as he manipulates the color palette to reflect the interior's responsive interaction with the natural illumination.

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[21] Rewald 38.
[22] Rewald 40.
[23] Rewald 40.

In *In Front of the Mirror*, Kersting plays down the dramatic Romantic evocations of confinement and desire associated with the iconography of a woman before an open window. The artist replaces the thought-provoking and contemplative air, exuded in his contemporary, Friedrich's *Woman at the Window*, of just five years prior, with the light-hearted articulation of the modern woman's world, its leisure and its superficial preoccupations. Kersting's wife does not look to the window as an escape route from the limitations of her social role in a state of melancholy[24]; instead, in her dedication to maintaining her appearances, she gazes into the mirror, which not only denies the relief of an alternate, exterior view, but reflects her current setting, submerging her deeper into her own confined reality.

Berthe Morisot, considered to be one of "les trois grandes dames" of the Impressionist movement[25], applied her feminist interpretation of the woman before an open window iconography in her 1869 composition, *The Artist's Sister at a Window* (figure 12). As in Kersting's, *In Front of the Mirror*, Morisot offers us a voyeuristic admission to the space of bourgeois womanhood, although it invites a more intimate gaze, rather than accommodating male desires.[26] The cropped composition, reminiscent of a photography, is devoted almost exclusively to the figure, thought Morisot refuses to abandon her attention to detail in favor of figuration. She sits leisurely in an oversized armchair, abandoning any concern for an appropriate "lady-like" posture. Dressed in a flowing white empire-waist dress,

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[24] Rewald 40.
[25] Elizabeth Kane and Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Marie Bracquemond*, (Woman's Art Journal, Vol. 5, No. 2, Autumn 1984-Winter 1985), 21.
[26] Marni Reva Kessler, *Reconstructing Relationships: Berthe Morisot's Edma Series* (Woman's Art Journal, Vol. 12, No. 1, Spring-Summer 1991), 24.

the subject is pregnant[27] both with child and with thought. She is captivated by the literature before her; she is amused by only her musings, rather than pictorial elements that confine her to her societal role as a woman, wife and mother[28]. The oversized window opens onto an expansive veranda, with more buildings beyond it, as Morisot alludes to the activity of society beyond the quiet confines of the bourgeoisie drawing room. Continuing the theme of photography's captured moment, Morisot refuses to abandon her attention to detail in favor of schematic renderings: in the distance, for example, other figures can be seen enjoying their moments of respite beneath sea-foam green awnings, which echo the green of the trees below. *The Artist's Sister at a Window* denies any sensations of isolation; though the figure sits alone inside, she is not trapped, but instead, she is surrounded by life.

Shaped by a powerful sense of femininity, Morisot's composition reveals her gender both in the treatment of subject matter and application of paint: a quality that defined the artist's unique fingerprint, yet. Morisot captures a uniquely ephemeral moment that will vanish as soon as the woman turns the page or adjusts her seat: the delicate, yet tangible impasto application of paint echoes the sensuality, immediacy and transience of the scene. Exploring the full potential of the color palette, the composition reveals the artist's interest in the articulation of light. The window operates as both a technical and symbolic tool: it ushers sunlight into the interior, achieved through the collaboration of myriad colors, to capture the

[27] Kessler 25.
[28] Kessler 25.

interaction of light as it simultaneously unites the female with the outside world. Rather than functioning as a decisive threshold between the confinement of a woman's confined societal role, it unites the realms of the exterior and interior.

In the beginning of the 20th century, Henri Matisse's contemporary – and rival – Pablo Picasso, redirected the course of modern art with the cultivation of the cubist aesthetic. One of Picasso's examples of analytic cubism, *Woman Seated Before a Window* of 1937 (figure 13) applies the artist's formula to the enduring iconography of the woman before the window. Abandoning any allegiance to realism, Picasso explores the freedom of the cubist aesthetic in order to create an ambiguous spatial plan: through the process of assembling myriad colors and shapes, the artist gives the composition recognizable form with the most unconventional of methods: a technique that Matisse would borrow from during his phase of radicalism. The familiar architectural shapes of the window and chair offer a legible organization to the painting, which is countered by the truly inimitable articulation of the female figure.

In a departure from the dark, melancholy sentiments of the Romantic era, Picasso looked to a bright color palette to lend a dynamic and vibrant energy to the woman, whose massive stature dominates the composition. She is not an idealized figure; rather, she is erect in posture, asserting an undeniable fortitude. Her bold shadow and reflection echo her bold presence. The confidence of the figure demands the viewer's attention; her left eye engages directly with us – captivating us. In the traditional cubist approach, the woman's face is oriented according to

different perspectives: however, the varied viewpoints yield a diversity of understandings. In one interpretation, the viewer understands her face in profile, as she gazes through the window; another perspective suggests she is frontally interacting face to face with the viewer. In profile, she takes on the role of the pensive woman, trapped inside the interior space as her drifting imagination wanders into the blank canvas of the unbridled outside world – a feature reminiscent of Friedrich's 19th century romantic compositions. Meanwhile, the frontal understanding suggests a portrait of a proud woman, celebrating her commanding position in the role and in society, undistracted by the emptiness of the exterior world. Refusing a definitive analysis, the ambiguous interpretation of the woman's cubist form mirrors the ambiguity of her condition and the richness of the motif and subject itself.

Over 70 years later, the window iconography survives in Alex Katz's *East Window* of 1979 (figure 14). Katz explored the conversation between the interior and exterior in the woman's world in his portraits of his primary model and wife, Ada Katz. The canvas is reminiscent of a family photograph, where Ada, who engages in eye contact with the viewer, is aligned with the left side of the cropped composition. Her direct gaze invites the viewer into the warm, domestic setting – assigning us to the role of the photographer, rather than the surreptitious voyeur. Ada sits just to the left of the paned-window that reveals the figurative articulation of the exterior's landscape and sunset. Katz looks to contemporary trends to assign a temporal context to a timeless motif, specifically through the detail of the chair caning, as well as Ada's outfit.

Katz reverses the format of the earlier compositions such as those with a parallel iconography of the woman before the window. Rather than situating a contemplative woman before an open window, alluding to the female dichotomy between confinement and longing, Katz seizes a moment where his model interacts with the viewer, rather than her psyche. Her back faces the window and the landscape beyond: for her, it does not evoke desires of unrealized opportunities. Reminiscent of the women that ornament Matisse's Nice period paintings, Ada is a symbol of modern theatricality – she penetrates the surface of the canvas, speaking to a cognizance of, and established intimacy with, the viewer. The tonal qualities of the interior are marked by warmth, light and intimacy, while the outside is dark, dull and colorless, except for the brief suggestions of the pastel sunset, as if to say that the natural light is irrelevant in the illumination of Ada's space.

Beyond their command of the paintbrush, what do Robert Campin and Alex Katz have in common? The unifying force of the window connects these two unlikeliest of painters. Spanning over 500 years, as religious altarpieces gave way to Baroque genre paintings, symbolically ennobled compositions of the Romantic Movement, experimental Impressionist paintings and finally, the Modernist aesthetic, the theme of a woman before the window has maintained its role as a crucial pictorial and symbolic device throughout the vast survey of art history. Whether intended to be a symbolic or technical tool, a reference to the religious or secular spheres, the window provokes myriad interpretations, specifically inviting, and in certain cases, necessitating an evaluation of the woman's place in society.

The long history of the female's relationship with the window set the stage for the intensive consideration of interior spaces that Matisse would conduct throughout the 20th century, as he explored every detail, function and consequence (both symbolic and architectural) of the frame. Looking to the paintbrush to reconcile his internal dualities of conservatism and innovation, the artist undoubtedly took direction from academic tradition to stimulate the course of his avant-garde explorations.

Chapter III: Matisse's Biography

According to Yve-Alain Bois, there existed two Matisses: the avant garde Matisse and the conservative Matisse[29]; the emotional Matisse and the controlled Matisse; the internal Matisse and the external Matisse. Art historian John Neff said of the artist, "there is a traditional part of Matisse and the part where he cuts through categories and upsets people's expectations about what a particular medium could or should be."[30] Despite the duality pulsing through the artist's life and work, it was in the midst of contradictions and paradoxes that he was able to uncover a certain "wholeness"[31] characterized by calm and balance.

However, Matisse resisted psychological scrutiny. He was extremely private, though he produced the most intimate of compositions. As the ultimate expressionist artist, he believed that his identity existed within his brushstroke, rather than the details of his biography. The resume of his work, marked by great stylistic diversity, suggested a composite portrait of the artist. Matisse's duality radiates from every canvas, as he discloses his literal visions of reality, enhanced by his imagination: he sought to record not the object, but the sensations they provoked.[32]

Matisse's journey was not a consequence of rationale or logic, but rather an empirical course, guided by experimentation and sensibility. Obeying no

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[29] Christopher Lyon, "Seeing Matisse Whole," MoMA, No. 13 (Autumn, 1992): 4, accessed January 5, 2012.
[30] Lyon 4.
[31] Lyon 4.
[32] Lyon 5.

established route or order, the artist was motivated by only his commitment to expression, harmony and liberty: a recipe that brought a unique sensation of creativity and novelty to Matisse's life, and consequently, his art.

On the last day of 1869, Henri Matisse was born in Le Cateau-Cambresis, a textile town located in the northern most region of France. Only after Matisse began his traditional education as a lawyer, would he serendipitously realize his wealth of artistic talents. In 1890, during a period of convalescence following an operation, Henri Matisse made a critical discovery: until then, he had been "unaware of his vocation."[33] During his recovery, his mother bought him art supplies that unlocked the door to his "kind of paradise." Soon, the young artist's interest in art would evolve into a passion that demanded more than extracurricular drawing classes. Though Matisse began with traditional training, the rigid curriculum of classical artistic education did not always agree with the burgeoning artist's creative bent: the notion of training according to an established order seemed counterintuitive to Matisse, whose mother encouraged him to follow his own emotions rather than rules.

Gustave Moreau discovered Matisse that same year and invited him to study at his studio where Matisse would remain until he married in 1898. It was here that progressive learning, insistent on feeling and imagination, was celebrated over the regimented structure of the traditional academic curriculum. Undoubtedly, Matisse's life-long infatuation with color was instigated in Moreau's studio, as he

[33] Jacques Laissaigne, *Matisse: a Biographical and Critical Study* (Geneva: Skira, 1959), 19.

imparted: "if you have no imagination, you will never produce beautiful colours…colours must be thought, dreamed, imagined."[34]

During Matisse's travels in 1896 to Belle-Ile, off the coast of Brittany, he embraced his appetite for novelty and experimentation that would chart a new course of his career, one marked by liberation and innovation. Matisse's friendship with the critic and scholar John Russell proved to be a profound influence on his development, as he was introduced to the work of Vincent Van Gogh, the impressionists, and the concepts of contemporary color theory, which lent a new sensation of freedom and abstraction to his art by way of his bright color palette, broken brushstroke and information compositional arrangements[35]. His newfound fascination with sunlight, its interplay with objects and how to capture its transient effects with paint anticipate the later works of his Nice period. It was not until Matisse broke away from the confines of the classroom and studio that he could fully understand the influence of nature on his painting; his experimentations, free from the rulebook of academic tradition, inspired the cultivation of the uniquely "Matisse" fingerprint that would define the master and his legacy.

The spirit of travel would continue with Matisse's honeymoon in London where he would study J.M.W. Turner paintings. The British master's command of the paintbrush, vast color palette and abstract renderings of natural motifs would

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[34] Jean Guichard-Meili, *Matisse* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 36.
[35] "Henri Matisse." *Benezit Dictionary of Artists.* Oxford Art Online. 5 January 2012. <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/benezit/B00118746>.

undoubtedly influence the painter's evolving aesthetic. A yearlong stay in the south, beginning with Corsica,[36] would follow. Delighting in his discovery of the warm Mediterranean light, the artist explored his capacity to render his natural setting: from traditional landscape paintings to intense and abstract experimentation with the bold and luxurious color palette that indicated a new tendency towards expressionism -- one that would foreshadow his later visual language. During moments of expedition and investigation, the artist refused to commit to a single aesthetic, instead seeking to render beauty and harmony, unrestrained by the demands of genre limitations.

1905 marked a critical year for the artist, one in which he ceased to borrow and began to solidify the "Matisse" aesthetic. Collioure, a port in French Catalonia, would host this moment of transformation: deliberate, unified brushstrokes reappeared and the luminous, bold colors remained, though this time, they would be introduced in conjunction with softer tones, which lent to the harmony of the composition. *Open Window, Collioure* of 1905 (figure 15) became for Matisse a critical turning point, characterized by a "definitive touch"[37] and the harmonious manipulation of the color palette – the signature qualities of the artist's Mediterranean output.

Though *Open Window* would suggest Matisse's artistic maturation, it was met with great criticism. Critics degraded the new aesthetic as a product of wild beasts or "fauves." The small community of fellow artists, including Andre Derain and

[36] "Henri Matisse." *Benezit Dictionary of Artists.*
[37] Guichard-Meili 48.

Maurice de Vlaminck, who came to be known as fauves, empowered color in order to articulate their instincts and sensations over reality, rather than obeying the contemporary trends of delicate formality and intellectual subject matter.[38] Fauvist art became an exercise in interiority and translating uninhibited sentiments onto the canvas – a theme that emerge with great profundity during the artist's Nice period art. In fact, Matisse had once revealed in 1908 "what I pursue above all else is expression."[39] This new fauvist attention to painting as a process to reveal internal feelings or emotions, rather than as a mimetic practice, laid the foundation for an abstract art that would manipulate the established functions of the medium for their own expressive purposes.

Fauvism, which would survive for only a few years, was by no means the end of novelty for Henri Matisse. The decade-long period between 1906 and 1916 would mark one of the most innovative and successful stages of the artist's career, as he moved towards a theme of simplicity in order to achieve harmony. Matisse was celebrated as an icon of the future of art, having been introduced to a small group of collectors, whose tastes and visions far surpassed the limited contemporary trends. American patrons like the Stein family, the Cone sisters and French politician, Marcel Sembat, encouraged Matisse to cultivate his unique style, while empowering him with the luxury of financial freedom, as they consistently purchased many of his compositions.

[38] Guichard-Meili 50
[39] Guichard-Meili 60.

Matisse's new financial independence allowed him to continue his travels, visiting Algeria, northern Italy and Munich during this decade. He had long demonstrated an interest in Muslim art – its purity, its harmony and its control of color. In 1911, Matisse would delight in the culture of Tangier with its great emphasis on harmonious aesthetics, decorative patterns, plants and vivacious tones. *Zorah Standing* of 1912 (figure 16), yielding a sensation of harmony, speaks to the revival of the Moroccan decorative standing native figure. The theme and quest of "wholeness," which was so characteristic of the artist himself, persists throughout his art, as he embraces a wealth of travel and artistic opportunities in pursuit of such balance. These ingredients, borrowed from myriad sources and evocative of pleasure, happiness and ease, would come together to express the most intimate musings of the artist – a recipe that would reemerge continuously throughout the artist's career – and most specifically, during his post-war sojourn in Nice.

At the same time, Matisse's contemporary and competitor, Pablo Picasso was redirecting the course of modern art with the cubist movement. Characterized by deconstructed form, a collage of mediums and a muted color palette, early cubism's aesthetic stood in opposition to the colorful, unified harmony of Matisse's art. However, Matisse was not one to pass up an opportunity for experimentation: in a deviation from his established style, the artist explored the qualities of synthetic cubism, as he broke down his compositions into compartmentalized shapes and forms that communicated a new sense of harshness and a divorce from harmonious reality. The artist's new technique of abstraction would survive until 1917, dominating his canvases of his most radical phase of invention.

Matisse had settled down with his family in the outskirts of Paris, at Issy-les-Moulineaux in 1909, where he remained until the close of 1917. During that moment, specifically between 1913 and 1917, the artist engaged in a period of searching and experimentation. He explored the "methods of modern construction"[40] by looking to an intensely somber color palette and geometric simplicity to complete his compositions, seen specifically in *Goldfish and Palette* of 1914 (figure 17). Replacing the sensual arabesque line that had come to define Matisse's style, he reduced his forms to their most basic elements, lending a rhythmic abstraction to his art: a tempo that echoed the process of production and creation. In deconstructing the forms, the artist abandons the cohesive harmony that had come to define his work. The viewer must piece together the shattered surface to understand the scene: the artist's studio. The dark tones, coupled with the harsh angularity of features emanate a stark coolness – indicative of the larger societal climate during the time of war and destruction. Though the artist includes personal references by employing the studio motif, the composition lacks the harmonious fingerprint that was unique to Matisse. The artist immersed himself in radical invention during the course of the Great War, exposing the avant-garde version of himself, before calling upon the traditional artist in his return to naturalism that would mark his Nice period art.

By the end of 1917, Matisse had been suffering from respiratory problems and relocated to the South of France to recuperate – this time, in Nice. For the

[40] D'Alessandro and Elderfield iii.

second time, a period of convalescence would prove critical to the artist's development. As Matisse was regaining his health, Europe was simultaneously regaining its own livelihood following the Great War. Matisse initially stayed in hotel rooms at Hotel Beau-Rivage, would later move into his studio at Hotel de la Mediterranée, and then settle in an apartment on Place Charles-Felix in the city's oldest quartier[41]. In Nice, Matisse would unite his myriad styles on a single canvas, while marrying a variety of iconographic themes as well. The location, characterized by its natural setting, leisure and warm Mediterranean light inspired a calm within the artist that was translated onto his canvases, as he celebrated Nice as a haven of both work and happiness[42]. Looking primarily to the motif of the window, Matisse created a cohesive spatial synthesis, uniting the exterior and interior (both literal and figurative) in one complete composition. It was here in the South of France that Matisse discovered the ultimate harmony of balance.

Matisse's Nice output united interiors, portraiture and landscapes, as he conjured up a hidden world of intimate spaces featuring pensive, bourgeois women posited before an open window. In such compositions, as his *Large Interior at Nice* of 1921 (figure 18), he evoked qualities of leisure and feminine sensuality, as he reintroduced the unifying structure of naturalism to his paintings in the wake of his wartime experimentation with abstraction. The women were draped in exotic prints that evoked his earlier infatuation with Muslim art as well as his travels to northern Africa. However, his harmonious, spontaneous and naturalistic canvases

[41] Laissaigne 9.
[42] Guichard-Meili 87.

were met with criticism from the art world. Dismissed as regressive for the seemingly unsophisticated handling of figures and space, his Nice period art was critiqued for its superficial subject matter and unremarkable stylistic rendering. Despite the negative feedback, Matisse's sojourn in Nice represents a culmination or "wholeness" of the visual language and iconographic themes that already shaped the course of the artist's travels, adventures and experimentations.

Chapter IV: Matisse in Nice

In 1917, a "nearly accidental"[43] move to Nice would prompt a critical period of transition for Henri Matisse's life and career. At the height of the Great War's cacophony, the artist visited his deployed son, who was stationed in Marseille. After falling sick, Matisse interrupted his travels to recuperate in Nice. Once again, a moment of convalescence would prove to be a major turning point for the artist. Matisse was initially uninspired by the bleak, deserted climate of Nice in December: with a packed suitcase, the artist barely survived two weeks of the discouraging non-stop rain[44] before discovering the enchanting Mediterranean light as its golden rays interacted with sea and snow. Matisse's study of light would inspire both a vehicle of escapism, and a return to naturalism following the abrasive radicalism[45] of his wartime compositions.

The brief sojourn of the artist in the South of France quickly evolved into a lifestyle: Matisse would stay in Nice for five months before returning to Paris during the summer months. This peripatetic pattern would survive well into the 1930's, as the artist divided his time between the Mediterranean – for the majority of the year – and Paris – to escape the southern heat in summer months. Though the artist's family would occasionally visit, Matisse enjoyed his solitude in Nice, where the pulse

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[43] Blum 93.
[44] Hayden Herrera, *Matisse: A Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 140.
[45] David Carrier, "The Beauty of Henri Matisse," *Journal of Aesthetic Education,* Vol. 38 No. 2 (Summer, 2004), pp. 80-87, accessed 10 February, 2012.

of urban chaos was silenced as he relished a quiet existence that encouraged a close examination of nature and of self.[46]

Matisse converted single rooms into studios in various seaside hotels, including the Hotel Beau-Rivage and Hotel de la Mediterranean. Though the rooms were certainly modest, they were punctuated by large French windows that welcomed blankets of Mediterranean light[47], which, for the painter transformed their simple interiors into fantastic, utopian sanctuaries. By 1921, the artist established near-permanent residence in a neo-classical building at 1 Place Charles-Felix[48]; it would remain his pied-a-terre in Nice until 1938. Matisse delighted in the extra space afforded by his new residence, which offered both living and studio quarters; by 1928, he had taken over the entire upper story of the building[49]. The most critical feature of the apartment, however, was the expanse of floor-to-ceiling windows, inviting a new intensity of illumination that he would capture and animate upon his canvas, in an unmistakable homage to Nice's sunlight.

Liberated from the sobering confines of wartime reality and the punishing competition of the avant-garde, Matisse relished his hotel room turned studio turned solitary utopia – and devoted himself to representing scenes and details of the real world, translated aesthetically into dream-like confections. Idyllic fantasies dominate the compositions of Matisse's Nice period as he embraced motifs evocative of pleasure and harmony. Though the expressive woman demands the viewer's attention, it was the pictorial translation of the Mediterranean light that

[46] Bock-Weiss 110.
[47] Blum 94.
[48] Lassaigne 9.
[49] Blum 94.

remained Matisse's priority.[50] Soon after arriving in Nice, the artist's new aesthetic earned him a reputation as the "Sultan of the Riviera."[51] Translated from Arabic, a culture that proved to be a great source of inspiration for the Matisse as seen in his color palette and handling of patterned fabric, Sultan is defined loosely as authority, strength or ruler From exotic textiles to open windows and decorative interiors, ingredients of spontaneity, serenity, satisfaction and sensuality blend to offer the recipe of the artist's Mediterranean output and no doubt, empower Matisse as the ultimate authority on the aesthetics of the South of France.

Sensations of fantasy and elegance invigorated Matisse's Nice period paintings, which flirtatiously blur the boundary between reality and the world of the dream. The "Sultan's" enchantment with his color palette persisted, as he investigated the interactions of tones to visually articulate the properties of light. Employing a softened color palette, ornamented with threads of gold and white that he indicated a decisive departure from the abrasive tones of royal blues, blacks and reds that Matisse employed during his moment of radical experimentation. Even his brushstroke is infused with a new sense of delicacy: the abbreviated, seemingly effortless strokes enunciate the ephemerality of his new subject matter. The intimate topics explored in Matisse's Nice paintings is echoed in the small scale of the canvases themselves: the artist achieved consistency by considering each detail of his products, as the delightful scenes of harmony and intimate contemplation were appropriately contained within delicate dimensions. The smaller scale of his

[50] Herrera 148.
[51] Michael Kimmelman, "The Many Moods of Henri Matisse." *NY Times,* 20 September 1992.

compositions likewise signals a direct departure from the large format paintings and ambitions of the larger and far more radical paintings that preceded them.

In one of his earliest Mediterranean compositions, *Interior at Nice* (figure 3), dating to 1917, Matisse introduces a crucial change in direction: his new aesthetic, marked by a return to naturalism, fluency and delight, suggests he had exhausted his radical energies in the preceding years. *Interior at Nice* exhibits the artist's new vocabulary of forms, his collection of motifs, and the new delicate color palette that would define his Nice period art. He welcomes the viewer into his hotel room-cum-studio - a dream-like space that radiates captivating warmth, satisfaction, and sunlight. The open French window, a formal and iconographical liaison between the interior and exterior realms, draws the viewer's eye into the space and introduces itself as a critical contemporary icon. In a very painterly application of the medium, Matisse employs floral motifs, scalloped forms and sinuous lines to evoke a sensual experience, which, when coupled with the visualization of Nice's sunlight through his pastel color palette, indicates the decisive new course of the artist's output in his return to naturalism.

However, nothing is more suggestive of Matisse's departure from his earlier wartime work and his subsequent absorption into his Mediterranean utopia than his new infatuation with the motif of the female model. The subject would quickly assume myriad responsibilities in his paintings: as a figure to inhabit the interior, situated before an open window; as a surface to absorb and reflect the Mediterranean light; as a trope of exoticism, whether rendered as a nude or an odalisque; or as a symbol of the contemporary bourgeoisie woman, consumed in

contemplation, echoing the sentiments of interiority that Matisse was exhibiting himself at this moment.

In looking to the motif of the woman (either as an introspective thinker or an extroverted odalisque), Matisse sought not to examine her psychology, but to stimulate his pictorial imagination.[52] The woman herself was a blank canvas upon which Matisse could project his thoughts, musings and inspirations. The artist had once admitted, "it is the quality of projection rather than the presence of a living person that gives an artist's vision its life."[53] Matisse visually articulates this notion time and again in myriad compositions that render the enticing woman – who operates both as a central subject and a reflection of the artist's expressions. In his depictions of the models, Matisse does not abandon his commitment to the decorative interior; rather, he integrates her into the space, suggesting one completely unified setting, aesthetic and sensation. Matisse's models in this context offered a unique opportunity for expression – a function that still lifes, landscapes or decorative interiors alone could not offer. The artist reconciled this reality by uniting in one composition a range of genres that revealed the aesthetic delights of the natural setting, the décor of the interior spaces, and the emotional subject of the women: after all, Matisse insisted, "I do not create a woman, I make a picture."[54]

In *Odalisque with Magnolias* (figure 19) of 1923, Matisse reveals the integrated dynamic of colors, patterns and expressions that unexpectedly fuse to offer a harmonious, intoxicating, dream-like vision. A mélange of visual intricacies

[52] Herrera 145.
[53]Herrera 148.
[54] Blum 110.

activate and unify the canvas: from the vibrant stripes of the chaise, to the still-life of the bouquet placed before the floral wallpaper, to the electric punctuations of white and gold paint that intimate sunlight, the natural setting is ushered into the boudoir. The Odalisque is caught in a simple, intimate moment of respite. Perhaps alluding to the Greek mythological icon, Ariadne, her eyes are closed, denying the viewer direct eye contact, but her satisfied smirk includes the onlooker in a secret of sorts: she is not sleeping, but delighting in the Mediterranean rays that blanket her. Though Matisse does not include the window within the piece's frame, the properties of the light that graces the Odalisque are entirely palpable. Typical of the artist's art from his Nice period, the female commands the viewer's attention, but the Mediterranean light remains Matisse's fixation. The following chapter will further explore the Sultan's obsession with Nice's warm Mediterranean light: how it floods into the interior spaces through the open French window and interacts with the contemplative woman, captured in a prosaic, yet private moment in her boudoir.

In his devotion to visually recording the Mediterranean sunlight during his time in Nice, Matisse ennobled the banal scenes of every day existence with an intoxicating magnificence; he granted a sense of permanence to a fleeting (and no doubt, enhanced) moment, when the Mediterranean rays would grace the woman, entranced in thought, just so picturesquely – heightening a prosaic moment to a utopian status by way of his paintbrush.

Chapter V: Matisse's Women before the Window and the Subject of Interiority

As the Romantic era of the 19th century welcomed modernity, the interior space began to take on heightened significance in its pictorial translation: the four walls and the space they contained were transformed into a space of intimacy, where the individual may delight, dwell or drown in his own reflections and feelings. Consequently, the evolving role of the interior as a critical visual motif provoked a contemporary dialogue surrounding how psychic space is related to physical space in representation.[55]

In Body, Place and Self in 19th Century Painting, Susan Sidlauskas tackles the complex notion of interiority – or the "sense of self carried within."[56] Although her investigations focus specifically on art in the 19th century, her musings on the visual communication of intimate self-reflections no doubt speak to the greater context of modernity, therefore extending into the moment of Matisse's oeuvre. According to Sidlauskas, in the pictorial translation of interiority, interior decoration, which emerged as an opportunity of self-expression[57], assumed the perspective of the protagonist. However, she argues that it was not just the setting that revealed secrets of the psyche; instead, it was how the individual interacted with the space that offered an "enactment of a private identity."[58] This relationship between the interior and interiority demanded a new pictorial expression that would materialize

[55] Susan Sidlauskas, *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth- Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.
[56] Sidlaauskas x.
[57] Sidlauskas 1.
[58] Sidlauskas 1.

during the course of the 19th century: one that would not just narrate, but would proffer an imagined experience of the psychological state. Whether the interiors took on an identity as an intimate theatre[59], from which the world can be observed, or as a stage for acting out one's most authentic self, the compositions of the private space boast "animate entities, highly responsive to, even shaped by, the psychological currents that flowed within them."[60]

In observing slices of prosaic moments within private interiors, the viewer takes on the role of the voyeur – one who "guiltily senses that he should not be watching."[61] However, the onlooker is a necessary detail in the compositions of the domestic scene. A profound, assumed relationship exists between the central actor and the audience: we provide a source of empathy as the figure welcomes us into his domestic and psychological space, revealing his most personal introspections. Were the viewer not present to behold the painting, the dialogue between the interior and interiority would evaporate. Sidlauskas insists that with the end of World War I, so dissolves the bourgeois imagination, and consequently, the dialogue between the interior and interiority in modern art.[62] During such a fragile moment, she argues, the physical and emotional devastation of war stripped interior spaces of their

[59] Sidlauskas 3.
[60] Sidlauskas 3.
[61] Georges Teyssot and Catherine Seavitt, "Boredom and Bedroom: The Suppression of the Habitual," *Assemblage*, No. 30 (August 1996), pp. 44-61: 45, accessed 15 April 2012.
[62] Sidlauskas x.

intimacy and security, resulting in the demise of the domestic setting as a "metaphorical vessel for the self."[63]

However, Matisse denies this assertion time and again throughout the course of his career. The visual communication of the relationship of the physical and the psychic in an intimate boudoir setting, and its perception by the external viewer, no doubt commands itself as a central theme throughout the art of Matisse's post-war period. So long as the individual, his psyche, his space and an audience exist – so will the pictorial examination of their dynamic relationship. With a total awareness and acknowledgement of history, Matisse preserves in his painting the visual dialogue dissected in the previous century of the interior and interiority, tempting the viewer into a meditation on the psyche, but then satisfying him with the aesthetic delights of balance and harmony. After all, according to Wolfflin, as Sidlauskas has insisted, man understands art through the psychological notion of empathy.[64] Therefore, so long as symmetrical compositions provoke positive responses, it is the harmonious equilibrium of a painting that will sate the viewer.[65] Nowhere can this notion be more pronounced than in Matisse's period exploration in his Nice period of the woman before the open window.

Henri Matisse offers entry into the private interior world of two women in their Mediterranean hotel room in *Two Women in an Interior* of 1921 (figure 20). The composition indicates a shift back into the artist's earlier naturalist aesthetic,

[63] Sidlauskas x.
[64] Sidlauskas 5.
[65] Sidlauskas 5.

though he has yet to render a space of convincing illusionism – that is not his intent here. Rather, Matisse looks to the delicacy of a swift, sketch-like brushstroke to evoke the captivating sensations of female sensuality and the atmospheric ambiance of Nice.

The elevated viewpoint enhances the voyeuristic qualities of the composition. Unaware of our gaze, the two women are caught in a moment of respite: one, seated before the open French door, is absorbed in thought, while the other, lying on a neighboring chaise, is immersed in her book. Matisse does not depict the women with any sense of individualization; instead, he alludes to their form and identities through casual gestural lines, which defines them as types for the confined bourgeois French woman, rather than identifying them as unique characters.

The French windows in the background, which serve as the focal point of the canvas, are a symbol of cohesion rather than of division. They connect the interior and exterior spaces by welcoming the Mediterranean light, and its accompanying visual sensations, into the hotel room. Matisse emphatically directs the viewer's attention to the windows through the intentional arrangement of details within the space: the chaise and closet are situated at an angle that fights realistic one-point perspective, yet both guide the eye to the key architectural and symbolic elements in the background. Beyond the terrace, where his technique borrows from the abbreviated and spontaneous impressionist brushstroke, Matisse suggests the distant vision of an immaculately blue sky and sea. The errant dashes of white

paint, which survive throughout the composition and give it a textured, formal unity, punctuate the ocean as an articulation of the sun's reflection, as well.

Within the hotel room's interior, curtains veil the French windows. The thin fabric offers Matisse another forum through which he can interpret the fall of Mediterranean light: he continues to look to the vibrant white paint to suggest the intense luminosity of the sun. Matisse invites the theme of nature indoors by way of the wallpaper. It introduces here a new sensation of exoticism, revealing a floral scheme that alludes to his travels in Tangier, while also referencing his longstanding interest in decorative, patterned interiors. The botanical pattern of the wallpaper blends into the window and the seascape beyond it: rather than a harsh confrontation of forms, the artist allows for a seamless transition, alluding to the cohesive interplay between the interior and exterior.

Like the dressing table, chair, and vase of flowers, the women operate here as ornamental features within the composition, though they assert a greater contextual significance. They speak to the theme of confinement within the established social order, but simultaneously escape the boundaries of their boudoir setting by way of their imagination and contemplation. Much like the beauty and sensations of the Mediterranean illumination, freedom is just a windowpane away. The pictorial dialogue between confinement and liberation is no doubt a reference to the notion of interiority that accompanies the subject of a boudoir setting. His female characters and their interaction with the window provoke a consideration of their psyches, yet offer no clues other than their visual delight.

In *Rose Nude* of the same year (figure 21), Matisse preserves the fundamental theme of the bourgeoisie woman caught in a private moment in her Mediterranean hotel room. The painting is very reminiscent of a photograph, showing a close up and cropped view into space. Decorative features, like the chaise, dressing table and mirror reflecting the vase of flowers – souvenirs of a woman's world – contribute to the convincing creation of the interior. However, these forms are merely details employed to complete the composition; once again, the French window demands critical attention.

In a departure from *Two Women in an Interior*, Matisse creates a more dynamic relationship between the woman and the window as she confronts the panes directly, rather than turning away from them. Though the figure is still marked by anonymity, her body language and interaction with the window reveal new depths of personalization. By suggesting an emotional climate of contemplation, ennui and longing, Matisse assumes a greater level of intimacy and trust between the viewer and the woman. Matisse catches her in a sensual moment after bathing: letting her towel fall to the floor, she is nude. However, Matisse does not allow any room for sexualized sub-text in his studio painting. Rather, her nudity speaks to the purity, naturalism and freedom of the woman's private realm – and furthermore, the desexualized nude posed in the artist's hotel room from which he worked suggests clear references to a model within an artist's studio. Even more revealing, the artist captures the women in the most naked, vulnerable state – lost in her imagination – as she is tempted by the world beyond the window (which is hermetically sealed.)

In a composition dominated by curvilinear forms, the French windows emerge as the unique source of harsh, straight angles. The rounded format of the chaise and its pillows are echoed in the serpentine curve of the woman's breasts, buttocks and curled hair, as well as in the bouquet of flowers, mirror and undulating design of the wallpaper. The sensual fall of the woman's towel is mimicked in the arrangement of curtains – suggesting a quality of abandon. The entire canvas offers a rhythmic conversation between its sensual, curvilinear features, which is interrupted by the decisive angularity of the French window. It is the stark juxtaposition of shapes that directs the viewer's attention to the key motif.

The closed window here also introduces a more palpable sense of exclusion and longing to the composition; the quality of accessibility to the world beyond seemingly disappears with Matisse's hermetically sealed window, as it structurally and symbolically confines the woman. However, Matisse insists upon the window's role as a tool of formal unity: continuity between the exterior and interior survives as the color and botanical rhythm of the wallpaper mimics the palm tree seen discretely in the distance, the only hint of the exterior Mediterranean landscape. Rather than experimenting with just a scattered articulation of falling sunlight, Matisse enhances his entire color palette with a lightness that gives rise to a confection-like quality of tone. In looking to a romantic, pastel color palette, the artist perpetuates the harmony and pictorial delight of the woman before the window.

Between 1921 and 1922, Henri Matisse used his familiar Nice format to offer a variation of his woman before the window genre in *Woman with a Mandolin* (figure 4). The composition boasts three different focal points: the Mediterranean Sea and landscape at left, the woman in the foreground and the open window to her right. The painting is organized around a series of vertical forms, which allows for the cohesion of its elements. The distant, tall palm trees punctuate the horizontal planes of sea and sky; the vertical of the trees is echoed in the female figure's confident stature. Her shadow and shape are reflected on the window, where the panes extend to the perimeter of the canvas. This series of vertical forms yields a crescendo-like effect that directs the viewer's attention to the key motif: the woman before the open window.

In *Woman with a Mandolin*, Matisse redirects his attention from the highly articulated interior space to a more detailed handling of the landscape setting. Rather than offering only subtle allusions to the natural Mediterranean world, the artist fully develops the scene that he would enjoy daily: the horizontals of the boardwalk, suggestions of people promenading there and on the beach, brilliant sunlight and the sea uniting with the sky off in the distance. The artist insists upon a complete cultivation of the exterior setting of the South of France in order to truly understand the interior space. Matisse relies on a muted color scheme, as if to indicate an overcast climate; however, the radiance, characteristic of Mediterranean light, survives in the delicacy of his pastels.

Matisse uses his muted, consistent palette to unify the piece. The shared range of tones – the tans, greys, yellows and whites - unifies the entire composition, as the window ushers the exterior into the interior space. The color of the wall beneath the window perfectly matches the sand beyond – blurring the distinction between indoors and out. Once again, Matisse invites the natural setting indoors with a glimpse of the floral wallpaper in the background: a hint of vitality to visually support the subject and energy of the woman who commands the canvas.

Unusually here, Matisse empowers the woman with a heightened degree of individualization; no longer do gestural lines insinuate her form, the artist introduces the viewer to a portrait-like character. We realize a more intimate relationship with the woman, as she engages with us through direct eye contact – she is aware of our gaze and invites us into her private world. She is a vision of bourgeois society: her dress, her jewelry, her setting, perhaps even her hobby (the mandolin.) She refuses to be confined by either her status or her space, as she leans toward the open window, penetrating the boundaries of the hotel room and society's demands of her.

Matisse's *Large Interior at Nice* of 1921 (figure 18) suggests a triumphant culmination of his aesthetic vocabulary. In a marriage of genres, the artist intimates the dynamic relationship between the woman and the window with a new level of expressive imagination: Matisse situates the figure and the framing device of the window within a complex organization that unites the interior of the hotel room, the landscapes setting and the genre of portraiture. Despite his varied exploration of

figures and forms, his unique format, characteristic of Matisse's Mediterranean output, lends a sense of cohesion to the composition. From the intimate invitation into the woman's hotel room to the illumination of the color palette, Matisse continues to tempt the viewer with his delightful interpretations of Nice – evocative of a utopian fantasy: a land so beautiful, pure and untouched by the horrors of war and urban industrialization - yet maintaining firm roots in reality with Matisse's commitment to the naturalist language.

The French door takes on a new formal and thematic role in Matisse's *Large Interior* and serves as a literal passageway between the exterior and interior. The window does not just tease the viewer with an idyllic vision of a distant seascape. Instead, it ushers the eye across the threshold in order to address the central theme of the contemplative woman: at last, utopian idealizations and reality meet on the sunlit terrace. As always, the window maintains its critical feature as a source of light, which Matisse welcomes through his experimentation with white to evoke light, shadow and illumination. Despite his somewhat abstracted handling of perspective and objects, the artist's return to naturalism is undeniable here in his articulation of the Mediterranean rays and their interaction with the world he has created.

Characterized by a balance of colors and forms, *Large Interior* is activated by the force of its compelling harmony. The composition is animated by a vertical energy, achieved through the great height of the windows, the ornamental curtains that punctuate the windows, and the walls that, with the elimination of the painted

ceiling[66], seemingly extend forever. However, Matisse interrupts the abrupt upward momentum with strategic placement of soft, curvilinear details. The scallop shaped chair, which is posited in the foreground of the composition, confronts the viewer immediately and echoes the shell-shaped decoration of the upper window. The tilted surface of the dressing table offers a strong horizontal presence as it meets the French windows at a perpendicular angle, and offers a sense of equilibrium. The flowers and mirror that populate the table assume a host of responsibilities in both formal and symbolic terms. The oval shapes of the mirror and cushion in the foreground, introduce a necessary respite from the verticality of the windows and the color field of the seascape beyond.

The mirror is a timeless symbol of self-reflection – a pertinent theme throughout Matisse's Nice period output – and also a key to the subject of the artist's studio. However, the artist offers little more than an abstract amalgamation of brushstrokes – disregarding any sense of identifiable forms to be replicated in the mirror. The chaotic interpretation of its reflection offers perhaps an understanding of the artist's self-understanding and its visual translation onto the canvas; the theme of reflection and perception will be further explored in the painting that hangs to the left of the French windows. In breaking from the vertical elements and rhythms of the composition, the artist includes the bouquet of flowers, which simultaneously introduces a souvenir of Nice's natural setting to the interior space. The flowers are situated in the same plane as the woman, perhaps alluding to a deeper degree of symbolic alignment – though Matisse's largely enigmatic female

[66] Blum 115.

character in *Large Interior*, who necessitates a great deal of consideration, provides no clear answers.

The whipped, painterly execution of the female figure does not allow for any precise analysis of her expression. The viewer is spatially divorced from her, so there is not the same quality of immediacy understood in *Woman with a Mandolin*. However, Matisse seemingly preserves the interpersonal connection between the composition and the third party spectator through the direct gaze of the woman, which invites us into both her room and her imagination. Characterized by a hint of melancholy, her body language is a challenge to decipher. She is free from the confines of the room, yet is constrained by her seat and the balcony's banister. Notably, she does not seek to penetrate the imposed boundaries as her gaze, rather than engaging with the temptations of the sea and sky extending into eternity, returns her to the interior space.

In the post World War I terrain of Europe, Matisse's Nice period paintings seemingly demand expansive interpretations and analyses – ones that respond to the dialogue between the interior and interiority, as well as the political, social and personal climate that proved to have such a resounding impact on the artist's resume. However, in *Large Interior*, it is as though Matisse is playing with the viewer's perception. The painting on the wall, which hangs to the left of the windows, speaks to the self-consciousness of Matisse as an artist and further develops the setting as an artist's studio. At its most basic level, Matisse is addressing the motif of art within art: the painting is about art itself – as the

painting – or a mirror within a painting – reveals a distorted scene of a woman before a window. Rather than proffering an explicit glimpse into the psyche of the female (or perhaps himself), the artist blurs the space – both technically and thematically – which denies the viewer the privilege of conclusions. Matisse acknowledges the tradition of interiority in modern art, yet insists upon his emphatic concentration on the formal, aesthetic elements. Both the artist and the woman are aware of our presence and they withhold answers and keys to their interiority, so we continue to wonder, until it becomes evident that the sensual and harmonious aesthetic dynamic of the painting is satisfying enough.

In *Young Woman at the Window* of 1921 (figure 22), Matisse offers a unique format of his woman before a window. Inching closer to the viewer, the female figure confronts the surface of the canvas. Though she does not engage in direct eye contact – her close proximity invites the audience into the composition. Matisse shifts his attention from an intricately constructed decorative interior, typical of his art of the same year, to a more individualized articulation of the woman and the Mediterranean landscape.

Though Matisse's work in the South of France is characterized by a cyclical momentum – echoing the female form and evoking a quality of sensuality, Young Woman at the Window is marked by a linear dynamism. The woman's hound's-tooth skirt and striped kaftan echo the perpendicular intersection of the windowpanes. The apartment buildings and horizon on the other side of the window extend to the end of the canvas; perpetuating the theme of linearism, as the height of the palm trees mimic the commanding posture of the figure.

Despite the precise organization of the composition, Matisse employs a very painterly technique in his application of the medium. The paint takes on a sketchy format which lends a quality of ephemerality – should the woman adjust her pose, the paint would seemingly shift with her. Echoing the delicacy of the subject matter, the pastel color palette of purples, blues, peaches and ivories blend together to offer the delightfully surreal Mediterranean sunset. Unlike the ever changing and confection-like tones that Matisse depends upon in his portrayal of Nice, the woman's outfit takes on a very definitive color scheme of yellow, white and black; through the stark contrast of tones, the artist introduces the juxtaposition between the landscape and domestic settings – and consequently perpetuating the conversation of interiority.

The repetitive interactions of the horizontals and verticals offer a precisely contained composition: a sensation that no doubt references the female's attitude. She is confined both within the interior space and the painting's dimensions, as she longingly reaches to the hermetically sealed window. Perhaps she is caught in the moment of opening the window to welcome in the sunset – but with no narrative context, the gesture is subject to interpretation. However, Matisse does grant the viewer access to a deeper level of understanding, affording through the increased personalization of her facial expression. Abandoning the swift, anonymous approach to his articulation of his female model, Matisse lends this young woman the privilege of a unique character; she is not a type of a member of the bourgeoisie, but she is an individual, as demonstrated in her expressive qualities.

As the young woman hovers over the threshold of interior and exterior, her countenance occupies the space between satisfaction and longing. Her gaze and reach extend into the seemingly inaccessible exterior world, suggesting unfulfilled desires, while her cryptic smile reveals noting. Unaware of the viewer's attention, she is absorbed in contemplation and proffers neither glimpses of her psyche nor resolutions to the commanding sense of ambiguity. As her form and expression penetrate the surface, the viewer seeks a sense of closure or understanding with greater urgency – though yet again, Matisse will only bare the surface delights of Nice and the interplay between the Mediterranean light, his contemplative models and the interior space.

Conclusion

Simply in search of a new method of expression following the Great War, Henri Matisse would unknowingly cultivate a genre that encouraged the investigation of interiority, domestic interiors and the female's place within them, as well as the properties of aesthetic delights. With his Women before the Window, the artist would make assert himself within the grander context of art history.

Even in the face of wartime destruction, Matisse continued to dream of "an art of balance, of purity and serenity."[67] even in the Following the Great War, Matisse would realize his dream in the South of France as his harmonious Nice period art boasted a "return to naturalism." In a departure from his austere wartime experimentations with radicalism, the artist traded his stark, rigid lines for his fluid, arabesque strokes.

With a commitment to tradition, Matisse looked to the enduring and historical iconographical program of the woman before the window as an expressive opportunity through which he could explore Nice, its women and its light. This formal organization allowed the artist to marry a variety of genres upon one canvas: decorative interiors, portraiture and landscape – offering a sensual product available for our delectation.

No doubt, the Mediterranean light operates as a key feature in Matisse's painting. Taking on a life of its own, the vibrant illumination and its interaction with

[67] Bock-Weiss 11.

the decorative interiors offer opportunities of visual delight, as it makes the distant utopian notion of Nice very real and accessible. However, Matisse's female figures insistently command both the space and the viewer's attention. Despite Shirley Neilsen Blum's relegation of the women to the status as accessories, the introspective actresses maintain a critical responsibility within Matisse's art: enhancing the aesthetic satisfaction of the surface, as well as exposing deeper layers of analyses on the subject of interiority.

Though focused primarily on the art of the 19th century, Susan Sidlauskas's contributions to the notion of interiority can certainly extend into the moment of Matisse's oeuvre. Her investigations assert that the visual communication of the domestic interior and one's interaction with the space reveals the "enactment of a private identity,"[68] as well as secrets of the psyche. Therefore, Matisse's Nice period art, depicting interior spaces and contemplative women within them, demand a consideration of interiority.

However, Matisse and his women refuse to reveal any answers: their cryptic expressions perpetuate a terrain of ambiguity that offers no opportunity for resolution. This was precisely Henri Matisse's intention -- he did not want his audience to excavate the depths of his canvas to find answers, but instead, he wanted them to delight in his dream: the harmonious and intoxicating enchantment of his art.

[68] Sidlauskas xi.

Figures

Figure 1: Henri Matisse, *Woman with a Hat*, 1905

Figure 2: Henri Matisse, *Bathers by a River*, 1909-1916

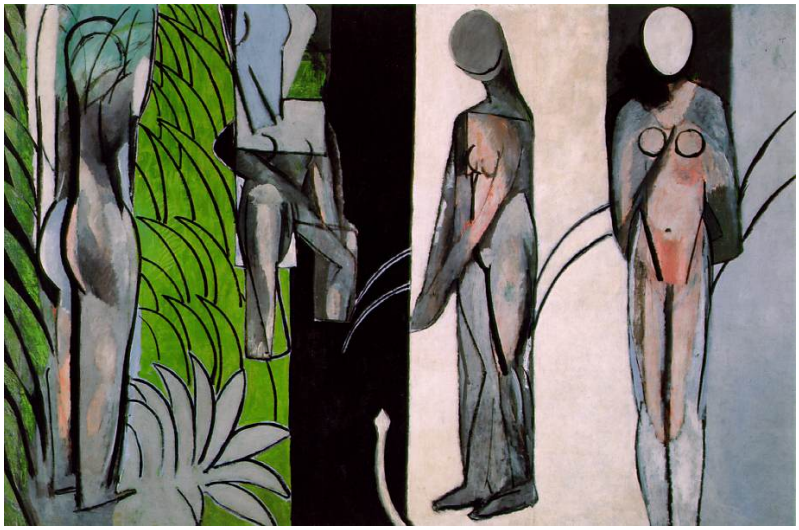

Figure 3: Henri Matisse, *Interior at Nice*, 1917-1918

Figure 4: Henri Matisse, *Woman with a Mandolin*, 1922

Figure 5: Henri Matisse, *Harmony in Red*, 1908

Figure 6: Henri Matisse, *The Black Fern*, 1948

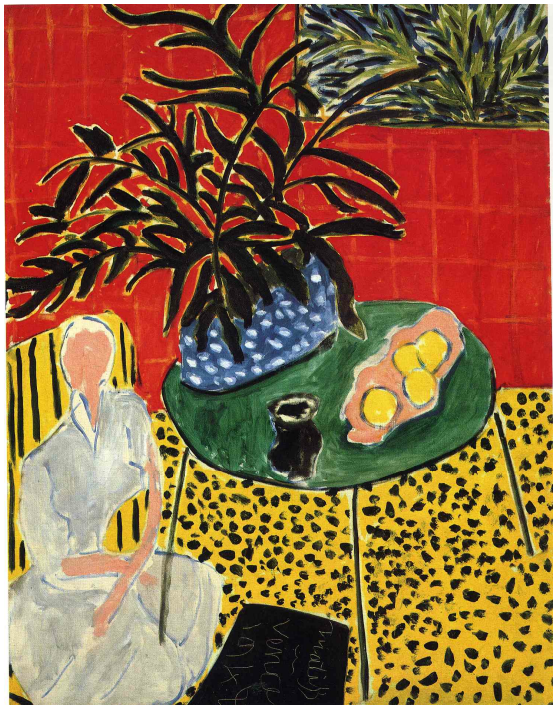

Figure 7: Robert Campin, *Merode Altarpiece*, 1425, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Figure 8: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Calling of St. Matthew,* 1599-1600

Figure 9: Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, 1657-1659

Figure 10**:** Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman at the Window*, 1822

Figure 11: George Kersting, *In Front of the Mirror*, 1827

Figure 12**:** Berthe Morisot, *The Artist's Sister at a Window*, 1869

Figure 13: Pablo Picasso, *Woman Seated Before a Window*, 1937

Figure 14: Alex Katz, *East Window,* 1979

Figure 15: Henri Matisse, *Open Window, Collioure,* 1905

Figure 16: Henri Matisse, *Zorah Standing*, 1912

Figure 17: Henri Matisse, *Goldfish and Palette*, 1914

Figure 18**:** Henri Matisse, *Large Interior at Nice*, 1921

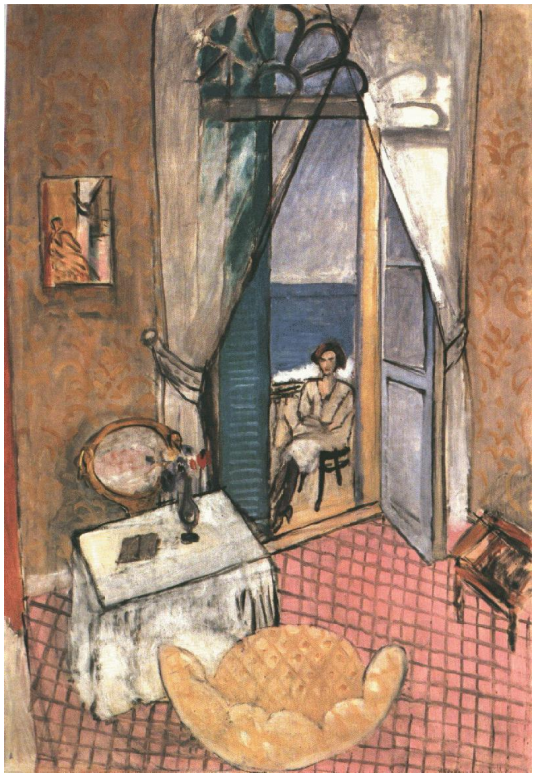

Figure 19: Henri Matisse, *Odalisque with Magnolias*, 1923-1924

Figure 20: Henri Matisse, *Two Women in an Interior*, 1921

Figure 21: Henri Matisse, *Pink Nude*, 1921

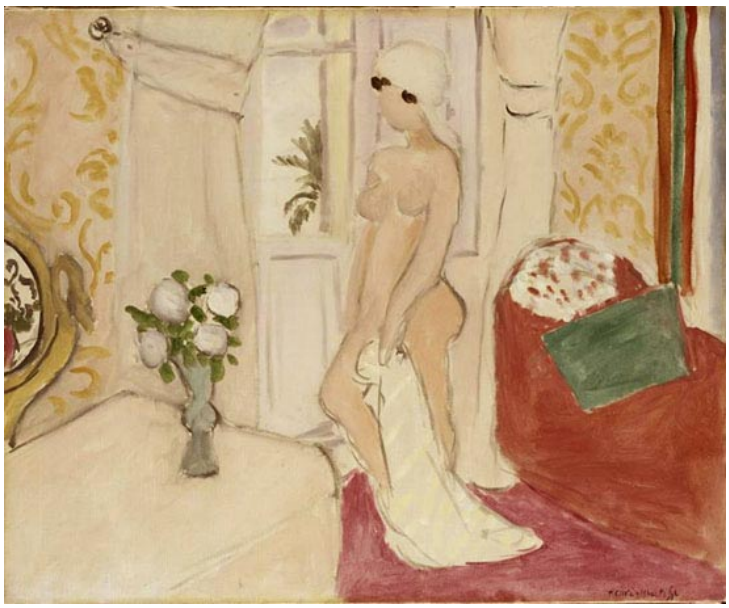

Figure 22: Henri Matisse, *Young Woman at the Window,* 1921

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