

Meet the Masters
February Program

Henri Matisse "Beasts of the Sea"

About the Artist:

About the Artwork:

(See the following pages.)

Hands-on Art Project:

Tissue Paper Collage

Teacher preparation: Pre-cut the colored tissue paper into a small pieces for easier use by the children. Distribute an assortment of colors for each group of children.

Materials: Stiff white paper (9" x 12" or larger) tagboard
Colored tissue paper squares
Scissors
Acrylic gloss medium
Soft paint brushes
Small tubs for gloss medium

Directions:

1. Students should sign their paper before the project begins.
2. Have the children cut the tissue into various interesting shapes.
3. Paint the entire paper surface with gloss medium using the paint brush.
4. Place colored tissue on gloss medium. Overlapping colors creates a new color as tissue is somewhat transparent.
5. Carefully paint the gloss medium over the tissue. The colors will bleed so explain to the children that they must use a light touch.
6. Allow the gloss medium to dry several hours.

Collage and Assemblage

Henri Matisse, *Beasts of the Sea*



Henri Matisse (ahn-ree ma-tees), French, 1869-1954
Beasts of the Sea, 1950, paper on canvas (collage),
116 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 60 $\frac{5}{8}$ -in.
National Gallery of Art, Washington
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

The Artist

For most of his life, Henri Matisse lived in a garden of his own creation, a garden of vibrant colors, undulating forms, and pulsating patterns. In the course of his long career in art, he worked tirelessly, sometimes in fierce pain from worsening arthritis, up to twelve hours a day. His contributions to twentieth century art and culture include hundreds of paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, stained glass windows, ceramics, rugs, murals, and paper cutout collages. He died at the age of 84.

It was in the year 1905 that Matisse, a lawyer-turned-art student, appeared on the Parisian art scene when he and other young unknown painters decided to exhibit their works in a Paris gallery after having been rejected by the prestigious Autumn Salon. The public was shocked by the brilliant, oddly colored paintings. The brightest picture of all showed a woman with blazing orange hair, a green nose, and a green, purple, and pink hat! The artist was Henri Matisse. People ridiculed him and his friends, calling the show "barbaric." One critic labeled the painters **Fauves**, "wild beasts," and their gallery room, "the cage." The title stuck and though the Fauves soon disbanded, they gained great notoriety and Matisse became their recognized leader.

As he grew older, Matisse suffered painful operations and numerous health problems. When he

could no longer stand at his easel, he worked just as energetically from his wheelchair. Later, confined to his bed, Matisse filled his walls and ceilings with drawings made with a piece of charcoal attached to a long pole. He then carved the simple, flowing forms with scissors from paper preprinted to his specifications. These shapes were pinned to his walls by assistants, arranged and rearranged, finally coming together as joyful collages, brilliant combinations of mass, color, and line.

The Art

Beasts of the Sea is a large collage (about 116 inches by 61 inches) from 1950 and might look absurdly simple here in its finished state, but it was executed by a slow, complex process of **simplification**—which is not at all the same thing as being **simple**. Indeed, Matisse was frequently accused of making pictures like a child. In response to these accusations, he replied that that was exactly what he intended: he wanted to recapture the freshness of vision characteristic of a young child when all the world is new to him.

This collage is composed of two vertical columns of blocks of color which create a background and organize the wonderful array of symbolic shapes interacting across the columns. The total composition of the organic shapes on top of the geometric building blocks floats on a white background. The forms like sealife swimming to the surface direct the eye upward along with the background grid blocks which get smaller in size. The forms themselves are very active, and though there are repetitions among them, they vary in size and color, keeping the eye in perpetual motion, like a swimmer in a teeming sea.

Many of the colors are intense and very opaque, but one can see that Matisse used a thinner paint for some of the shapes and the visible brushstrokes suggest even more airiness and movement. The total effect is vibrancy combined with the calm of the white background.

Guided Analysis

Subject and Media and Techniques:

Matisse followed two distinct processes in creating the cutouts he created in the last five to seven years of his life. One he termed "image making" and the other "decorative organization." He tried always to create a simplified, stylized form, "a form filtered to the essentials," as he wrote in his journal.

Henri Matisse, *Beasts of the Sea*

He first drew the form by observing it in nature. He made many, many drawings (often in the air with his finger) until in his mind he arrived at the forms he would cut from paper that he or his assistants had painted with his trademark colors. He almost always used gouache, an opaque watercolor.

Matisse said he carved, never clipped, his forms, using wide open scissors in a few fluid moves. He said the process was like a sculptor releasing a form from inside a block of stone. In fact, we can visualize the finished collage as a very low relief sculpture.

Style:

Matisse expressed his enjoyment of life with simple lines, shapes, and especially colors. He painted his emotional responses to nature by interpreting, not copying, it. He simplified objects from nature to what he called their "signs," then fixed these signs into the decorative setting of his art. In this respect, he has similarities with the Symbolists and their stylized organic forms. He also shares one common artistic source with the abstract Surrealists: the abstracted forms of Art Nouveau.

Matisse was influenced also by the delicate flat art of the East, but he interpreted it with a bold, stirring Western vigor. He ignored volume, light, shade, perspective, and many traditional rules about color, and often applied his colors directly from the tube bringing them together in clashing discord that nevertheless created vivid harmonies like songs of color.

Elements and Principles of Design:

Matisse arranged the composition of his collages in a very direct manner. With the smaller cutouts, the process was often as simple as arranging one or more shapes against a single background color. In his larger works, such as the murals or the patterns for stained glass windows, Matisse sometimes used groups of the smaller cutouts as building blocks, creating an "image on image," forming a sort of background at the same time.

In the largest of Matisse's works, the white wall upon which he arranged the cutouts was the ground. He would continue to arrange and rearrange the colored shapes until they "spoke" to each other, interacting with their positive and negative spaces. The white areas allowed brilliant contrast, as did the color combinations he designed into the collage.

Matisse was first ridiculed for positioning complementary colors next to each other because they jolted the eye! Later, this same placement was widely acclaimed. What do you think accounts for the change in reaction to the same technique?

Where do you see shapes repeated in the composition? How are balance and unity achieved? *Repetition of shape and color; shapes crossing over from one ground to another to tie elements together; smaller rectangles of ground toward the top, heavier toward the bottom.*

Expressive Properties:

Give five words that might describe the mood of *Beasts of the Sea*. What elements help create this mood? Would you say this work is more serious or more whimsical? Is serious art more respectable than childlike art?

Judgment:

Does this collage seem *modern* or *old* to you? Give your reasons.

Sometimes people viewing a particular piece of art have been overheard saying something like, "Why, my nine-year-old could have made that!" Could a nine-year-old have created *Beasts of the Sea*? Why or why not? What is the difference between "childish" and "childlike" and "simple" and "simplified"?

If you could add a shape or color to this cutout, what would it be and where would you place it? Why? If you could take something out, rearrange or change something, what might that be? Why?

Comparison:

In what ways is Matisse's *Beasts of the Sea* similar to and different from Braque's Cubist collage *Musical Forms*? If you were going to hang one of the paintings in your bedroom and one in your living room, in which room would you place each?

Interpretation:

What do the shapes in this collage remind you of? Does the title help describe the various forms? Does the word "beasts" accurately reflect the mood of this piece? Matisse intended the shapes to suggest aquatic life. Can you find algae, coral, fish, and snails?

Activity: Cut out geometric shapes from different colored papers and place them on a larger piece of paper. Then, study pictures of birds flying, flowers in a garden, or fish in an aquarium. From memory, draw and cut the simplest shapes of the subjects that interest you on colored papers and arrange them on the geometric shapes. Rearrange all the shapes until you are pleased; then glue them down.