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"Sources of Fauvism" by Maurice Tuchman, 1963

[00:00:00]
(background dialogue; not transcribed)
[00:04:14]

MAURICE TUCHMAN
In the summer of 1890, Henri Matisse was a 20-year-old clerk in a law office in the town of Saint-Quentin. Thank you.

In the summer of 1890, Henri Matisse was a law clerk in a law office in the town of Saint-Quentin. He was a bored young man. Matisse had just spent a couple of years studying for the judiciary and was now practicing it, and he found both unsatisfying. During the summer, Matisse had appendicitis. In the course of his convalescence, his mother brought him a box of paints. Soon after that, he painted his first picture, and he decided to become an artist. [00:05:00] His father, a successful merchant, was bitterly opposed to this idea. The young Matisse maintained that painting was, in his words, "more interesting than quarrels between other people." His father, however, remained opposed until the elder Matisse heard about Bouguereau, William-Adolphe Bouguereau, the most famous painter and teacher of the time. The elder Matisse was advised that Bouguereau was a successful man who might well make a success of his son.

In the winter of 1891, Matisse went to Paris to become an artist. He found Bouguereau in his studio. Bouguereau was meticulously copying a copy of one of his meticulously painted vapid paintings. [00:06:00] Matisse was contemptuous and outraged, but he entered Bouguereau's class anyway. The course that Bouguereau taught consisted of 20 lessons in drawing from the plaster cast. Bouguereau stressed the importance of holding the charcoal correctly, of rubbing out the charcoal on the paper with a bit of rag rather than the messy way of using your fingers. He insisted on a certain kind of dead perfection. And when, after several days went by, Matisse had not achieved this, Bouguereau burst out, "You'll never learn how to draw." It's easy to laugh today at Bouguereau, but in the 1890s he was the formidable embodiment of the academic spirit. Among other posts, he was president of the official Society of Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers. Cézanne, who bitterly despised him, called it Bouguereau's Salon.

We find [00:07:00] Bouguereau's painting at the left, painted in the same year of 1891, so sentimental, saccharine, so banal that it becomes ludicrous. And then, it becomes really humorous. The title of the picture gives the show away. The picture is called *The Captive*, and, wings or no wings, archaized, statue-like flesh or not, it is clear that what the spectator is invited to feel toward this sexy pubescent is what she feels toward the moth in her hand, the sense of complete possession, the power to tease and violate. I don't know if there's a paperback out of *Lolita*, but this would make a marvelous cover, I think. It's interesting, too, as a French example of a condition that we, as intensely self-critical Americans, have taken to be peculiarly American. I'm referring, of course, to the Nabokov syndrome, the deluge [00:08:00] of criticism we all read when Nabokov's novel appeared about how *Lolita* points up the American male's desire for the child virgin. The American man, the story goes, is a half-man, and thus he only feels secure with half a woman.

That certainly may be true, but the painting, which was enormously popular with the French philistine — that is, with virtually everyone in France — suggests that the problem is not exclusively of the new world. But I have to say that great demand for Bouguereau's pictures, a constant clamoring market, came from Americans. The painting is interesting in another way too. The content, the subject matter of the painting, is so commanding it almost drowns out the formal values such as they are. One is at first so involved with the overpowering sentiment that one doesn't see the corny way the hand, [00:09:00] the hand she's holding the moth with, is haloed by a parting in the foliage. One doesn't at first perceive the awkward placing of an upraised arm against that wing. A critic, incidentally, made a similar comment about Pop art recently. "I can't see the form for the content," he said. Well, narrative, if not anecdotal, content has had firm roots in art history from Greece through the 19th century, but the mainstream of twentieth-century painting has completely abandoned or at least disguised such expressive means.

Matisse left Bouguereau but was now much in doubt about his decision to become an artist. Such was the effect and influence of a figure like Bouguereau in the art world of Paris in the 1890s. When the story of modern art is told, as it often is, as a succession of advanced movements, one coming after [00:10:00] the other like waves on the shore, Ingres, then Delacroix, then Courbet, then Manet, then the impressionists, then the four post-impressionists, then Fauvism, then cubism, and so on. If we think of modern art as unfolding in this manner, we wrench the painting out of history. We tear the painter out of his own fixed time. We fail to understand or appreciate the nature of the struggle. The case of Matisse is a particularly poignant one. His heroism, both as painter and as man, is all the more appealing because no myth, no myth real or specious, has been built around him. Matisse was to become a successful conservative painter, established and respected, in middle age after years of apprenticeship and years of hard times. And then, he would throw it all over. He would join together with a group of aggressive young men, [00:11:00] men of a different temperament, a different sensibility than his, and with nothing to lose. And with them, he would lead the first great art revolution of the century and one of the two most decisive.

Time and again in his work, Matisse would show a marvelous capacity for self-renewal, for going back in on himself and emerging refreshed, younger than ever. This quality of Matisse's was noted as early as 1905 in the very first published article on Matisse's art by the art historian Roger [Marks?]. Roger Marks wrote, "At the age of 27, in 1896, Henri Matisse exhibited at the Salon de Champ-de-Mars with exceptional brilliance. His promotion to associate went unchallenged, and his paintings swept into private and public galleries with no interference. Now, if a painter prudently follows [00:12:00] in the path that first brings him success, he has little to fear for the future. But in this case, the promise of an easy life seemed to hold little appeal. To a fashionable success, Matisse preferred the challenge of struggle and the bitter honor of satisfying himself. The more one ponders, the more it becomes evident in this case that the constant growth of his talent was caused by endlessly renewed efforts, which stimulated the artist to make the ruthless demands upon himself." This was written in 1905, and many, many more examples of Matisse's astonishing capacity for self-renewal happened over the next five decades.

Bouguereau is not a source of Fauvism, but he was an obstacle of the first magnitude. Many exciting, courageous, and radically differing paintings had to be made in the 1890s so that the picture at the right, Matisse's *Joy of Life,* [00:13:00] could be conceived, and it was conceived just about a decade and a half after the picture at the left. In fact, the closing years of the 19th century in France witnessed an almost unparalleled efflorescence in art, a multiplicity of styles and achievements we find even staggering today. Let us turn to some examples of this fecund period in French art. One often hears these days that American abstract expressionism is dead, finished as a movement, although it is maintained that some of the movement's most notable practitioners are still making great works of art. A precedent for this curious situation may be found in the history of impressionism. In the middle of the 1880s, a profound reaction to impressionism and to impressionist principles set in among the most original of the younger [00:14:00] painters in France. No new painters came along to take their place alongside Monet and Pissarro, but Monet and Pissarro themselves continued to make masterpieces into the new century.

There are two Pissarro cityscapes on the screen. The one at the right is a detail from a picture in the Fogg Museum. These Pissarros of the 1890s are as fresh and exciting as Pissarro's first impressionist pictures. They also display the same stylistic and spiritual qualities. In them, there is first of all the love of spectacle, of movement, of complex and rich passage from one point to another in space. The city of Paris is enjoyed here as she still is today, as a field of sparkling movement, of bright, flickering light and terrific energy. The painter stands on high and surveys the city's populace, which watches a parade or returns home at rush hour. He surveys this [00:15:00] in a panoramic view, much the way an older painter would have surveyed a great battlefield. To record the sensations of movement, Pissarro uses abrupt, short, comma-like or ribbon-like strokes, nervous, sensitive marks which exist as almost independent entities. These marks and strokes quiver and vibrate. The pulsate with autonomous energy. We shall see when we come to the Fauvist painters how the impressionists' love of the outdoors, the passion for movement, the emphasis upon relatively pure — that is, independent — means of expressions, how these aspects of impressionism are fused with elements from the art of the younger generation into the new Fauve statement.

One of the most determined efforts to overthrow impressionism was made by Gauguin, who had earlier passed through an impressionist phase. This is *Jacob Wrestling* [00:16:00] *with the Angel*, painted in 1888, the first complete so-called Synthetist or Symbolist picture designed to introduce Gauguin's new theories of painting. In place of all that pertains to the ephemeral sensations of impressionism, Gauguin paints everything in large, flat colors, each area separated by firmly drawn contour lines, each area contained and precise, the polar opposite of the impressionist method. The strokes are not painterly, not independent or assertive in themselves. Similarly, the edges are not indistinct or ambiguous. There is no attempt to unify by atmospheric means. In order to paint his vision of a new painting, Gauguin paints a vision, the vision of Jacob and the angel as induced in the minds of peasant women in Brittany. The blazing red field — much washed out here in the slide — upon [00:17:00] which the two envisioned figures fight is patently unreal, hallucinatory. The pulsating contours, which repeat from left to right, the rhythmic curving lines, which are found along the women's dress — and they're washed out here, unfortunately, at the bottom edge of the picture — these, too, are explicitly contrived, artificial. Gauguin once wrote advice to an artist friend as follows. "Don't copy nature too

much," he said. "Art is an abstraction. Derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it and think more of the creation which will result than the model. This is the only way of mounting toward God, doing as our divine master does, create." And about this picture itself, Gauguin wrote to Van Gogh, "I believe I have attained in these figures a great, rustic, and superstitious simplicity. It is all very severe." [00:18:00]

Gauguin's picture was inspired by a religious mood. So was Van Gogh's *Starry Night* in the Modern Museum, although this being inspired by a religious mood was exceptional for Van Gogh. Painted shortly after Gauguin's Jacob and the angel in 1889, Van Gogh's painting is also a negation of impressionist tenets. Gauguin was dissatisfied with impressionism's evanescence and its lack of spiritual profundity. Gauguin found no mystery in Monet, no mystery in Pissarro, and instead Gauguin preferred to cultivate a sort of primitivism in his art. Van Gogh, like Gauguin, went through an impressionist phase, but he found impressionism insufficiently emotional and not personally expressive enough. Early in his career, Van Gogh wrote the prophetic words, "There is something good in every direct [00:19:00] action," which might stand as a slogan for much of the new art of our time. While Gauguin asserted his creative personality on canvas with large decorative shapes and arbitrary color, Vincent poured passion in brushstrokes. We respond to *The Starry Night* on the basis of its immediacy and its power, its torrential release, its impulsive and ecstatic charge. There is variation, quite calculated, of the speed of strokes so that the bottom, the town and foreground, is conceived in short distinct strokes, generally perpendicular one to the other. These are slow strokes. The mountains and the great cypress seem to have been painted faster, although it is doubtful that they actually were painted more quickly. Above the sky, the stars, the crescent moon, and the heavens all seem ablaze with unbridled energy. [00:20:00] Also, all is curved there, curved in and upon itself. The picture is effective, again, primarily because of the contrasts in the picture. I could point out one detail. It won't show too well, but in the houses at the bottom here and in many other places there are in the original painting bright, shining electric lights. And these are all square at the bottom and very assertive in the original painting, whereas they contrast with the great orbs above, which are circular.

At the left, now, we see the first appearance in Van Gogh's art of the still life theme. The three pairs of shoes here are rendered in the browns and grays of academic painting. And although the choice of worn old boots is a significant one and [00:21:00] a novel one, the shoes are nevertheless treated as if they were studio objects, like academic casts. Their arrangement is uninspired, and the painter fails to draw out of these objects the sort of characterizing we commonly find in Van Gogh and which we do find in the marvelous painting done less than two years later, at the right. The shoes, now seen from above, quiver and tremble as though possessed, as if the energies which poured into them during the long workday were just now dying in them with a shuddering and convulsive gasp. Important to this realization is the way the shoes seem to cower before yet oppose the rigid, repetitive squares, those squares symbolic, perhaps, of constraining environmental conditions. The shoes, then, in the second and later painting have a face, distinctive and unique. It is here [00:22:00] that still life as a theme of expression begins in modern art.

These two surprising pictures were planned as a pair. That is a crack in the slide. Empty chairs had held a special meaning for Van Gogh for a long time. When he was young, he had read of

an account by an English artist of his visit to Charles Dickens's room on the day of Dickens's death, and there he saw Dickens's empty chair by the fireplace. He wrote about it, and Van Gogh was very moved. Vincent had also painted a chair once before, his father's chair, soon after his father died, and on that chair Vincent in the picture had placed his father's pipe and his father's pouch. Chairs, incidentally, were equally important to Matisse, as we'll see in two weeks' time. But to Matisse, chairs had an opposite meaning. He once wrote that he wished his art to be something like a good armchair [00:23:00] in which to rest from physical fatigue.

The chair at the left is Van Gogh's own chair with his own pipe, his own tobacco pouch, and at the right Vincent painted Gauguin's chair, on which he set a lighted candle and two books. The pictures both evoke and symbolize the respective human beings. Van Gogh chose the kind of object that becomes so familiar after years of use that we scarcely know it. And with his conviction, he succeeds in imbuing this commonplace object with mysterious importance. When we see the pictures together, Van Gogh's chair seems pointedly masculine, strong, severe, simple, while Gauguin's chair now looks feminine, elegant in its curves. And the overtones of psychological significance are intensified by the suggestive placement of the candle in the picture of [00:24:00] Gauguin's chair, the suggestive placement of the candle where it is, the candle often being a male symbol, and another candle in that painting on the wall, as if to emphasize Vincent's own pervasive presence in that painting.

Another movement in the 1890s was as much an outgrowth of impressionism as a reaction to it. Vuillard and Bonnard and their friends were known as the Nabis, after the Hebrew word for "prophet." They were also known as the Intimists for their homely portrayals of simple domestic scenes. In a way, Bonnard and Vuillard brought impressionism indoors. Vuillard's *Mother and Sister* in the Modern Museum is at the left, and Bonnard's painting *Le Peignoir* at the right. They were both influenced by Gauguin's theories and his use of large, decorated, flatly painted areas with, however, impressionist [00:25:00] influence in the flecking and the spotting. But the Nabis' aspiration in art was similar, was similar to Gauguin's. It was less ambitious. They aimed at an evocative art, an art redolent of mystery and secrecy, reverie, a dream state. Another Nabi was Vallotton, who was a radical innovator of the new woodcut, a radical new woodcut made in the 1890s. And on the left, Vallotton painted this *Dinner by Lamplight*. Vuillard's *Dining Room* at the right presents a similar theme, a frequent theme of the Nabis and one which Matisse picked up. Now, at the left we'll see Matisse's first important painting which comes out of Nabi conceptions and may even have been derived from Vuillard's painting. We'll talk more about that in two weeks' time.

Now, Cézanne was also dissatisfied with impressionism and also dissatisfied with the ephemeral nature of [00:26:00] impressionism. He desired a more permanent art, "an art for museums," as he put it, a painting which would project eternal things. This landscape, *The Bay Seen from L'Estaque* or, rather — yes, no, it's *The Bay at L'Estaque* — is like most Cézanne canvases in that it requests from us no other response than that of purely looking. It is not gay like an impressionist painting, nor is it frozen and severely still like many Classical landscapes. In this sunny landscape, there is a balance between warm and cool, movement and repose. There is a quiet harmony achieved through the mingling of direct contrasts. The cool blue shape of the sea is a repeat of the opposing warm shape of the earth. These become almost cut-out shapes, one fitted on top of the other. The movement, then, is as marked a vertical alignment [00:27:00] as it

is a recessive one. In the earth area, which is spotted by cubical areas of houses, the chimney here plays an important role. At the bottom of that chimney, its color corresponds to the basic hue of the earth. At the top of the chimney, there is a cool area corresponding to the sea. In other ways, the chimney is a culminating point. It serves to unite and bring into focus the scattered horizontals and verticals that surround it on the earth area. Over the entire canvas surface, Cézanne's brush makes the most lively and spontaneous strokes, but each is held carefully in check in response to the qualities of the area described. Thus, the great variety of marks in the sky are nevertheless consistently delicate and quivering and ethereal, while the deep blue of the sea is rendered with heavier, denser, [00:28:00] pulsating strokes.

Again a panoramic view such as we saw in the Pissarro, this was a favorite approach of Cézanne's, being conducive to the vast serenity of Cézanne's constructions. This is one of the many paintings Cézanne made of Mont Sainte-Victoire, the great mountain near Cézanne's home in Aix-en-Provence. Most striking here is the vertical of the tree, which traverses the entire breadth of the canvas, and it is placed, further, directly in the center of the canvas. The vast space that extends from the foreground through the broad distance of the valley neatly contrasts with this extremely elongated movement on the picture plane. Many diagonals appear in order to offset this basic contrast between vertical movement on the picture plane and deep movement into space. None of these diagonals, [00:29:00] however, converge in depth, as is common practice in older landscape painting. Rather, these diagonals are all related to other forms in the painting. For example, this emphatic diagonal here, which winds in its long sinuous way into the background, the contour of this diagonal resembles the contour of the mountain edge, and it also resembles the contour of this branch, which you may not have seen, here.

Now, in this way, Cézanne succeeds in both expressing a sense of depth yet negating or modifying that depth by relating different spatial planes to each other. Now, this is the purpose of this piece of foliage here, which is connected to the branch I just pointed to. The foliage actually seems to belong to the distance although it is as close to the observer as this [00:30:00] tree from which it springs. That section of foliage is further related to the section of foliage here by virtue of its color, its texture, and a similar type of stroking in both these areas. But this area here actually does belong to the far distance. Cézanne constantly surprises us in this way, with these kinds of ambiguities, these kinds of enigmatic passages. Just as in this case where an area that is objectively close to us is related to distant objects, so in another area, which actually is close up in the distance, is hooked up with a faraway form. This area here, which is very close up, is lined up with the incisive horizontal of the viaduct.

One last picture of Mont Sainte-Victoire will show us how Cézanne creates an electric tension between [00:31:00] planes that lie recessed in space and planes that fall directly on the foreground or picture plane. In this painting, color is made to project a feeling of space. To begin with, the contrasts between shades are more intense in the areas near to us such as the contrast between the brown tree here, more brown in the original than here — the painting is much too green, but in the original the contrast between the brown tree and the green foliage right around it is more intense a contrast than the contrast in the distance, as, for example, the bluish and reddish tones in the mountains are similar to the tones of the sky. In the middle distance, greens and blues and yellows are mingled together, but each hue is less intense than the hues we find along the bottom edge. Color creates space, and so does the gradual diminution in

size of the various sections [00:32:00] in the middle ground here, larger cut-out sections here than we find further back. Now, to oppose the feeling of deep space, Cézanne, in a most striking manner, aligns the area of greatest distance, which is the edge of the mountaintop — he relates this area to the branch coming in from the right-hand side, and that branch is the area of greatest nearness. So just a couple of inches of space on the picture surface separates these two forms, which are actually separated by miles. The two linear rhythms are read as parallel because they so nearly resemble each other. I might point out one other area in the painting in which near and far are purposely confused and merged. The tree, which rises in a straight perpendicular, suddenly inclines to the left. It does so precisely when it [00:33:00] encounters the rising slope of the mountain. In doing so, then, the tree makes a perfect right angle with the mountain. This right angle configuration tends to unite areas at different planes just as the repetitive configuration at the other side of the canvas.

The last post-impressionist, Georges Seurat, was dissatisfied with the inexactness of impressionist methods. As a student, he was attracted to Delacroix's paintings. He saw how Delacroix had kept strokes of different colors separated rather than first blended on the palette. He saw how in the finished painting the strokes blended naturally at a distance and that the resultant colors were fresher and more energetic than they would have been otherwise. Seurat was drawn to the [00:34:00] scientific basis of such matters. He read several writers on optical phenomena such as Charles Blank, Chevreul, David Sutter, and others. Chevreul, for one, had explained that if one looks at two objects at once and regards them attentively each of the objects appears to have not its own color, the color it would have in isolation, but a different shade, a new shade due to its juxtaposition. The shade arising from the juxtaposition will arise from the complementary color of the other colored objects. Now, such theorizing was opposed to impressionist conceptions. The impressionists would have argued that it is impossible to define the real color of any object since any object is always exposed to and influenced by everything that's around it. Thus, Monet and Pissarro and the others showed the effects produced [00:35:00] on each object by others around it, and they showed the effects of the pervading light. Painting by instinct and by intuition, the impressionists had no desire to raise their perceptions to an exact science.

Seurat, however, said he wanted to start afresh everything the impressionists had done and truly to reconcile art and science. Seurat worked on his enormous canvas, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, a detail of which is here, for two years, from 1884 to 1886. He was 25 years old when he conceived and began to carry out this project, a unique project in his time, for nothing so vast had been attempted by a serious artist since the days of David and Ingres early in the century. In place of the ribbon- or comma-like strokes of Pissarro, Seurat applied dots of primary and [00:36:00] intermediate tints plus white. However, the canvas was not only covered by dots. Underneath the immediate surface, there lies another layer of pigment, brushed in broadly in the manner Seurat used on his sketches. When we examine the canvas and we find places where dots do not touch and the white of the canvas does not appear, we know that Seurat had underpainted. The figures are frozen in their postures. Their contours are clear and simplified. They are immobile yet alive. As Rewald put it, "The figures live not only as symbols of a season, of a day, of a specific time of the day, all of which is implied by Seurat's title, but also the figures live as symbols of an entire epoch." In all these ways, the painting, redolent of timelessness, is the antithesis of impressionism. [00:37:00]

Well, Matisse and the Fauves all took one element from the art of the post-impressionist painters we've seen, that element which pertains to intensity of statement, to passion, to vigor. They searched also, like the post-impressionists, for large patterned areas, and they stressed the use of primary colors. Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck, Braque, Freisz, Dufy, and the other Fauves all depended on the painters we have seen today in varying degrees, as we shall see in subsequent discussions on the Fauves. Fauvism was to be, then, a synthesis, a synthesis of the intensity of the post-impressionists together with the impressionist love of the outdoors and of movement. The Fauves' most cherished value was to be instinctual action, based on the confidence of inner freedom. As a movement, Fauvism was like a meteor flashing across the sky. It was born, came to brilliant maturity, [00:38:00] and died within two or three years. I hope you'll be with me to look at Matisse's contribution to Fauvism in two weeks' time. Thank you. (applause)

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