

The Museum of Modern Art

MoMA Audio

Matisse: The Red Studio

Stop List

Room 1: Intro Room

- 342. Introduction
- 343. Henri Matisse. Studio Under the Eaves, 1903

Room 2: Painting Room

- 344. Henri Matisse. Corsica, The Old Mill. 1898
- 345. Henri Matisse. Nude with White Scarf. 1909
- 360. Henri Matisse. Young Sailor, II. 1906
- 347. Henri Matisse. The Red Studio. 1911
- 348. Henri Matisse. Le Luxe (II). 1907
- 349. Henri Matisse. Bathers. 1907
- 350. Henri Matisse. Decorative Figure. 1908
- 351. Henri Matisse. Untitled (Female Nude), 1907
- 353. Henri Matisse. Studies for a reclining nude. 1910-1911

Room 3: History Room

- 354. Henri Matisse. The Blue Window. 1913
- 355. Henri Matisse. Still Life with Geraniums. 1910
- 356. Henri Matisse. Nasturtiums with the Painting "Dance I. 1912
- 357. Henri Matisse. The Studio, quai Saint-Michel. 1917
- 358. Henri Matisse. Large Red Interior. 1948

342 Introduction

02:01

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: I'm Ann Temkin. I'm the Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture here at MoMA.

The Red Studio is a picture of Matisse's real studio, in the Parisian suburb of Issy-les-Moulineaux. That picture has 11 artworks depicted in it, which we've brought together in the exhibition.

Artist, Faith Ringgold: I think a studio is very important.

Artist, Lisa Yuskavage: When you're an artist, it's where you spend all of your life.

Ann Temkin: What we really wanted to do was bring visitors into Matisse's world, first of all, into the studio that's the subject of the painting, into the other artworks that are in the painting, and then into the events and artworks that relate to this work as it went on to live its life in the decades following its making.

Writer, Siri Hustvedt: The outrage caused by these images, their radicality when they were produced, is something that I think is good to recover.

Professor, Mehammed Mack: That deconstruction of color, like disassociating color from the object is a kind of revolutionary act.

Ann Temkin: Matisse is so easy to think about as the maker of beautiful, relaxing pictures. We really wanted to try to recreate what extraordinary focus and effort and leaps of imagination and daring an artist goes through in making a work of radical innovation, like *The Red Studio*.

Writer, Claire Messud: That, for me, is the fascination it's as if we have a glimpse inside his head.

343 *Studio Under the Eaves. 1903*

01:47

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: When Matisse painted *Studio Under the Eaves*, it was probably the worst moment in his professional life to that time. He was about 33 years old and personal and financial difficulties had forced him and his family to leave Paris and go back to his hometown in Northeast France. It was a humiliating retreat. He had his few very fervent supporters, but for the most part, the general public completely ridiculed what he was doing. And that's so hard. He rented a studio in this garrett and tried to make art, tried to continue.

You see a realistic depiction of this attic space, very grim palette. But what's really extraordinary about the painting is that there's a window and there you see this incredible bright, vivid, palette, indicating the natural world outside that studio.

Writer, Claire Messud: I love this painting as an expression of an artist's interiority, that equation between the studio space and the artist themselves.

My name is Claire Messud and I am a fiction writer and I teach at Harvard University.

For me, as a writer, I feel as though I've been in this room so many times trying to, if you will, find my way into the light. This room has the long, dark aspect of struggle. We can see here that the window is open, but the overriding impression is of light at the end of a tunnel. The table itself is illuminated, and there's a patch of light on the floor. To me, at least that suggests that the work is the way to the window.

344 Corsica, The Old Mill. 1898

02:20

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: This picture was made when Matisse was first married. He and his wife went to spend about six months in Corsica. Corsica is an island off Southern France in the Mediterranean and at that time was a French province. It was the first time that he was in the Mediterranean.

Professor, Mehammed Mack: I think you see a sort of appreciation for the different qualities of sunlight that you would only notice if you traveled.

My name is Mehammed Mack. I am Associate Professor of French Studies at Smith College.

That contrast between the grayness of the north that haunts the city of Paris during winter and the really strong sunlight which is so crucial to the Mediterranean lifestyle.

Ann Temkin: The intense sunlight changed his life, it changed his work. He experienced a sense of, here's what my painting could become—all about color, all about imagination.

When you look at this, you think more of an Impressionist painting, in which there are almost no outlines and instead lines are just formed by areas of color. The olive trees that are at the top of the wall don't even have trunks. It's like the light has become so hot that the trees just become these sorts of puffs.

Writer, Claire Messud: When I was young, everybody would say, “Oh, you have to find your voice,” and you think, “what the heck do they mean?” And then there comes some moment in your evolution where you realize you're not listening to your teachers, and you're not trying to copy other people, and you're just being yourself, and that is finding your voice. So, this painting is interesting to me because you can see him beginning to find his voice.

Ann Temkin: For the rest of his life, Matisse spoke about those few months in Corsica as really being transformative.

Choosing to put a landscape from Corsica in *The Red Studio* is the one place where he put a picture that had particular meaning to him as an artist. And so, he just propped it against that stack of frames that are sitting on the floor in the corner.

345 *Nude with White Scarf. 1909*

01:43

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: *Nude with White Scarf* is a painting that was pretty provocative at the time. This is a very out-there pose. And as you can see in the dark areas, especially under her right leg and under her left arm, Matisse did a lot of moving around and lots of rejiggering of the composition, in order to get that pose.

Artist, Lisa Yuskavage: The goal in this painting is not to attract or to arouse. The black lines are aggressive.

I'm Lisa Yuskavage and I'm a painter.

It pushes away from that idea of what had been the function of a nude painting, which is to just look at flesh.

Artist, Faith Ringgold: I see his interpretation of a woman. He thinks of women as powerful. I don't think he thinks they're weak at all, not at all.

Ann Temkin: The other incredible thing about this painting is that white scarf. It's not just passively flowing. It's really got energy to it.

Writer, Siri Hustvedt: The red here has a passionate and sexual quality, it seems to me.

My name is Siri Hustvedt. I'm a writer.

The fact that the scarf is so strategically placed to veil her genitalia makes it suggestive of what's hidden. If you lifted that veil, you could look.

She looks quite relaxed and confident. She seems to be communicating something that is not just come hither. She's thinking.

360 Young Sailor II. 1906

01:13

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: *The Red Studio* is filled with nudes and there's one male, *The Young Sailor*. He's got clothes on amid all of these women. Matisse went out on a limb to do the simplification of line and color, space that he was working towards, but no customers.

Professor, Mehammed Mack: To me this seems like a homoerotic painting. I was struck that this is a super direct gaze. The folds in the sweater have an interesting interplay with the folds in his pants. It accentuates the musculature of the thighs. And what I felt was very obvious here was the outline of the crotch and the genitals.

I think it's just very beautiful how his left pant leg is rolled up to show the lower part of the calf and the ankles going down to the shoes. That is a very fetishized part of the male anatomy, when it's well-developed in its musculature.

Writer, Claire Messud: He's both an objective and a totally subjective presence. The actual person he was is evoked by the physicality—his solid thighs and his big hand on his leg, but it's also the very intimate portrait of the person that Matisse sees.

347 *The Red Studio*. 1911

02:33

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: *The Red Studio* actually began not as the red studio. The floor was pink, the walls were blue, and all the furniture was an ochre yellow. After living with that a little bit, Matisse made the very bold decision that he was going to take one color, Venetian red, and coat the whole surface of the painting with it, except his works of art.

And it is just such an incredible example of creative courage, because it's not like you can start painting over with red paint and then decide, "oh, I don't think that was a good idea." This was not something he could step back from once he began.

The Red Studio is a painting that Matisse himself admitted that he didn't quite understand. He said I like it, but I can't explain it to you. And for me, this was profoundly moving, because it does represent a moment that happens, not infrequently with great works of art, that they actually go further than the artist himself or herself can even really articulate.

Writer, Claire Messud: Part of what makes it real are the little knick-knacks and items that are strewn around on the surfaces. It was Roland Barthes who wrote that you have to have both meaningful and unmeaningful detail for something to feel real.

Professor, Mehammed Mack: What strikes me about that image is the collection of things: objects of inspiration and then art that might be inspired by those objects. And for me, that is so central to the whole project of self-discovery and rediscovery.

Claire Messud: I could spend days looking at this painting trying to understand what this moment in his life was like, and why certain things were meaningful to him and other things not. The blue square on the left of the painting is a curtain and is referring to an outside, but you don't really have a sense that there's a way out of the room. You have a sense that the room is hermetic, and in that way, it seems like the inside of a mind to me.

Ann Temkin: Matisse painted very few self-portraits, but he made many paintings of his studios, often at points of either transition or particularly challenging moments in his work. So, when Matisse is making paintings of his works of art, it's his self-portrait.

348 Le Luxe (II). 1907

01:58

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: In the history of European painting, there are centuries of depictions of gods, goddesses in scenes of leisure and pleasure. And Matisse, as a modern artist, chose to take on this subject matter of the mythological. But the way in which he did it horrified his peers and his critics and the public. Matisse's viewers were still looking for beautiful flesh and marvelous hair. And what they saw instead were these figures that, to them, seemed preposterous, completely baffling.

Artist, Lisa Yuskavage: What happens when you take your place within a grand tradition is that you have to affect it. You have to do something to it, you have to change it. You paint something quite traditional and make it be seen in a way that's never been seen before.

Ann Temkin: At this time, because of European colonial intervention, one of the many anxieties current in European society had to do with ethnic and racial differences. When Matisse painted these female figures, who didn't seem in the tradition of the white goddess, the criticism would be, your females don't even look human. That wasn't just an artistic problem. That was something that tapped into all of their fears about a changing society.

When he represents *Le Luxe II* in *The Red Studio*, he actually paints the three women red.

Professor, Mehammed Mack: He existed in France during the colonial time when artists felt that Europe had run out of ideas, that everything that there was to be said had been said, and people turned to the colonized world to look for new forms, new ideas. They're looking for authenticity, purity, striking colors, vivacious bodies, aliveness.

Disassociating European skin with the color white is a kind of revolutionary act. When Matisse represented women in red—earthy red—I thought that was even more of a revolutionary step in denaturalizing aesthetic conventions.

349 Bathers. 1907

01:48

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: There's absolutely no doubt that one of Matisse's goals for his art was to give pleasure. And in his paintings of bathers, it's a scene of pleasure. It's a scene of leisure.

Artist, Faith Ringgold: I'm Faith Ringgold. I'm an artist and Matisse is one of my favorite artists.

I think that when you look at Matisse's work, you can see he doesn't labor over things. He gets the feeling of it. He's got a lot of pictures that they're not even finished. And I think it's because he's moving along. He's saying what he has to say. And it's okay because those details that he's left out are not important, they don't bring what he wants to the painting. You're trying to make your statement without overdoing it.

Ann Temkin: The goal of making you feel joy and happiness. This was a noble goal for art and it's something we're not so much talking about these days. But he knew life was hard. And he felt that as an artist, one of the things he could do was provide the counterpoint of that.

Writer, Claire Messud: One might not think of the joy in Matisse's paintings as being in itself a radical act, but I feel it is.

The luxuriating and voluptuous figure on the left with her arm behind her head and then her legs splayed open. I'd be the bather on the right. I'd be the bather who's all hunched over with her knees pulled up to her chest, looking maybe mournful or maybe pensive, but not open to the world in the same way as her companion. But I would long to be the naked figure luxuriating on the lawn with the flowers around me.

350 *Decorative Figure. 1908*

02:40

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: Matisse's most prolific period of making sculpture were those few years before *The Red Studio*.

The idea of sculpture for him was one of expressing the vitality of the female figure, not by this realistic resemblance, he's wanting to create a work of art that has its own expressive reality, its own formal force.

The view from the back is incredible. The way that the negative spaces interact—the spaces between her arms and her body, or between her two legs and the base—these are so complicated, structurally.

Writer, Siri Hustvedt: *Decorative Figure* is a pensive, thoughtful woman. She's thoroughly in command of her own body. Her head is stunningly erect, despite the fact that her body is leaning in one direction. She's perched, confidently, on this base. She has her hands suggestively located between her thighs, but that too has an autoerotic and confident quality to it.

Ann Temkin: We think today of the word “decoration” in a derogatory way, like “oh, that's decorative.” The decorative arts, such as textiles or ceramics, have always had a subsidiary ranking to painting and sculpture. Also, the decorative arts have been linked with women. Matisse wanted to upend that. He used that word “decoration” in a very specific way. It was something artistic, imaginary, creative. And part of his goal with his art was to decorate and make the world more beautiful.

351 Untitled (Female Nude) Ceramic. 1907

02:08

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: Matisse worked for about a year with this ceramicist called Andre Metthey on what turned out to be about 40 vases, dishes, tiles. He loved that work. He was so interested in decorative arts, as a collector of ceramics, a collector of textiles. These are mainly known because of him including them in his paintings, like *The Red Studio*, not because they were featured in exhibitions.

Writer, Claire Messud: The rendition of it in *The Red Studio*—this plate is next to a glass, that looks as though you might just be putting some lunch on the plate.

There's this question about what is art and the status of art and is art something separate from life? And I think all of his work is saying art and life are totally intertwined and are the same thing. And I love that these naked figures are all speaking to each other, and they're speaking from the sort of privileged position of art on the wall to the everyday plate.

Ann Temkin: Matisse, with this plate, has this very relaxed way of painting a female figure. The brush strokes outlining her body, you feel him doing it with a few minutes of effort and these almost like little stamped flowers, just with the tip of the brush to get the five petals of blue around the center of yellow because then they dry. No erasing, no backtracking. It's almost like a sketch pad.

I think working with ceramic brought out that relaxed side of him and that just pleasurable act of painting in a very spontaneous way.

Pleasure was so important to Matisse and also so hard-won. When he was talking, for example, to students, he said Don't think this comes easy, don't think getting to where I had to get to make these look natural was easy. It was anything but. I absolutely worked myself to the bone to figure out how to arrive at these results that just seemed almost inevitable.

353 Untitled (Study for Reclining Nude). 1911

01:22

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: There's one painting in *The Red Studio* that we could not borrow for the exhibition. It's actually the biggest in the painting. It was called *Large Nude*. And it was a painting that Matisse asked to have destroyed after his death. We're not exactly sure why, if Matisse felt it was unresolved or it became damaged.

There are five, to our knowledge, drawings that he made planning this picture and these have never been presented before as a set. Matisse's daughter Marguerite posed for these drawings. He always started his work in observation.

Artist, Faith Ringgold: I don't think there's any way you can draw a body without looking at one. We had models, I think that's very, very important.

Curator, Ann Temkin: But then as his work became more and more adventurous it was starting a new language that had almost nothing to do with that model.

Artist, Lisa Yuskavage: As a young person, when I went to art school, there was just always a naked person lying there for us to draw.

I really am very interested in this particular period in art when everyone was painting figuratively. And there was never a question that the challenge for the painter was to make something pictorially different. Otherwise, hang your hat up and go home.

354 *The Blue Window. 1913*

00:45

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: *The Blue Window* is painted from the bedroom of Henri and Amélie Matisse. And what you see in the distance is the rooftop of the studio. This is actually the only painting in Matisse's career in which he portrayed the exterior of the studio building that's in *The Red Studio*.

The foreground is the dressing table of Madame Matisse.

Writer, Claire Messud: We have a very pretty green bud vase in which there are a spray of flowers, and then there's what I imagine is a sculpture to the right of that. And in the front is a dish with a brooch.

This is the thing I felt so much looking at the objects in a number of his paintings is they were everyday objects, the little things that make up a life, but each one has its story, where it came from, who gave it to you, what it means to you.

Ann Temkin: It's a very intimate picture on the one hand and yet one that is so expansive in that this blue takes over, not only the interior, but the exterior, the trees, as well as the sky.

Claire Messud: There's this harmony between the indoors and the outdoors, the harmony between what's on the dresser and these sorts of festive, dreamlike trees that look like balloons, and the moon that looks like a stone or a spaceship. What's outside the window is not separate from life. They're in this beautiful relationship to one another.

Ann Temkin: In all of the studio paintings in the exhibition, there are windows, there are paintings. Are the windows paintings? Are the paintings windows? And you realize how much this back and forth between life and art mattered to Matisse's work.

355 Still Life with Geraniums. 1910

02:14

[Audio](#)

Artist, Faith Ringgold: Matisse uses his color beautifully. He's a wonderful colorist. He's a wonderful colorist.

Curator, Ann Temkin: Matisse loved flowers. He was delighting, always, in showing visitors his garden. He talked about the colors of flowers as the primary inspiration for the way he worked to make the colors on his canvases alive.

Professor, Mehammed Mack: A flower is such a dense concentration of many different colors arranged in this visually inviting way. And it seems like it's a color key, everything around it takes on a new feel or a new meaning because of that little section of the painting.

Artist, Lisa Yuskavage: I remember, in school, this sense that color was more emotional, more feminine or female. I felt always sensitive towards that reading of Matisse, but in many of these paintings, these are complex color games that he's playing. And in some ways, you've never seen color like he's used it.

Ann Temkin: You see the very realistic details of the studio that you don't see in *The Red Studio*, which is that there are these wood plank floors and wood panel walls. But instead of very ordinary colors of wood, Matisse has liberated himself from needing to have color describe a certain part of a room.

Still Life with Geraniums has this incredible floral textile that bends and twists all through the center of the painting. He certainly put as much love and personality into these still lives, whether they were a flower or pottery or a textile, these objects had as much meaning to him as human models did.

Writer, Claire Messud: The details that move us most powerfully are precisely the things that in real life cannot endure. They're the moments of holding your mother's hand or sitting in a garden eating a peach in August or hearing a bird sing outside your window. And with painting all these senses can be rendered, and one feels with Matisse, rendered as he experienced them. Matisse said that he believed the whole of an artist to be in his work, and I believe that too.

356 Nasturtiums with the Painting “Dance” I. 1912

02:01

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: The flowers in *Nasturtiums with “The Dance”* are the same flowers in the vase at the foreground of *The Red Studio*. Here, the nasturtiums are in front of MoMA's painting, *Dance I*, which he kept on the back wall of his studio for 30 years.

Writer, Claire Messud: When I think of Matisse, I think of his dancers, I think of that exuberance, that embodied freedom and joy.

If you look at the table on which the nasturtiums stand, the back leg of this little table seems to land in the painting. What's in the world and what he has painted, these two worlds are one and the same and are inseparable.

Ann Temkin: He's linking the flowers and the dancers in a way very typical for Matisse, where real plants, painted plants, real life, art, are all connected, and almost ambiguously interconnected. That kind of constant back and forth between art and life, or living and working—completely fundamental to his art.

The artist Faith Ringgold included Matisse's circle of dancers in a painted quilt titled *Matisse's Model*. It's part of a series that tells the fictional story of a young Black woman visiting Paris from the United States in the 1920s and she becomes part of the history of modern art.

Artist, Faith Ringgold: Matisse's paintings always make me think of dancing, beauty, and love. They make me want to strip off my clothes and join hands with a circle of friends to dance till both my body and my soul are so tired, I fall asleep on a beautiful chaise-longue and say, “Ahh, Matisse's *La Danse* did that.”

357 Studio, Quai Saint-Michel. 1916

01:59

[Audio](#)

Curator, Ann Temkin: This painting was made during World War I, when he was using as a studio a cramped apartment near the Notre Dame Cathedral.

Artist, Lisa Yuskavage: The first thing that strikes me about this painting is the otherworldly sense of light. The elegant use of changing from blue violet to red violet, down to yellow, back to blue violet through the window. It's just really beautiful. It's a very striking sense of iridescence.

Writer, Siri Hustvedt: That model is bored and angry. But she's also very human.

Lisa Yuskavage: Her body is not a solid, it is a void. It's painted this kind of thin, lemony yellow almost like the canvas itself. She's there because of what's around her. That black paint that comes up and hits her hip, that's what's creating her hip.

There's a big difference between trying to paint something realistically and making painted things. That's not a woman, that's a painted thing. And that's where the delight comes from in this painting—it's just the way in which he gives himself all of this liberty and then it all holds together. And we believe what we're seeing is a woman posing, but there's no woman there. It's all paint.

Ann Temkin: Matisse's work generally doesn't talk about politics and history. It's much more all about his own world, which is his studio. He's doing that here again. Yet, there is a wartime feeling to it for me. Whereas *The Red Studio* is almost like this imaginary paradise, this is a painting of constraint, a little colorless, which is a contradiction for Matisse.

358 *Large Red Interior. 1948*

01:53

[Audio](#)

Artist, Faith Ringgold: I love that red that he dances around with.

Curator, Ann Temkin: The way *Large Red Interior* connects to *The Red Studio* is, for me, an intensely moving aspect of Matisse's artistic evolution. It's actually his last finished oil painting, and it seems that Matisse returned to *The Red Studio*.

He became as radical again in his 70s as he was almost 40 years earlier. The surfaces became so bright and so exploding with color. This whole device of putting his own artworks in his own art becomes the grand structure of this painting. As with *The Red Studio*, it too depicts a corner. So that line that you see between the ink drawing and the painting is actually the corner of his room.

Writer, Claire Messud: Matisse always started from observation. Then what can you still do? What are the freedoms that you nonetheless have?

I always say this with my students when they're writing: you can set something in an entirely different world, but you can also take what's there and just imagine that you're a couple of inches above the ground. That gives this possibility for all sorts of things to change. You're opening reality to possibility.

Matisse is inspiring as someone who kept following his own path. And as he grew older, was still pushing himself. What you can see visually is ever greater joy. The color and the vibrancy is everywhere.

Ann Temkin: And even though it's not Venetian red, it's a very bright cadmium red, it's exactly the same kind of all-red feeling that you get. And for me, that fact that his last painting is somehow a look-back at *The Red Studio* is not a coincidence.