

# Talent, Mind and Wisdom: On the Oriental Context in Matisse's Architectural Works of Art — France Rose of Vence Chapel as an Example

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## Abstract

Through the study of Matisse himself to explore the process of the road of art, to understand in the social context of the time, the Eastern high-end art through the loss of cultural relics overseas, greatly influenced a group of modernist masters of art, who through the study of the study of Oriental paintings, porcelains, furniture and other works of art and design, and constantly absorbed and learned from the Oriental mood in their works to express the presentation, so as to influence the influence of their works has been felt for generations to come. A large number of Matisse's art works have an inevitable potential connection with the spirit of Chinese art, but also as a result of his study and borrowing of traditional Chinese art. Thus, it reminds us that we should create a modern cultural spirit that reflects the significance of the times on the basis of absorbing traditional Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** Matisse, rose chapel, color expression, oriental mood

## 1. Introduction

Architecture is a living fossil that writes history, carries the life of culture and records stories. As author Victor Hugo wrote in *Notre Dame de Paris*, "Great buildings, like mountains, are the product of many centuries. Art changes, while buildings often remain intact." As one of Matisse's few architectural works, the Rose Chapel in Vence, France, is full of his lifetime of artistic attainments.

## 2. Matisse's Love Affair with Art

### 2.1 Gifted — A Talented Artist Brought on by Illness

Born in the small town of Le Cadot in the south of France, Henri Matisse, one of the most

prominent painters of the 20th century, would not have touched painting at all had it not been for an attack of appendicitis. It was through this illness that, at the age of 20, he found his vocation. For at the time, he never wanted to pursue a career in art. Instead, he was going to be a notary clerk. Being too weak, he was also not able to take on the family business, as a trader of seeds. This was impossible for him. There was nothing he could do about the menial tasks. He therefore took up the study of law, making it his aim to become a notary clerk. He studied for a year in Paris. We might think that he visited all the museums of the capital. But that wasn't the case; he wasn't the least bit

interested in art. But everything changed the moment his stomach began to ache. Appendicitis forced him to stay in bed for weeks. He knew his neighbor had an oil paint box, so he wished he had one to pass the time. His mother agreed to buy him one, but his father argued that a young man in the country shouldn't waste his time with it. Nonetheless, according to Matisse's account in his memoirs, his mother still bought one for herself. "From then on, when I got that box of oil colors, I felt where my life was," he said. He started by painting some still lifes. In the blink of an eye, the first paintings depicted some legal writings. After 10 years of painting, Matisse was married and the father of three children, but he was ready to leave everything behind. In 1903, he went to work in a textile factory. He and his father went to the art museum in Lille and saw Goya's paintings. This inspired him again to decide to become like Goya and invent a new language of painting. He decided to stay in the field of painting and in 1904 he discovered the light of St. Tropez and the South of France. In 1905, color played a pivotal role in his paintings. The Fauvists were born. Matisse became famous.

## 2.2 *The Creation of Fauvism*

Matisse first studied under the academy painter William Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), because of his personal interest and the teacher's traditional law of contradiction in 1892 to the symbolism of the first public exhibition in the "Salon of the National Union of Fine Arts", a success. The first public exhibition of Symbolist paintings was held at the Salon of the National Union of Fine Arts in 1892. Two years later, Matisse, who had just begun to make a name for himself, started a family, married a gentle and intelligent woman, and was able to fulfill his long-cherished dream of creating sculptures in between his paintings.

The period between 1896 and 1904 was a time when the artist was looking for a new direction. Matisse had a revolutionary idea in his heart, and began to pay attention to the works of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism, in order to draw nourishment from various styles. For a period of time, he went to the streets, cafes and other places to paint countless paintings; Pissarro, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Sinek and other painters of the expressive methods, so that he was further familiar with the characteristics of the color,

Cézanne's skills and promote his study of new techniques. 1899, Matisse's landscapes, figure paintings, still-life paintings are very different from the old days, the form of the simple, bright colors, so that the teacher Moisés, the teacher of the new style of painting, the new style. The simplicity of the forms and the brightness of the colors surprised his teacher, Moreau, who, at the beginning of the 20th century, seemed to be awakened by the expressive power of strong colors. He began to use exaggerated colors and unrestrained brushstrokes to shape the form, and by 1903, works with obvious "Fauvism" characteristics appeared in his pen in advance. At first glance, this kind of work seems to be rash and sloppy, but in fact, in the midst of the "messy painting" shows the painter's sensitivity and rich creativity: the color squeezed directly from the paint tube is no longer meant to reproduce the visual reality of the objective object, but becomes a means for the painter to pursue his inner emotion and self-expression, and to explore a new form of painting space constrained by color and movement. It became a means for the artist to pursue inner emotion and self-expression, and formally explored a new kind of painting space constrained by color. The Fauvists ultimately rejected the traditional forms of the West and the aesthetic habits associated with them, realizing the liberation of color and driving the abstraction of the plastic arts in a dynamic way. Matisse also found his own way in a fundamental reform of form.

Unfortunately, Fauvism only prevailed for 3 years, in 1907, Fauvism experienced a crisis, the face of partners one by one to abandon the purpose of Fauvism to go, Matisse instead of firm conviction, and then nearly half a century of artistic career in the adherence to unswervingly, to become the only lifelong to maintain the Fauvist style of painting. During this period, Matisse was strongly attacked by opponents, but fortunately, a few collectors had the foresight to buy his works in large quantities, and Matisse's value doubled instantly.

After 1906, Matisse entered a prolific period of artistic production. His solo exhibitions moved from city to city, including Paris, New York, Moscow, London, Stockholm, and Berlin. He also took the opportunity to travel throughout Europe and North Africa, touring the art world in search of new sources of inspiration. He became one of the most active painters on the international scene at the time, and from 1914

onwards, Matisse traveled year after year to the south to spend the winter in the port of Nice, where he completed many of his works in a quiet studio, where women and still lifes were his favorite subjects. The artist was happy and tireless to study the relationship between various shades, looking for new techniques in modeling, colorful but not flashy, bold but not wild brushstrokes, the strong primary colors of the Fauvist era gradually turned into quiet and harmonious images, which not only contain wisdom and poetry, but also pleasing to the eye. Matisse thus gained the reputation of “the playground of colors and lines”.

After the 1820s, Matisse broadened his scope of work, demonstrating his talent in sculpture, printmaking, murals, and illustration, and in the 1930s, when his art reached its peak, he was recognized by his peers as one of the most celebrated masters of the century.

Matisse, who was modest and refined, had no ambition for glory and wealth in life and fame and fortune in the painting world, and his character was very different from that of Picasso, another giant in the painting world at the same time. During World War II, both of them participated in the resistance movement against German fascism and joined the French Communist Party, and took part in progressive activities politically, but Matisse did not have any embodiment in his art, and did not use painting as a weapon. He was a firm believer in the Greek philosopher Plato's theory that “beauty is the gift of pleasure”, and in his autobiography he described his lifelong pursuit as follows: “The art I aspire to is one of balance, purity and serenity, and I avoid touching on distressing or suffocating subjects; a work of art should be like a comfort chair, so as to bring peace and solace to the human being. The artwork should be like a comfort chair, so that people's moods can be tranquilized and comforted.”

### *2.3 Intangible Oriental Art Episode*

We can study Matisse's oriental plot by studying the painter's psychological changes and inner emotions and that obsession with nature. From the numerous Matisse's art works, Matisse's paintings and Chinese paintings are similar in that they both express a kind of self-feeling, as if Matisse's paintings are not purely realistic imitations of objects, but rather more expressive of the feelings given to him by objects in the

environment at that time. Chinese paintings are similar in the sense that they are more in pursuit of brushwork, interest, and elegant literary thinking.

### **3. Matisse's Comprehension of Oriental Moods**

As a western master of art, Matisse's artworks are full of oriental episodes, such as simple colors, like the simple brush and ink in Chinese painting, and then the brush and ink-like lines, as well as the pursuit of displaying the spirit of the painting object with all its might. Matisse's unique painting style is not only a display of his artistic talent, but also a strong desire to create, especially important is the breakthrough and innovation of Western realistic painting. It is obvious that he absorbed many elements in his works, such as Japanese ukiyo-e prints, Chinese paintings, Chinese paper-cutting art, and Chinese ceramics. These strong oriental flavors add great influence and unique charm to Matisse's paintings.

#### *3.1 Japanese Ukiyo-e Prints in Matisse's Paintings*

Matisse first came into contact with the Japanese ukiyo-e in 1903, when many exhibits with oriental flavor in the Oriental Art Exposition deeply attracted Matisse, paintings of bright colors, simple and strong, these forms of color deeply attracted this Matisse, because it is his favorite form. Just as in painting, Matisse often did not depict things visually, but through subjective expression of the inner world, the painter's emotions and so on.

#### *3.2 The Embodiment of Chinese Traditional Painting in Matisse's Paintings*

Many of Matisse's paintings are rich in Chinese elements, such as the uniqueness of the Chinese painting form, the use of flat techniques to express things, Matisse is precisely the pursuit of this mood. Leaving space for the viewer's imagination in order to achieve a potential exchange between the artist and the viewer. While Western artworks are often very full of paintings, Matisse applied the white space of Oriental paintings to his own paintings, making the picture achieve a different effect.

#### *3.3 The Embodiment of Chinese Paper Cutting Art in Matisse's Paintings*

Matisse's paintings reached the extreme of purified color expression, and achieved a clear and lofty artistic realm compared with classicism. These are also the inspirations given to Matisse by the art of Chinese paper-cutting.

The symbolism of Chinese paper-cutting is very strong, symbolizing beauty and harmony, symbolizing joy, and Matisse's paper-cutting works are also the same, symbolism is very strong, and the essence is very the same.

#### *3.4 Chinese Ceramic Art in Matisse's Paintings*

Chinese ceramic art has a long history and complementary with the art of painting, Chinese painting first appeared in the new era of the era of colored pottery, we can find that China's colored pottery art comes from life and nature, very rich in the essence of the flavor of life.

#### **4. Evidence of Matisse's Friendship with the Nuns – Rosary Chapel of Vence**

Matisse has been suffering from illness in his later years, but still insisted on the creation of the art of paper-cutting, either lying in bed or sitting in a wheelchair, concentrating on cutting out various images from pre-colored paper, works are still full of boldness, perfection, and cheerful and optimistic spirit, which is very reminiscent of the Fauvist era of his passionate love and obsession with the beauty of the form.

Matisse died on November 3, 1954, at the age of 85, in Nice, where he had lived for many years. Seventy years ago, Henri Matisse, the master of modernist art, died in Vence, in the south of France, and until the end of his life, the master of color did not stop working. At the end of his life, he offered a medium for color expression that he had never before explored: architecture.

##### *4.1 A Unique House of Worship Made Possible by the Trust of a Dear Friend*

In sunny Southern France, between the seaside cities of Nice and Antibes, there is a small town called Vence, where Matisse spent the last days of his life. Matisse used his last energies to design a chapel (Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence) as a thank you to Sister Jacques-Marie, who had taken care of him after an operation for intestinal cancer.

##### *4.2 Distinctive Architectural Appearance*

Blue and white, color elements that appear frequently in Matisse's later works. The small scale of Matisse's Sundays is easy to overlook when walking down the street, but the clean blue and white color of the building's exterior makes it instantly recognizable at a distance, and the blue and white pattern of the roof stands out from its surroundings while reflecting the brilliant sunshine of Southern France and the azure Mediterranean Sea.

The chapel is not overly decorated, but the entrance and façade are painted in Matisse's style, hinting at the designer of the building. Entering the chapel, the rose window, the frescoes, and even the crucifix, all became vehicles for Matisse's creations. As an artist who had spent his entire life working with oil paintings, he left them behind at this point and replaced them with light.

##### *4.3 Simple and Uncomplicated Interior Decoration*

Matisse depicts biblical stories such as the Virgin and Jesus and the Crucifixion with his characteristic minimalist lines. These themes, which were originally colorized in traditional churches, are returned to the essence of narrative in Matisse's painting. The rose window, in the form of a paper-cut collage, echoes the vivid lines of the frescoes. The curves of the work contrast harmoniously with the straight lines of the building itself, the regular paving of the floor, and the straight lines of the tiles.

The color combination of blue, yellow and green makes the light through the rose window fresh and quiet. Inside the chapel, there is no more oppression of traditional churches, but a certain naturalness and innocence is incredibly revealed. Maybe it is this kind of easygoing and touching, in which one does not feel humble and small, but also produces a certain sense of holiness, and can not help but be devout.

Matisse's little chapel uses the last energies of his life, and it is hard to imagine an octogenarian, an atheist, constructing such a pure religious space. Absolutely no complicated decorations, yet no minimalist coldness, returning a Catholic chapel to the essence of Abraham.

"My only religion," he once wrote, "is a total love of the work I am to create."

In this town, there is an exquisite and beautiful chapel: Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence, which in English is The Rosary Chapel, translated as the Church of the Rosary. Whenever the sun shines through the stained glass windows into the church, the colorful light and shadow cast on the wall can instantly turn the environment into a space full of dreamy colors.

This church was designed by Matisse and is his largest surviving work. 1947 was a time when Europe was still reeling from the scars of World War II and people were busy rebuilding their homes. In Vence, in the south of France, Matisse was emaciated by intestinal cancer, and only the



Mediterranean sunshine could bring him any warmth.

One of the greatest painters of the twentieth century, Matisse completed one of the last “weighty” works of his life in this small French town — the construction of a one-of-a-kind church for the town. Matisse himself designed every element of the building, from the exterior to the decorative details. As the culmination of his long artistic trajectory, this was the first time that the painter had designed every detail of a church in such a comprehensive, 360-degree manner, and it remains today a powerful expression of Matisse’s mature artistic style.

Vence, in fact, is a true art village. Located on a hilltop, the village gives the impression of a bird’s nest built in the trees, a typical “vulture’s nest village”. The old town still has its 16th-century streets, and the labyrinth of winding roads lined with medieval buildings arranged on the hillside exudes a quaint atmosphere.

The entire old town of Vence, is surrounded by medieval buildings and walls, while the paths on the inside of the walls go right around the town in a circle. At the heart of this buzzards’ nest of a town is the 12th century church of St. Paul, whose bell tower is the highest point in the old town. The town’s most famous is the Meg Foundation’s Museum of Modern Art, which exhibits modern works by Matisse, Miro, Braque, Chagall, Kalda and others, and some of the collection has traveled to China for exhibitions. The collection of the Museo de Arte Moderna de São Paulo de Vence is considered one of the most important in the field of 20th century European visual arts.

Regarding the chapel, it took Matisse a total of four years to build it in his later years when he was very ill. Why, you must ask, would a great painter at the end of his life want to build a chapel in this town?

This brings us to the “goddess” of the church, a nun named Monique, a close friend of Matisse.

In 1942, Matisse was 72 years old. He had just undergone a major operation and, living alone, he was looking for a nurse to help him recover. He placed an advertisement in the newspaper looking for a “beautiful young nurse” to take care of him. An apprentice nurse named Monique Bourgeois applied for the job.

Monique came from a family of war veterans,

she was raised in a strict household and her mother rarely complimented her, always saying under her breath that she was, “ugly and mediocre.” So Monique was surprised when Mathis hired her immediately, “I’m young, but not pretty.” However, the nurse had thick hair, had a round face, and crucially, her evocative eyes were very moving, and in Matisse’s eyes, she was undoubtedly beautiful.

And even more surprising to Mathis, Monique was studious and enthusiastic, not only taking care of his health, but also becoming his own model and inspiration.

Initially, Monique was very surprised to see herself in Matisse’s paintings, because she felt that the beautiful women in the paintings did not resemble her at all, and she even told Matisse that since she was a little girl, she had always thought that she was ugly, but Matisse said that she was very beautiful, and that he didn’t only paint the beauty that he saw in front of his eyes, but he would also paint the beauty that he felt in his heart. The great artist used his brush to tell a young girl — you are in fact very beautiful.

This pair of oblivious friends inspired the old man to create new ideas in his art, so the two of them transcended their employment relationship and became good friends who shared the same heart.

Matisse described Monique as “a great man”. Monique stayed at Matisse’s bedside for long periods of time, reading to him, helping him with his paintings, and taking care of him. Monique said, “I felt comfortable, I was able to breathe freely and to relax.”

Matisse had Monique model for him in a beautiful dress and amber necklace. The old man was mesmerized by her arms and elbows. During that time, Matisse produced a large number of works modeled after Monique, but never one in the nude.

In 1946, young Monique decided to make her religious aspirations her life’s work, and she entered a convent and became a nun. After this, she continued to provide care for Matisse, and the painter eventually bought a house in Vence, not far from the convent.

In the summer of 1947, Monique confided in Matisse that she hoped the great artist would help them with the women’s convent by decorating a room in the convent. Matisse

listened and had bigger ideas and ambitions. He wanted to design a chapel for Sister Monique that could be used by more than one person.

The history behind the world's churches, large and small, and the purpose of their construction are each unique, a labor of love that has been poured out over the years by architects and artists of different eras with a love of God, beauty, and hope, rather than just a purely religious endeavor. Matisse's construction of this chapel for a nurse who cared for him late in his life is also an expression of that love.

The mutual warmth, support, and snuggling that relationships generate when one's health is compromised is priceless, as valuable as faith, and this kind of sincere and selfless devotion deserves to be remembered and celebrated. This friendship, emotion, and companionship is, in my opinion, the key to Matisse's design of this church.

So, in 1947, on the advice of the architects Auguste Perret and Milon de Peillon, and relying on the skill of the Vence craftsmen, Matisse began his solid work on this church project over the next four years. At the age of 77 and in poor health, Matisse embarked on the largest and most challenging work of his entire career.

In 1951, the church was inaugurated, and Matisse used his gifted sense of color to build the brightly stained glass windows, painted all kinds of portraits on the walls with dynamic lines, and even designed the priest's distinctive robes himself.

From the outside, it's a pure white making for a peaceful and tranquil house. Decorated with breezy ultramarine blue tiles, the facade is adorned with Matisse's seemingly random graffiti. The clean blue and white color of the building's exterior is instantly recognizable from a distance, and the blue and white pattern of the roof stands out from its surroundings while reflecting the brilliant sunshine of Southern France and the azure Mediterranean Sea.

Inside the chapel, the finest art deco contains three sets of stained glass windows. They resemble a trio completed using the colors of light: vivid green, intense yellow and bright blue that will echo each other. The stained glass windows are composed of ultramarine blue, emerald green and lark yellow. The sunlight passing through these windows will paint the floor inside the church in soft colors, sometimes

projecting patterns onto the opposite wall.

This wall also has a mural by Matisse. The mural as a whole is grey-toned, not rich in color, and with only dark lines, it paints classic stories from the Bible: the Chronicle of the Crucifixion, St. Dominic, and other drawings. Matisse depicted the Virgin and Jesus, the Crucifixion, and other biblical stories with his characteristic simplicity of line.

These subjects, originally heavily colored in traditional churches, return to the essence of narrative in Matisse's writing. In particular, the thick black lines used in the description of the story are amazing in that they do not ruin the overall brightness. It can be said that Matisse was the one who understood black and used it most skillfully.

The rose windows, which resemble a collage of paper cut-outs, echo the vivid lines of the frescoes. The curves of the work contrast harmoniously with the straight lines of the building itself, the regular paving of the floor, and the straight lines of the tiles. In the whole scene, all the colors harmoniously match almost perfectly, achieving a mysterious and wonderful balance.

The stained glass window behind the altar is filled with a cactus with needles, an oval shape, and a large rhizome, with blue flowers in bloom, showing the power of growth, showing the classic abstract art form in the hands of Matisse, who called it "the tree of life".

The design of these elements came from Matisse's repeated experiments. He would use a long wooden stick attached to a black charcoal pencil to draw repeatedly on the paper pasted on the wall to figure out the relationship between the figures, the harmony of size and dimension, and the degree of flow of the line walk when his health was in question; and he would even climb up a ladder and experiment with his artistic ideas on the wall when his body was still able to carry the load. This pursuit of artistic quality and dedication to beauty is something more precious than gold anywhere and at any time.

The entire interior of the chapel, without the oppression of traditional churches, incredibly reveals a certain naturalness and innocence. Maybe it is this kind of approachability is touching, in which, and will not feel their own humble and small, but also produce a sense of holiness, can not help but devout.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Matisse's chapel exhausted the last energies of an artist's life. We can hardly imagine that an old man in his eighties, a cancer patient, an atheist, for the sake of a friendship and affection, personally constructed such an innocent and pure religious space. There is absolutely no complicated and vulgar decoration here, and there is no coldness of the minimalist style in some contemporary buildings today, Matisse pulled a Catholic chapel back to a pure spiritual existence, celebrating the essence of "truth, goodness and beauty" space. He once wrote, "The only religion I have is the love of the work I want to create." And this chapel in Vence is the truest and most beautiful proof of that.

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