

Henri Matisse

The Dinner Table (1897) and *The Red Room* (1908)

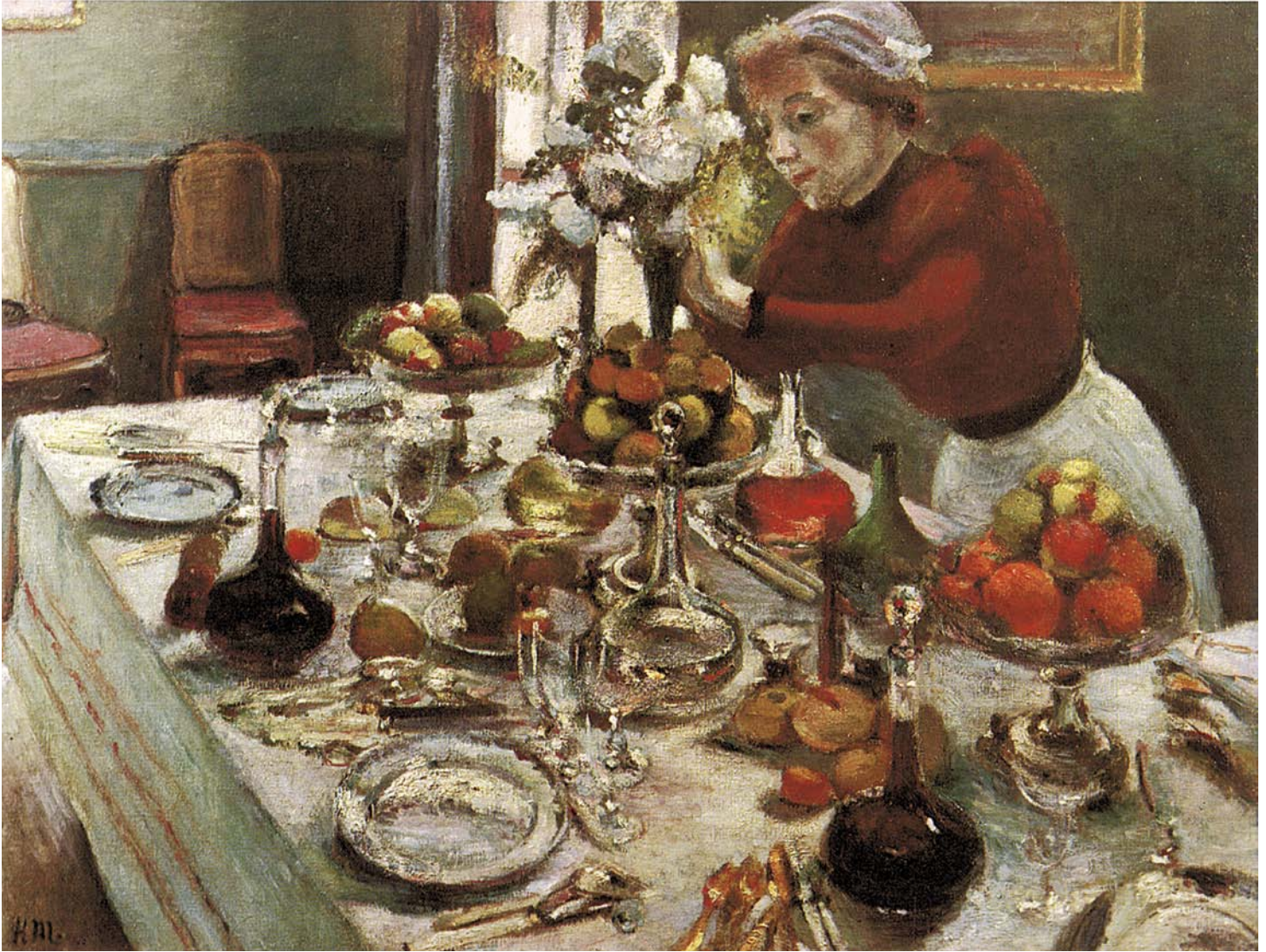


Fig. 1 Henri Matisse, *The Dinner Table*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 100x131 cm. Athens, Stavros S. Niarcos Collection.

The Same Theme

Although Matisse painted these canvases eleven years apart, the two works deal with the same theme: the preparation of a dining room table. **Elements** of the later painting are already seen in the earlier work: two chairs, a window that allows light to filter inside the room, the carafes, the silver bowls heaped with red and yellow fruit, the female figure with a light-coloured apron who is portrayed in a three-quarter turn with one arm actively reaching out.

However, the later painting is the **result of an extreme simplification, in which colour plays a highly accentuated role**, becoming Matisse's main vehicle for conveying light. Wherever light needs to be more intense he chooses a stronger colour without any attempt to lighten it or touch it up with white brush strokes. Above all the artist uses combinations of colours to highlight their own reciprocal expressive qualities.

From Light's Reflections to the Objects' Colours

The 1908 work is like a sampling of reds interrupted, in the upper left, by a green rectangle. Baskets of flowers at the centre of blue swirls, like a series of symmetrical volutes that

simulate fabric patterns, appear 'printed' on the area of the red plane. Notice how the combination of red/blue to connote an indoor room is darker than the sunlit blue/green combination which connotes the natural world as seen through the window.

By contrast, in the 1897 painting, the **drawing** is not visible and the brush strokes, taken from an observation of Pissarro and Pointillism, apply fragmentary colour. In the 1908 version, the **surfaces** are flat and the strongly summarised drawing is emphasized by the outlines drawn in black. In the early painting we see that the artist focuses on the play of light, as it is depicted in the reflections on the table objects. Eleven years later it is the **colour** of the objects themselves that interests him, showing how, in the meantime, he had abandoned the exploration that the Impressionists held so dear: the investigation of phenomena generated by white light falling on the surfaces of various physical objects.

Two Different Spatial Constructions

In these two art works we also see a drastic difference in the construction of space.

In the later work the progression towards the background



Fig. 1 Henri Matisse, *The Red Room (Harmony in Red)*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 180x200 cm. St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum.
Below: compositional diagram.

is suggested by a series of coloured planes. Starting in the foreground, the yellow wicker chair suggests a first position in space. The red around it unites the table with the wall behind it, thereby confusing the difference between the two spaces. The third plane is represented by the window showing its outdoor greenery (again divided by colour into different planes: the green hedge, the white trees, followed by the pink house and, finally, the light blue sky). However, Matisse has arranged the objects in space in such a way as to flatten the scene, denying even this simplified perspective. The backs of the chairs are exactly the same size even if one is closer to us so we expect it to be larger than the other. The yellow jug is behind the brown one but it receives more emphasis because of its colour and because of the plate on which it is placed. Again, the larger fruit bowl – situated closer to the window – is actually farther from the viewer. However it is especially the continuity of the wallpaper and tablecloth (on the left

there is no real distinction made between them) that creates the tension of a two-dimensional reading versus a possible three dimensional space.

The Colour of Emotions

During the years that separated these two works Matisse had explored the techniques of decoration, which especially influenced his choice of palette. It also led him to consider **the**

entire picture plane as an area of uniform importance; it was no longer necessary to concentrate the main action at the centre, leaving the margins less defined. But above all we should emphasise that Matisse had begun to create **painting that communicated emotions through his use of colour**. His art tended toward an **extreme synthesis of form** in which he eliminated half-tones as well as any narrative and realist elements that might be superfluous to the viewer.

