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Matisse, "The Moroccans": Vendo por si mesmo

Matisse, "The Moroccans": Seeing For Yourself

Matisse, "The Moroccans": Ver por ti mismo

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RESUMO

Um pintor e artista autônomo de Nova York descreve uma experiência ao visitar a pintura de Matisse "Os Marroquinos" no Museu de Arte Moderna com um grupo de jovens e suas famílias. Ela descreve seus métodos de educação estética, que incluem encorajar os visitantes do museu a se envolverem profundamente com as obras de arte, observando, fazendo perguntas e participando de discussões em grupo. Quando as conclusões dos visitantes sobre "Os marroquinos" se revelam conflitantes com o texto da parede do museu, eles questionam no que deveriam acreditar - em seus próprios olhos ou na interpretação oficial do museu sobre esta obra abstrata. Conectando essa experiência à escrita de John Dewey sobre o propósito da arte e o poder do observador para ativar um objeto de arte, o autor reflete sobre o papel dos museus e as prioridades às vezes conflitantes de engajamento público e autoridade acadêmica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Museus; Abstração; Artista do Ensino; Matisse

ABSTRACT

A New York painter and freelance teaching artist describes an experience visiting Matisse's painting "The Moroccans" at the Museum of Modern Art with a group of young people and their families. She describes her aesthetic education methods which include encouraging museum visitors to engage deeply with works of art by noticing, asking questions, and participating in group discussion. When the visitors' conclusions about "The Moroccans" turn out to be at odds with the museum's wall text, they question what they should believe—their own eyes or the museum's official interpretation of this abstract work. Connecting this experience to John Dewey's writing about the purpose of art and the power of the perceiver to activate an art object, the author reflects on the role of museums and the sometimes conflicting priorities of public engagement and scholarly authority.

KEY WORDS

Museums; Abstraction; Teaching Artist; Matisse

RESUMEN

Un pintor y artista docente autónomo de Nueva York describe una experiencia al visitar el cuadro de Matisse "Los marroquíes" en el Museo de Arte Moderno con un grupo de jóvenes y sus familias. Ella describe sus métodos de educación estética, que incluyen alentar a los visitantes del museo a involucrarse profundamente con las obras de arte al darse cuenta, hacer preguntas y participar en discusiones grupales. Cuando las conclusiones de los visitantes sobre "Los marroquíes" resultan contrarias al texto de la pared del museo, se preguntan qué deberían creer: sus propios ojos o la interpretación oficial del museo de esta obra abstracta. Conectando esta experiencia con los escritos de John Dewey sobre el propósito del arte y el poder del perceptor para activar un objeto de arte, el autor reflexiona sobre el papel de los museos y las prioridades a veces conflictivas del compromiso público y la autoridad académica.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Museos; Abstracción; Artista Docente; Matisse

A viewer looking at a painting may be understood as activating the work through careful examination. This experience depends on the artist responsible for creating the work but also the perceiver's attention to opening up to the work's possibilities. John Dewey describes this transaction as the aesthetic experience. The artist assembles discrete elements—lines, shape, color—into an expressive and cohesive whole. The perceiver encounters the art object and uses observations and associations to discover what is there. Dewey asserts in *Art as Experience* that this active participation is what ignites the art object as an exciting site for revelatory meaning-making and creative exchange.

As a museum educator, I see my job as helping others come into their role as perceivers. Taking each artwork as a starting point, I encourage deep, sustained looking that leads to critical thinking about what the object may reveal to us. Whether it's a work of contemporary art or something that was created hundreds of years ago, I always start by asking museum-goers to start with what they can see.

In March 2019 while working as a teaching artist at the Museum of Modern Art, I was asked to design a family tour about abstract art for children ages 8-10 and their adult companions. The objective was to introduce young people to the concept of abstraction and explore the power of abstract art to suggest the essence of a person, place, or object using reduced details and suggestive shapes and gestures. My plan involved three paintings that had both rich areas of abstraction and occasionally more defined or recognizable elements from our lived world.

Henri Matisse's *The Moroccans* was the last stop on my tour. The painting is large, about five feet tall by nine feet wide, and is one of many works that Matisse painted based on his trip to Morocco in 1912. I had never used *The Moroccans* in my teaching before, so I collected some contextual information to have at the ready just in case I needed it, primarily turning to MoMA's wall text adjacent to the work and the catalog of the museum's permanent collection.

Fig. 1, Henri Matisse, The Moroccans, 1915-16, Oil on canvas, 181.3 x 279.4 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

On the day of the tour, a group of families followed me up to MoMA's permanent collection floor. The group included first-time visitors to the museum as well as a couple of regulars who had participated in our family programs before. As leader of the tour, my goal was to get everyone to participate in responding to and thinking about the work on the walls. Group conversation is an extremely powerful way to make sense of a work of art, and I find that tours are most effective when each member of the group is actively engaged in noticing, describing, thinking, and listening, adults and children together.

At each stop on the tour, we started with objective noticing. I asked everyone to list aloud what they saw in the work while doing their best to not express likes, dislikes, or interpretations. Each art object demands its own vocabulary of noticing, so the lists included shapes, colors, lines, textures, and familiar imagery. At a certain point, I shifted the discussion to questions about how these many elements were related. Were we seeing repetitions, contrasts, asymmetry, movement? How is black dividing the picture into sections? What are the many ways the artist is using circles? Slowly the parts began to assemble in our collective imagination as a whole. Lastly, we talked about what conclusions we were drawing about the work. Gathering together everything we had noticed and connected, what might the artist be saying? Did the painting remind us of anything?

This process of deep and communal engagement goes through describing, analyzing, and interpreting in such a way that each member of the group leaves with an experience of the work of art both shared and personal. As facilitator of the

conversation I often look for and encourage opposing views and opinions. My job is also to remember everyone's contributions so that I can remind the group of relevant remarks as we're making connections. To do this I have to remain open to what a group is seeing, and attend with fresh eyes and curiosity as I stand before an artwork that I have looked at for many years.

By the time we arrived at the Matisse gallery everyone in the group was warmed up, feeling comfortable with contributing to our conversation, and enjoying the discoveries that were being made about each piece. The children were especially excited by *The Moroccans*, which was the most abstract work on the tour. They talked about the shapes they recognized and saw repeated, the circles and the rectangles. They pointed out the bold colors and the large areas of black. They wondered if those blue and white striped circles could be flowers? On a terrace? And the white circle on the right floating above a blue rectangle might be a head, or a turban? And if that is a turban, might the architecture in the top left corner perhaps be a mosque?

By this time we were rolling. All of the group's observations were strongly echoed by the text on the wall, which I was strategically blocking by standing in front of it. I asked them what was going on in the bottom left hand corner of the painting. One child thought that we were looking down from above at the tops of trees from a balcony. Another noticed a repeated bunch of circles. These were the same shape as the head of the seated figure seen from behind on the right. They were making connections between the parts of the painting. A very excited 10-year-old said that she and her family were Muslim and she knew that those were people praying. She got right into position and imitated the way the figures were bowing and lifting back up. "And they are on a prayer rug!" she said. So all of the pieces were fitting together in a tidy bundle of a scene from Morocco. I shared the title of the painting with them—*The Moroccans*—and then we read the wall text together:

> Matisse developed this painting of what he described as "the terrace of the little cafe of the casbah" in the years following two visits to Morocco, in 1912 and 1913... A balcony with a flowerpot and a mosque behind it are at upper left, at lower left is a still life of vegetables, and to the right is a man wearing a round turban, seen from behind.

The explanation from the wall text did not settle well with the group. No one could agree that those shapes at the bottom were vegetables. They had fully lent themselves to the artist's point of view and had explored the world of the picture for themselves, and vegetables didn't make sense given everything else that they were able to identify in the painting. I explained to the group that the text on the wall that accompanies the painting is written by people who study works of art, but they are "just people" after all with their own ideas and opinions. I suggested that we shouldn't

let their idea be any more important than our own conclusions based on our careful viewing of the artwork.

I repeated the tour a week later and another visitor identified praying figures in the bottom left corner of *The Moroccans*. Everyone was again convinced that Matisse was not painting a still life of vegetables. Their reactions and the obvious contradiction to the wall text stuck with me. I had never thought about that section of the painting with a fresh mind, and had taken the scholarship of the museum at face value. Teaching is very often about your own learning, and it had taken the curiosity of children and new visitors to the museum to help me see *The Moroccans* for what it had to offer.

I felt that the museum should also be made aware of what the public was seeing in the work, so I wrote to my supervisor in the Education department describing the pattern. She forwarded my message to the curatorial department.

After a short time, a response was returned. The bottom left quadrant of *The Moroccans* had been questioned by visitors before! So many times, in fact, that the curatorial department had developed a form email response, which they forwarded to me:

> Dear_____,
> Many thanks for your feedback and your patience. Your concern has been voiced by other visitors before. Here is the rationale behind the wall label text for The Moroccans:
> First, there is a quote from Matisse himself, reprinted in Jack Flam, ed. Matisse on Art, Rev. ed. (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1995), p.203: "The Moroccans -- I find it difficult to describe this painting of mine with words. It is the beginning of my expression with color, with blacks and their contrasts. They are reclining figures of Moroccans, on a terrace, with their watermelons and gourds."
> In addition to this quote, there are sketches for the painting that indicate they are most likely fruits and leaves. Matisse also made a lithograph the year before (547.1953.5), based on Cézanne's Fruit and Foliage, that is also a likely source for the fruit/vegetables. I have attached an image of this lithograph for your reference.
> I hope this helps clarify things.
> Warmly, _____

Attached was an image of the lithograph (omitted here for copyright reasons).

Intrigued that my inquiry was among enough others to have a stock answer on file, but frustrated at the unyielding nature of the reply, I went in search of more information.

In 1990, *The Moroccans* was featured in a special traveling exhibition titled *Matisse in Morocco: the Paintings and Drawings 1912-1913*. The exhibition was collectively organized by the National Gallery of Art, MoMA, and several other institutions. It included 23 paintings and 47 drawings that were produced by Matisse during his visits to Morocco in 1912 and 1913.

Jack Cowart—curator of 20th-century art at the National Gallery and chief curator of *Matisse in Morocco*—wrote about *The Moroccans* in the catalog for the exhibition. Based on sketches that Matisse made during his trips to Morocco in 1912 and 1913, Cowart suggests that the artist worked and reworked the painting many times. Cowart also quotes Alfred Barr (MoMA's first ever director), who wrote about *The Morocans* in 1951, saying that the painting comprises three sections that are "separate both as regards (to) composition and subject matter…These three groups might be described as compositions of architecture, still life, and figures." However, in the footnotes of Cowart's essay about the painting, he acknowledges that Barr also said:

> The four great rounded figures in the architecture section echo the four melons in the still-life section. Yet these melons are so like the turban of the seated Moroccan in the figure section that the whole pile of melons has sometimes been interpreted as Moroccans bowing their foreheads to the ground in prayer.

One reading of the work is not closer to the truth than the other, or an exact match with what Matisse was thinking in 1915. However, other visitors to *Matisse in Morocco* noticed this same ambiguity occuring in the *The Moroccans* that Barr describes. Writing for the *Washington Post*, critic Paul Richard noted, "Almost all of these pictures [in the show] glow with contradictions." He then wrote:

> By far the grandest painting here is that "souvenir" of Tangier from the Museum of Modern Art known as "The Moroccans." Dated 1915-1916, it is the latest in the show. It seems organized in chapters. At upper left one reads a white-domed tomb, a terrace and a terra cotta pot of blue-and-white-striped flowers. The round forms grouped beneath them are intentionally ambiguous: Some will tend to see them as ripe yellow melons and the green leaves of their plants growing on a trellis; others may well read them as Moslems at a mosque, kneeling on a tiled floor, bowing down in prayer.

Critic Tim Higgins also described the piece in his review of the show for *The Morning Call*: "Its background, a dark and mysteriously dense black, illuminates an architectural view of the city, with a group of Moslems, kneeling in prayer and looking oddly like a group of melons, seen in the foreground."

So multiple interpretations of that lower left quadrant have historically been part of the public conversation about *The Moroccans.*

I like to think that a museum's role is to encourage a continued and open dialogue around the work in its collection, one that holds space for differing viewpoints on each artwork. This idea is certainly part of our pedagogy as museum educators, but it's at odds with the practice of displaying explanatory text that codifies one reading of the work over others. Historical information and artistic context can be valuable in creating one kind of entry into a work, but wall text that lists everything one might see in the work can serve as a statement of authority from the museum about what is the correct way to look at a painting.

Especially in the case of work that sits somewhere between representation and abstraction, this approach prioritizes scholarship and an official version of art history over the actual experience of engaging with an art object. This practice also interferes with the responsibility of the perceiver, as John Dewey would argue, to activate the artwork with imagination, questions, and experiences.

To me, MoMA's boilerplate email response to questions about *The Moroccans* was a way of doubling down on this authoritative approach to art history, flattening all interpretation of the work to a single, ambiguous quote from the artist. That quote is certainly relevant to the object, but it leaves out all of the interactions and interpretations that have come after. *The Moroccans* is now over 100 years old, and the social and political context that surrounds the work has changed the way one might perceive it.

During summer 2019, MoMA closed to the public to complete a massive expansion and remodeling project that was "inspired by Alfred Barr's original vision to be an experimental museum in New York." According to the museum's press release "The real value of this expansion is not just more space, but space that allows us to rethink the experience of art in the Museum. We have an opportunity to re-energize and expand upon our founding mission—to welcome everyone to experience MoMA as a laboratory for the study and presentation of the art of our time, across all visual arts." Indeed, the renovations included the Paula and James Crown Creativity Lab, a glass-walled education space on the second floor overlooking the museum's main lobby that invited visitors to drop in for daily artmaking activities and conversations.

As the museum prepared to reopen to the public, MoMA scheduled a series of training events in the theatre for the entire Education department. Each event began with a statement from a museum official saying, "we want MoMA to be the most welcoming museum in the world," implying that the new version of the museum would have something for everyone.

To this end, all of the curatorial departments would work together to re-hang the collection, no longer in the separated silos of painting, drawing, sculpture, prints, architecture, photography, and film. The galleries would be rotated more often. The

origin story about modernism as told by MoMA's permanent collection would be broken up and reimagined. An emphasis on cultural diversity would be introduced into how the permanent collection was displayed, ensuring that the work of women, people of color, other cultures, and outsider artists would have a place in the arrangement.

When the museum reopened in October, I visited the new Matisse room and was happy to see *The Moroccans* again, this time accompanied by no explanatory wall text, other than a small card with information about the work's title, medium, and provenance.

On the page for the work on MoMA's website, the full text about a still life of vegetables still remains.

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