

IAN WALLACE: "How working in hotels led Henri Matisse and Ian Wallace to rediscover the intoxicating purity of light"

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January 23, 2013

Christmas 1917: Elsewhere in France, war was raging, but not in Nice, where Henri Matisse had checked into the Hôtel Beau-Rivage. A few years earlier, the painter had been turned down for military service on the grounds of poor health. Safe in Paris, he'd been haunted by guilt at how little he could contribute to the war effort, and he struggled—fruitfully—with some of the most severe, ascetic paintings of his career. They were "displays of force," one fellow painter declared at the time. Now Matisse wanted a little less reality. Leaving his wife and younger children behind in Paris, he'd gone south, stopping along the way to visit his eldest son Jean, who'd been called up and was stationed west of Marseille. At the Beau-Rivage on January 1, 1918, the day after his forty-eighth birthday, Matisse began painting what would be his last self-portrait: a chilly depiction of a suited, bespectacled, reserved bourgeois with a brush that we have come to accept as the quintessential image of this artist. It's "a powerful, anti-heroic, oddly provisional image for a man approaching 50 with an international reputation," writes his biographer, Hilary Spurling. Although masquerading as the solid citizen (the anti-bohemian, the functionary of art), the painter shows himself with a suitcase at his feet. He was a nomad.

Matisse stayed on at the Beau-Rivage until early April 1918. Over the next few years he would head south each winter, staying in various hotels around Nice, mainly the Hôtel de la Méditerranée, and would eventually find a place of his own in town. Years later, he reminisced about the Méditerranée with Francis Carco, the arch-bohemian poet and novelist who also happened to be staying in Nice at the same time: "A good old hotel, I must say! And what lovely Italian-style ceilings! What tiles!... I stayed there four years for the pleasure of painting nudes and figures in an old rococo salon. Do you remember the way the light came through the shutters? It came from below like footlights in a theater. Everything was fake, absurd, terrific, delicious...." The impassive figure we see in Matisse's 1918 self-portrait does not look like the kind of man who would have a camp sensibility, a "love of the unnatural" and "of artifice and exaggeration," as Susan Sontag famously defined it. The man in the picture is still the one who spent many years battling with his *Bathers by a River*, started in 1909 and only completed (or, as Paul Valéry would have said, abandoned) in 1917. Or he is the man who—to take an example from the fine exhibition now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (through March 17), "Matisse: In Search of True Painting"—had painted the darkly luminous, bluntly geometricized still life *Apples*, 1916. The fruit is beautiful, but it would not have tempted Eve to bite.

The journey to Nice led Matisse to a different manner of painting. His was to become an "often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content"—again, the words are Sontag's, and though written without reference to Matisse, they are apt. The art of Matisse's Nice period is often associated with the "return to order" proclaimed by Jean Cocteau as the watchword for the 1920s, but this seems mistaken. The neoclassicism and archaism of some of Picasso's work or of the Novecento Italiano are real manifestations of a return to order. (With the Italians, the political implications were clear enough; their great promoter was Mussolini's mistress, Margherita Sarfatti.) In Matisse's case, the work of the war years is more deeply permeated with a search for order than what he produced in the decade that followed. In Nice, he rediscovered the intoxicating purity of light, but he also rediscovered—through Auguste Renoir, whom he went to visit almost immediately in nearby Cagnes-sur-Mer—the Impressionist treatment of light, using it in his paintings to dissolve hard boundaries between forms.

But unlike most of the Impressionists, Matisse would not be pre-eminently a landscapist, *aplein-air* painter. He would not be a painter of nature, because “to be natural,” per Sontag and Oscar Wilde, “is such a very difficult pose to keep up.” In “fake, absurd, terrific, delicious” hotel rooms, ones that turned natural light into theatrical lighting, he found that “the richness and the silver clarity of the light of Nice” had been trapped and condensed, intensified even when gathered in shade, and bounced from wall to wall and ceiling to floor in a kind of dizzying ebullience: always changing, always in motion. The exhibition at the Met—the theme of which is how Matisse “used his completed canvases as tools, repeating compositions in order to compare effects, gauge his progress, and, as he put it, ‘push further and deeper into true painting’”—is perfectly pitched to his Nice period. His newfound fascination with theatricality, combined with his immersion in the mercurial nature of light and its incessant intersuffusions, enabled him to show the same motifs again within the compass of the same room, which can never be as neutral a background as a proper artist’s studio, and can never be the same way twice.

At the Met, there is a pair of remarkable and, at first glance, very similar paintings of the same room, with nearly the same view; they are *The Open Window (Room at the Hôtel Beau-Rivage)*, 1917–18, and *Interior at Nice (Room at the Hôtel Beau-Rivage)*, 1918. In a way, they are both paintings of nothing. This could be the room in Roy Lichtenstein’s celebrated 1961 painting in which ace reporter Steve Roper is looking through a hole in the door and exclaiming, “I can see the whole room!...and there’s nobody in it!” The absence of the figure in these paintings is palpable—it’s as if the armchair in which the model should have been seated has been pushed aside to make room for her absence, and for the view of sea and sky out of a window that seems to wear its lace curtains as the model would have worn her artfully revealing *dishabille*. The second version, a tad larger, shows a bit more of the room and puts the window at a greater distance. The sky is whiter in the second version and its reflection in the open window correspondingly paler, whereas in the first it has been painted nearly the same deep blue as the sea.

Perhaps for this reason the most notable difference between these two paintings is that in the first, the room is dominated by the sky and sea at its center, which amount to a single dominant entity, while in the second, as Dorthe Aagesen writes in the exhibition catalog, “the focus shifts to the decor,” above all the green armchair on the left. The earlier painting uses light to collapse the room’s space nearly into a single intransigent plane; the second version opens it up, softening the painting’s impact but letting in more air. It’s a sunnier picture, with a different sense of looseness and spontaneity.

For Matisse, there could never be only one way to interpret a scene; he always recognized that it could have been painted otherwise. “I do not repudiate any of my paintings,” he famously declared, “but there is not one of them that I would not redo differently, if I had it to redo. My destination is always the same but I work out a different route to get there.” Earlier on, he would have been more likely to start with a more conventional, easygoing approach, painting his way toward a stark and unyielding work; at the Met, for example, there is the sweet, almost anecdotal 1914 view of Notre-Dame that is usually in the collection of the Kunstmuseum Solothurn in Switzerland, hung alongside the far more famous, nearly abstract one he painted a little later the same year, which belongs to New York’s MoMA. Or observe, likewise, the pairing of *Interior with Goldfish* and the slightly later *Goldfish and Palette*, both also from 1914. The difference between the two 1918 views of the room at the Hôtel Beau-Rivage is far subtler, but what’s more telling is that the development from one to the next runs in the opposite direction: having learned how to be obdurate, Matisse was teaching himself again how to yield. Earlier, Matisse had been determined, as he said, “to risk losing charm in order to obtain greater stability.” Now he’d become fascinated by charm, and the way it put a classical sense of stability in doubt, redirecting the viewer’s attention from the compositional center to its “decor.”

But the story doesn’t end there, because there is a third painting of the same room, also from 1918. Yet one wouldn’t have mistaken it for another version of the same view: it’s a bigger painting and an altogether bigger statement. *Interior with a Violin (Room at the Hôtel Beau-Rivage)* shows the same room—the same window, chair on the left (now with an open violin case resting on it, revealing its treasure), dresser on the right. But despite the change of scale, it shows less of the room. The focus is tighter, the

vantage point higher—we can see a bit of beach out the window, which wasn't visible in the other two paintings, but the ceiling's been cut out of the frame, making the room feel much less boxy but also somehow smaller, almost constricted, and the froufrou of the curtains has been reduced to a minimum. The great change is in color, or rather in tone: this is a dark picture. One of the blinds has been closed, the other half-closed, and the space is bathed in shadows. Yet miraculously, this darkness is somehow luminous. "In that painting," Matisse said, "I painted light in black."

As different as *Interior with a Violin* may be from its two precursors, Matisse couldn't have painted it without having painted them. If you look back at the two earlier paintings, you'll notice a detail that might not have registered before: the dark bar around the top of the curtains. When Matisse showed Renoir his paintings, the master was thunderstruck by the bar. "How do you do that?" Renoir exclaimed. "If I used a black like that in a painting, it would jump out at you." In fact, the Impressionists had more or less banished black from their palette; for them, it was not a color, and its use would have destroyed the unity of painting, whose basis was color. Matisse realized that he could take what he wanted from the Impressionists because the foundations of his art were different, and more capacious. *Interior with a Violin* is his proclamation of that discovery. Though his idol Renoir would have been horrified to hear this, Impressionism for Matisse was at one with the "fake, absurd, terrific, delicious" charm of a hotel in Nice, which he could enjoy or abstain from as he pleased.

Checking into the Beau-Rivage, Matisse deliberately uprooted himself from his settled existence in Paris—he was checking out of everyday life. But a successful artist these days hardly has what Matisse would have recognized as a settled life. Consider the Canadian artist Ian Wallace, whose remarkable retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery, "At the Intersection of Painting and Photography," continues to preoccupy me [see "Heroism, Hidden," January 7/14]. In 2008, for instance, Wallace had solo gallery shows in London, Brussels and New York, not to mention a museum show in Zurich, Rotterdam and Düsseldorf. Naturally, he'll have traveled to all those cities, and I wouldn't be surprised if he also attended the group shows in Ottawa and Vienna that featured his work. And, of course, there are artists who are far more in demand than Wallace. How does one keep making work in such circumstances?

Wallace has long been interested in making his activity as an artist a subject of his work: "documenting my workspace," as he says, is "a self-consciously modernist strategy" for self-reflection. One of the thematic sections of the Vancouver exhibition is accordingly devoted to "The Studio." But "studio," it becomes clear, is a highly elastic term as it applies to Wallace's artistic practice. Yes, the white-walled, cement-floored ex-industrial space where Wallace habitually works in Vancouver appears in various pieces; it's sweet, too, to catch sight (in *Work in Progress [June 28, 2010]*, 2010) of the drum kit he keeps there—his counterpart, perhaps, to the violin Matisse liked to play as a break from his painting, and which was perhaps a stand-in for himself in *Interior with a Violin*. But many of Wallace's studio pictures—which, like most of his work since the late 1980s, juxtapose photographic images and monochromatic or geometrically abstract painting—are really hotel pictures. Among them are four in whose collective title I like to think Matisse would have found a pleasing irony: *Abstract Drawing (Hotel de Nice, Paris, February 2, 2010) I-IV*, 2010. As "fake, absurd, terrific, delicious" as a Nice hotel might have been, wouldn't a Parisian hotel pretending to represent Nice be even more so? In these works, as in many of Wallace's other hotel pictures (and unlike Matisse's paintings from the Hôtel Beau-Rivage), one can hardly sense the room as a whole, though there is that window; these are still life paintings, where the focus is on a tabletop and the things it holds. The *Hotel de Nice* suite shows us the sheets of paper on which the artist has been making some geometrical abstract drawings, his supply of colored pencils, a zipper pouch of who knows what small items (a pair of scissors seems to be sticking out—that can't have been in his carry-on bag!), and an ashtray filled not with stubbed-out cigarettes but with delicately curled pencil shavings.

One trait that Wallace's Hotel de Nice pictures—and, for that matter, nearly all his other hotel pieces—have in common with Matisse's paintings from the Hôtel Beau-Rivage is their concern with light. And as with the Matisse of *Interior with a Violin*, the inclusion of a window in a generally dark picture, and

therefore of the gamut of tones between brightness and shadow, makes the light theatrical. The hotel still lifes are a reminder of just what a good photographer Wallace is. "I accept the subject as it presents itself to me," he has said, but his avowal is misleading. His street pictures certainly give such an impression, but the hotel still lifes are studied: the light is recorded not passively, but with great tenderness and warmth, and one feels the artist's affection for these familiar tools, just as one feels the light in one's fingers, in the palms of one's hands, as one looks at the images. We see them from above, probably at the same angle as the artist would, contemplating the piece of work he is about to continue. The objects are placed with a deceptively casual-looking geometrical rigor that Matisse would have answered with a smile. Wallace likes to emphasize that the artist is not only a maker but also a thinker. In other hotel pictures of his—as in his studio pictures more broadly—the accouterments shown are ones that might belong to the poet he once thought of becoming: books, notebooks, pens. Or they might belong to the art historian he has also been, traveling to some symposium. But light touches his things delicately, akin to how his colored pencils have touched his sheets of paper: a delicacy that thought alone—so much clumsier than light—rarely achieves.