

Audio Guide Transcript

MATISSE
and the sea

February 17–May 12, 2024
Ticketed Exhibition Galleries

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

STOP 1
Taylor Hall
Introduction

Speakers

Min Jung Kim
Barbara B. Taylor Director
Saint Louis Art Museum

Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

[Min]

Hello, I am Min Jung Kim, Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

I am delighted to welcome you to the audio guide for *Matisse and the Sea*. This is the first exhibition to explore the importance of the sea across the career of the leading French Modernist painter, Henri Matisse. Over several decades, the sea acted as a crucial catalyst for Matisse's pioneering experiments in color and light. This exhibition has a range of wonderful loans from Europe and North America and is anchored by a pivotal work in the Museum's collection, *Bathers with a Turtle*. To tell you more, I'd like to introduce the exhibition curator, Simon Kelly, curator of modern and contemporary art.

[Simon]

Thank you, Min. Matisse loved the sea. This exhibition explores the extraordinary variety of marine imagery that Matisse produced over his long career. As you move through this display, you will see coastal views of the Mediterranean Sea, as well as the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. You'll travel from the picturesque fishing port of Collioure in the south-west of France to the resort town of Nice on the French Riviera to the islands and atolls of French Polynesia. You'll experience panoramic vistas as well as quasi-surreal imaginings of life beneath the waves. You'll also be able to explore a fresh interpretation of the Saint Louis Art Museum's own *Bathers with a Turtle*, an enigmatic masterwork of three women by the sea.

In his writings, Matisse evocatively described the colors of the sea, sometimes blue like the wings of a butterfly, and sometimes green like the color of jade. Although I think we

often imagine Matisse as very cerebral, his deep attachment to the sea was a highly physical one and informed by his love of swimming and diving. While in the Mediterranean, he would swim every day as part of his routine. He was also an avid rower who won a prize for his diligent turnout at meetings of the Nautical Club of Nice. For Matisse, the sea was also an invitation to voyage and travel, and he did travel extensively to France's wide network of colonies.

This exhibition guide offers commentaries from several individuals. In addition to my voice, you will hear from other art historians, as well as a wildlife veterinarian and a conservation biologist.

We encourage you to experience this guide in any order you like. You may follow it in numeric order or pick and choose. Each featured object can be located by following the floorplan on this webpage or by identifying the audio icon on the object's label in the exhibition. Whether you're listening from home or in the Museum's galleries, I hope you enjoy this audio guide and your visit to *Matisse and the Sea*.

STOP 2

From Brittany to the Mediterranean Coast: The Early Years

Gallery 247

Sailboats at Collioure

Speaker

Abigail Yoder

Curatorial Assistant

Saint Louis Art Museum

I'm Abby Yoder, curatorial assistant at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

In 1905, Matisse traveled to the Mediterranean coastal town of Collioure in the south of France. It would be the first of many visits over the next decade, but it was this initial trip that was instrumental in the development of his new modernist painting style. Up to this point he had been working in a Neo-Impressionist manner, painting with small dashes of unmixed color. But his time in Collioure, with its dazzling light, influenced his coloristic experimentations and led to the emergence of his Fauvist painting style, characterized by non-naturalistic color, bold brushstrokes, and flat decorative forms.

During this stay, Matisse painted *Sailboats at Collioure*, depicting fishing boats lining the shore of the Port d'Avall—the only sandy beach in the town—with a swelling hill and the shimmering sea in the background. It was one of about 40 watercolors Matisse produced during that first summer visit. This was not a medium he often used, but here it was effective in capturing the luminosity of the landscape. Using thick strokes, he painted translucent layers of color that captured the appearance of the shifting light on the water. He also left the blank paper exposed in places, giving the image more radiance and eliminating what he considered the “flickering” effect of Neo-Impressionist painting.

The glowing blues and greens of the sea and the sweeping salmon pink on the beach in *Sailboats at Collioure* paved the way for a later painting of this same subject, called *The Red Beach*, on view nearby. The watercolor was most likely a study for the painting, which took Matisse's color experimentation to new heights, with mauve dashes punctuating the aqua and deep blue of the water and an intense warm red for the sand.

STOP 3
Collioure: A Constellation of Influences
Gallery 246
Two Women

Speaker

Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

Matisse's work at the seaside resort of Collioure, in the south-west of France, is best known for his colorful paintings but he also made important sculpture, including this major work *Two Women*. This is the only sculpture of more than one figure that Matisse ever made. As its title indicates, it shows two women, locked in an embrace, their eyes fixed on one another. *Two Women* is a play of contrasts between the two figures, one with closed legs, the other with legs open, one with a straight arm, the other with an arm at an angle, one with longer hair, the other with short hair and smooth head. Please take a moment to walk around the sculpture and see it in the round. It's important to see it from different angles. It's been suggested that Matisse was playing with gender fluidity here. When the taller figure is seen from behind, its muscular physique suggests that it is a male body and that the sculpture thus shows the embrace of male and female lovers. One has to shift viewpoints to see that both figures are indeed women.

There is an existing photograph of Matisse's studio at Collioure which shows this sculpture, in its initial clay model form, sitting on a pedestal. He used this model in order to create an edition of six bronze casts, of which the sculpture in front of you is an excellent example. Look closely at its surface and you can see the way in which Matisse originally pressed his thumbs into the clay in order to create the two bodies.

Matisse's interest in pairing was probably encouraged by his collecting of sub-Saharan African sculpture, where we often find pairs of figures. In this exhibition, *Two Women* is placed alongside a male and female pair, made by a Bamana artist from Mali. This pairing once belonged to Matisse. As in *Two Women*, there are fascinating and subtle differences between the figures that reward close looking.

STOP 4

Bathers with a Turtle: A Fusion of European and African Traditions

Gallery 244A

Bathers with a Turtle

Speakers

Sharon Deem

Wildlife Veterinarian and Epidemiologist

Saint Louis Zoo Institute for Conservation Medicine

Jamie Palmer

Conservation Biologist and Technician

Saint Louis Zoo Institute for Conservation Medicine

[Sharon]

I'm Sharon Deem, wildlife veterinarian and epidemiologist and the Director of the Saint Louis Zoo Institute for Conservation Medicine.

[Jamie]

And I'm Jamie Palmer, a conservation biologist and Technician of the Saint Louis Zoo Institute for Conservation Medicine.

[Sharon]

When we first saw the painting and were asked to comment on it, we were a bit confused. Three women, bathers around a turtle. One woman feeding it, one looking sad, and another with her hands in her mouth. However, after time and considering the bathers' positions, we started thinking more deeply about how humans are inspired and in awe of turtles. It also got us thinking about the conservation work we are doing at the Saint Louis Zoo to help save turtles.

[Jamie]

Like the bathers in the picture, everyone we know has a turtle story. Humans are fascinated by turtles, and turtles have always played key roles in many of the world's religions and cultural histories. However, today turtles are in grave danger. Of the 356 turtle species on earth, over 50 percent are already threatened with extinction. In some cases, turtles are loved to death when taken from the wild and put into the exotic pet

trade. In other cases, they are used as food, with many species already extinct due to human appetites.

These threats to turtle survival are why we started the Saint Louis Box Turtle Project here in Forest Park. Since 2012 we have met hundreds of box turtles in the park and learned so much about their secret lives. Each box turtle we meet has a veterinary checkup to better understand their general health status and also to learn what infectious diseases may be impacting the population.

Some we have even followed for years using radio tags that allow us to check in with them weekly. During our decade working with box turtles in Missouri, we've seen great concern and pride in our community for these shy and unique reptiles.

[Sharon]

It's no wonder that people are drawn to turtles and tortoises. They have been around since the dinosaurs; they grow slowly and can live for many years. It's also what makes them such tough species, but in many ways very vulnerable. Maybe their mix of strength and vulnerability reminds us of ourselves in an ever-changing world, maybe they bring us hope. So, like the women in the painting, stay curious about turtles, observe them, but always leave them wild. The health of the planet depends on it.

STOP 5

Nice and the Mediterranean Coast: the 1920s

Gallery 244B

Interior at Nice

Speaker

Simon Kelly

Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

Saint Louis Art Museum

Matisse first visited the Mediterranean coastal resort of Nice in December 1917 when he was 48 years old. He was immediately captivated by the city and would spend much of the rest of his life there. Matisse particularly loved the quality of the light at Nice. He described it as "beautiful and soft" and he marveled at his luck that he might wake up to such luminosity every day. He loved the sea at Nice too and compared its blue to the color of sapphires, peacock feathers or an Alpine glacier.

Interior at Nice was painted in 1919, in one of Matisse's early painting campaigns in this city. It shows a seafront room in the hotel Méditerranée, a rococo-style hotel where Matisse was then staying and which was later demolished in the 1930s. Matisse was fascinated by window views, particularly the transition between interior and exterior. Here, on the inside, he paints his 18-year-old model, Antoinette Arnoud, seated pensively on the left. Around her are yellow arabesques on the wallpaper decoration, a pink tiled floor, large French windows, and a vase of roses. As we move to the outside, we see the balcony balustrade, and then a single palm tree, a figure in black walking along the Promenade des Anglais and then the flat expanse of sea. The sea feels decorative and it's worth noting that Matisse once compared a sea view to a piece of colored silk.

Matisse's Nice views were seen by some critics as a step back after the radical experiment of pictures like *Bathers with a Turtle*. But the artist rejected this, arguing that he was fusing his devotion to the impressionistic study of nature with a fascination in effects of decorative patternmaking. *Interior at Nice* was purchased by the Saint Louis Art Museum in 1945 and it was the first picture by the artist to enter the Museum collection.

STOP 6

French Polynesia I

Gallery 244C

The Lagoon (from Jazz, plate XIX)

Speaker

Abigail Yoder

Curatorial Assistant

Saint Louis Art Museum

Matisse is best known as a painter, but beginning in the 1930s, he also produced many book illustrations. One of his most significant book projects was called *Jazz*, published in 1947. It was an album of text and accompanying images on subjects ranging from the circus to mythology to world travel, with an undercurrent of anxiety due to the ongoing World War II. *Jazz* was unique among his projects for featuring text written by the artist himself and for using color illustrations instead of black and white.

This is a group of six plates from the twenty illustrations published in *Jazz*. Key among them are three images titled *The Lagoon*. These were inspired by Matisse's time in French Polynesia, which he visited in 1930. During the trip, he enjoyed swimming and snorkeling in the lagoons of the Tuamotu Islands, near Tahiti. Matisse marveled at the clarity of the water there. Looking down, he could see the colorful fish, corals, and seaweed beneath the surface; looking up, he saw the sun reflecting patterns on the waves. *The Lagoon* prints capture this feeling of vibrant, undulating forms floating in the light-saturated water. Such forms became the basis for Matisse's decorative aesthetic in his work going forward and can be seen in other illustrations from *Jazz*, as well as in his later paper cut-outs.

Matisse may have also been influenced by Oceanic objects, like the Abau shield on view nearby. This shield, made within a relatively small, localized region of the Upper Sepik River basin in Papua New Guinea, was designed to be used in combat. Abstract, curvilinear forms are arranged in symmetrical patterns across the surface. It is unclear if Matisse collected Melanesian shields like this one, but there are visual similarities between this and the seaweed forms in *Jazz*, so it's possible he was responding to this sort of motif in his own work.

STOP 7
French Polynesia II
Gallery 243
Oceania, The Sea

Speaker

John Klein
Professor of Art History
Washington University in St. Louis

Hello! I'm John Klein, Professor of Art History at Washington University, with a few words about the large fabric wall hangings, made by screen-printing white oil paint onto beige linen, that you are looking at now.

Henri Matisse suffered frequently from insomnia. One sleepless night in his Paris apartment, in 1946, he passed the time by cutting bird shapes from white paper and pinning them to the wall, which was covered with a plain wallpaper. The artist's whimsical aviary grew to populate the entire side of the room. An adjacent wall evolved into an aquatic counterpart, teeming with sharks, seaweed, coral, and jellyfish. What began in distraction and self-amusement would eventually become, through a technically challenging printing process, two of Matisse's largest artworks, *Oceania, the Sea* and *Oceania, the Sky*.

These middle-of-the-night dream worlds were also memory worlds, imaginative recollections of Matisse's three-month trip to Tahiti in 1930, when he was mesmerized by the stunning variety of tropical fish, seen while snorkeling in warm lagoons. Over 15 years later, his pleasurable memories fed his ambition to create the large-scale, immersive artworks that you see here.

In a late career flourishing, his similar use of the paper cut-out method would lead to other initiatives in such materials as tapestry, ceramic tile, and stained glass, ambitious efforts that would crown his illustrious career.

STOP 8

The Late Paper Cut-Outs

Gallery 242

Blue Nude, the Frog

Speaker

Simon Kelly

Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

Saint Louis Art Museum

The series of *Blue Nude* paper cut-outs that Matisse produced at the end of his career are among his best-known works and they represent the culmination of his artistic output. *Blue Nude, The Frog*, is one of the largest and most striking examples that he ever produced. Matisse shows the seated form of a forward-facing female bather, with legs splayed out. Her body is abstracted into simple shapes, circles for her head and breasts, and a diamond for her torso. Her thighs and calves seem to advance in space but she has no feet, which further heightens the sense of abstraction.

Blue Nude, The Frog is unusual among the late *Blue Nudes* because there is a suggestion of a landscape context. The yellow background, made up of a patchwork of irregular rectangles, evokes intense sunlight, perhaps of the Mediterranean. The two pomegranate fruits to the left also suggest the fertility of the land. Look closely for the pinholes in the pomegranates that show the way in which Matisse moved these around to explore different configurations.

By now, physically frail, Matisse made this paper cut-out seated up in bed or at a table. As was his practice, he cut this form from paper which had been covered with ultramarine blue paint by his assistants. The color blue remained central to Matisse throughout his career. Early on, he used ultramarine blue to represent the sea itself but here it inhabits the very body of the bather. At a time when Matisse was very conscious of his own mortality, this work has an escapist element, as if Matisse is trying to create a sunny, oceanic paradise.

Close by is another example of Matisse's *Blue Nude* series, the iconic *Blue Nude I*, which shows a kneeling bather, rendered in elegant, swirling lines. Both of these cut-outs belong to the Beyeler Foundation in Switzerland and are very rarely lent. It is a pleasure to exhibit them here as the culmination of the exhibition *Matisse and the Sea*.