

X4

Week 8 Discussion: Color and Social or Political Purpose

What did **Matisse** mean by saying: *“When I put a green, it is not grass. When I put a blue, it is not the sky.” Does color have a social or political purpose?*

Please reply to one other student's post as well.

Matisse was a painter of the Post-Impressionism period and known as being the leader of Fauvism. Following the Impressionists, Fauvism took representational art and color to the next level. Matisse did not use color as a means to represent an object, he used it to represent a sensation or a feeling. By Matisse saying "When I paint green, it is not grass," I think what he means is color does not have one representation in his artwork. His artwork represents how he feels or senses whatever it is that he is painting. There is no right or wrong. For Matisse, color was a means to express a feeling not just represent an object.

Many people don't see color as Matisse did, ironically thinking of it more in black and white terms. An apple is red, the sun is yellow, the sky is blue. Its something that is taught to us when we are learning our numbers and ABCs. We begin to associate colors with objects and feelings. A single color or group of colors can even become a means to representing a political or social group. One of the most relevant examples that comes to mind is the Republican and Democratic party, represented by red and blue. This led me to doing a little research and learning that it wasn't until the 2000 election that each party had a dedicated color. And it really seems that standard colors were finally chosen more so by the media to make it easier to cover election stories. I'm sure arguments can be made for either side why that exact color was chosen, but I think the more important thing to note is two colors were

chosen for clarity and to distinguish the two sides from each other. They wanted to make it so green meant the grass and blue meant the sky, just as Matisse had not wanted.

I'm glad you pointed out that artists use color to represent how they feel. Pablo Picasso went through a "Blue Period" where his paintings became darker due to his depression. I think each artist's mood and stage of life affects their application and view of color.

Fully agree with you Arianna - we are definitely taught to have specific associations with specific colors/objects! when we think about the sun, the first thing we think "yellow", but that's not true - it can be orange, red, pink... it funny how without realizing it we make these associations constantly.

This could be apocryphal, but my understanding has been that the reason Democrats are "blue" and Republicans are "red" is that Tim Russert, during coverage of the 2000 election results, arbitrarily used those colors to define who was winning on a whiteboard he used to illustrate the points he was making. It's funny because in most of Europe, for example, red is associated with more left-leaning politics (for example, Labour in the UK) and blue is associated with right-leaning, conservative politics (like the Tories in the UK).

What Henri Matisse said about color meant color alone without a form can be his means of expression. He used color to convey sensation. They might not be right or representational but they reflected his subjective thinking. Fauve art including Matisse's challenged the traditional way of creating arts. Since then there was modern art movement and the fully independence between form and art. we can see from some fauve artworks below including Matisse's "Open Window". The sky can be colorful, the beach can be red and the mountains can be purple.



I think it's up to the artist to give color any kinds of purpose or not at all. An artist who is seeking for social or political correctness would make the nature rules as priority. It's grass so it's green, it's the sky so it's blue. Socially it would be a perfect art piece at the same time not special by that means. But if the artist chooses to express herself fully subjectively, color might just work for herself rather than eyes of anyone else. Can we find the purpose behind the color? A thousand viewers might have a thousand answers.

Well said! I also chose to include "The Open Window" in my answer. I vacationed in Collioure where Matisse painted it so it's one of my favorites from him!

This is well articulated! I agree with your representation of Matisse' thought, that a color can represent more than what its form would constraint it to in terms of "correctness". A "red beach," as you say, can bring together the sensation of red with the shape of a beach. The creative range in separating form and color is endless!

What Henri Matisse meant by saying "When I put a green, it is not grass. When I put a blue, it is not the sky" was that his application of color does not fit that of society's norms. Fauvism, the movement of which he was a leader, is

based on that principle in a sense. All the landscapes are painted with warm colors only. Or in his painting "The Open Window" from Collioure, in the Southwest of France, none of the colors are traditional but yet our eye can still recognize that it's portraying a seaport.

Color does have a social purpose, like the red and green lights on the road, the red stop signs, or serve as qualifier for intensities or progression like in sports: black ski trails, or yellow belt in martial arts. Colors are signal agreed upon by society and vary depending on the culture in which they are applied.





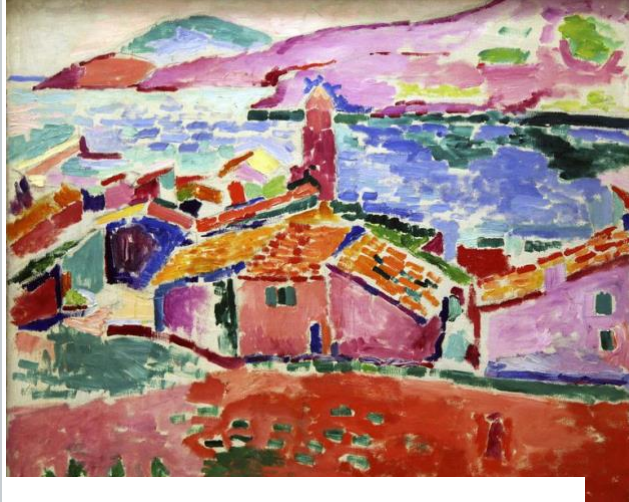
I like that you point out color being used socially as an indicator of progression. It's funny how that is something that we interact with frequently and it doesn't seem unusual at all, as compared to something like using numbered ranks for instance.

Henri Matisse helped revolutionize the visual arts through his use of color and shape. He was one of the leading figures in Fauvism and Modern Art. Fauvism was a style of painting that featured a vivid and nonnaturalistic use of color. By saying *"When I put a green, it is not grass. When I put a blue, it is not the sky."* Matisse meant that he is bound neither by a color's role in nature, or by its social and political purpose. Landscapes explode with life and color while portraits become more dynamic as colors dance upon the figure to create new visual sensations. This use of color is both fun and challenging since color schemes must be developed for each painting. A well-rounded knowledge and understanding of color is crucial to creating paintings where colors are used without conforming to "norms".

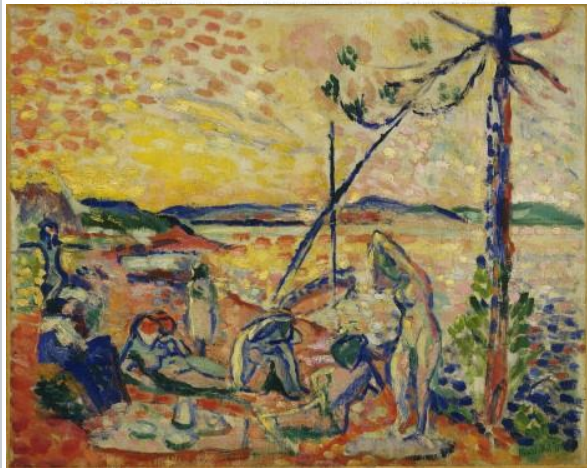
"An artist must never be a prisoner. Prisoner? An artist should never be a prisoner of himself, prisoner of style, prisoner of reputation, prisoner of success, etc." - Henri Matisse

Color imparts meaning. Because of this, colors have been used for centuries to represent things in society. In the past, purple clothing represented royalty due to how expensive purple dye was. Now political parties use colors to represent themselves. As we drive green lights tell us to go and red lights instruct us to stop. Stores use red to indicate sales. Each season and holiday has a general color scheme associated with it. Throughout the world, color is used for various social and political purposes.

Matisse was one of the pioneers within the Fauvism movement – a movement in which the artists pieces emphasized the use of bold, bright and non-naturalistic colors. The way these artists used color and representation within their artwork was revolutionary and ground breaking from the historical notion of art works needed to resemble naturalistic or realistic color schemes as well as details.



Henri Matisse
OPEN WINDOW, COLLAGE, 1905



Matisse as well as others within the Fauvism movement, used color as a way to express their emotions on the art work being produced. As seen by some of Matisse pieces – almost none to none of the colors can be attributed to naturalistic or realistic colors “Color was not given to use in order that we should imitate nature. It was given to us so that we can express our emotions”. In his quote “When I put a green, it is not grass. When I put a blue, it is not the sky.” That’s exactly what Matisse is referring to – that we should not be constraint my how society views colors or wants the individual to view colors, but to explore and use those colors to express how we feel or view things.

I believe color plays a pivotal social and political role and purpose – as many of the class mates have pointed out, colors are used within our society (i.e. stop signs, green, yellow and red lights, red sale signs, red and green Christmas feel, white dressed bride..) to impart specific meaning that is understood by all as well as for political purposes (green symbolizes environmental (‘green’) initiatives, red is usually associated with socialist/left wing parties v. blue with right wing parties). As Arianna pointed out – color association to certain objects or meanings are thought to society like learning numbers and ABCs, breaking the cycle of seeing an object that you associate with a color and not seeing or otherwise seeing a color and not associate it with the meaning you are familiar with is very difficult.

"that we should not be constraint my how society views colors or wants the individual to view colors, but to explore and use those colors to express how we feel or view things."

Yes! Otherwise, what is the point of art? Just to create pretty things? No, thanks! I want art that stimulates and has something to say.

Matisse was a pioneer of the fauvism movement, which was born out of impressionism. Matisse and the fauvists broke free from the real life like color depicted by the impressionists and translated their feelings into color, thus giving their artwork a nonrepresentational role.

Matisse’s quote, “When I put a green, it is not grass. When I put a blue, it is not the sky,” perfectly captures their unique approach to color. Matisse emphasized the expressive potential of color, using it arbitrarily, not based on an object’s natural appearance. Colors were “liberated” in the sense that they are no longer determined by an actual scene. The artists of this movement were able to experiment with color to give off entirely different feelings and emotions from common scenes and subjects. They also played with the thickness of brushstrokes and the color’s intensity to add more emotion and drama to their work.

The underlying theme that can be applied to color across many areas, is the pre-conceived ideas of what colors mean and represent. Just as in landscapes

painted by Impressionists with their life-like colors, this can also be understood through the many examples of cultural color meanings we discussed earlier in the course.

Politics is another aspect our society that relies on color as a communication tool to express its beliefs. Red is the most common sign of communism, as in the Red Flag and Russia's Red Army. Ironically the US differs in its approach to political red, since here red is considered the color of the more conservative Republican party. The Green party is self-explanatory in that it aligns itself with environmental issues. Black in politics also contends to darker ideologies: black was the color of the National Fascist Party in Italy and is the flag for ISIS.

All these examples show color is a very powerful tool – it evokes instantaneous responses and associations. One can only imagine the feelings created by seeing the multicolored female face in *Woman with a Hat* by Matisse for the first time!

Matisse's art broke away from realism, the respected traditional style of painting that prized the ability to create lifelike paintings. Instead, Matisse helped to create Fauvism, a style that embraced the use of intense colors in unexpected ways, such as in his painting below, *Joy Of Life*. When Matisse said, "When I put a green, it is not grass. When I put a blue, it is not the sky", he was explaining his unconventional use of color which was subjective and based on emotion, not on replicating or being restricted by the colors we see with our eyes that typically occur in nature. It's a powerful statement of defiance against accepted norms of the time and gives a voice to a different perspective which I think art is an effective and necessary tool for.



In the same sense, art is used as a tool for political criticism. For example, Ai Weiwei is a famous Chinese artist who uses his creations to protest actions of the Chinese government. However, Chinese citizens have limited freedom of expression so he was detained by the government without explanation which he then turned into another piece of art (below).



Color is also used for political symbolism. As discussed by other students, red and blue are used by the two main political parties in the United States. The colors are commonly used in campaigning and in the clothing politicians wear. In recent years, white has also had a significant presence in politics. In the early 1900s, the suffragettes, who were fighting for women's voting rights, wore white, purple and green but white had the most impact and became the main color associated with their movement. Much later, both Geraldine Ferraro and Hillary Clinton chose to wear a white pantsuit to their historical nominations for political office renewing the color's meaning as a symbol for women's rights in modern times. Since then white has become associated with gender equality beyond just voting rights. Almost all of the democate Congresswomen wore white to a state of the union address to bring attention to this cause.



Thank you for your post, and the provided visuals, especially the Joy of Life painting.

As we enter into a society that is more and more dependent on social media, the attention span of the viewer lessens as well. Color, it's application and it's meaning will start to pick up more and more significance to newer generations as society shifts.

With the Hilary photo in-particular, the color composition- mainly white against a blurred backdrop, holds a lot of meaning. While directing us to look at Hilary, the white also signifies purity and, in my mind, more of her altruistic ideals.

I have to wonder if the director/ cinematographer and even camera person will have the same or more impact by how they address their subjects.

Yes, I remember how visually striking it was when many celebrities followed the same theme and wore white at the oscars to promote women's rights. Not only was it meaningful, it was memorable and left a lasting visual impression

Matisse was an instrumental figure in Fauvism, an art style known for its bold, unexpected application of colors and relaxed, less rigid forms and brushwork. His quote really reflects the Fauvist mentality of not being confined to specific color uses and interpretations, which stands in strong contrast to his predecessors, and the views of society at the time. Matisse and his contemporaries used color (and form) as a vehicle for abstraction by subverting expectations about the way color could be used to create art. They deliberately used colors that were not realistically representative of figures in the natural world, which challenged ideas about art at that time. In this quote Matisse explains that colors do not need to be bound to certain objects or ideas, and can become artistically expressive or provocative in their own right. The diversity and countless possibilities that can be created with color should not be boxed in to specific and overly simplistic representations of well known concepts or forms. Color can be a conversation piece on its own.

In society, color can be given strong cultural associations that vary widely (as we learned earlier in the course). Colors play an important role in the psyche of a society and it informs how people react to particular ideas or objects. Certain colors can become strongly associated with political parties or ideologies (e.g. red associated with Communism). Color has a wide ranging scope of applications and associations that are quite significant in society and

can vary immensely across cultures and through time. It is truly too broad to be boxed in.

Well said! I especially like what you said about color being a conversation piece on its own and that we should not put colors into boxes that are too specific and limited.

I agree with others who have noted that Matisse meant that, in his understanding of painting, color choices are more about conveying feeling than "accurate" or realistic representations of the appearances of the physical world. Color definitely carries social and political purposes, with widespread connotations for different color families. It's been interesting to see political candidates and organizations in the U.S. attempt to break away from the very binary red/blue distinction we've had over the last 20 years to new brand identities in the space, as part of a way to signal a newness of their models or missions.

For example, a nonprofit that came out of the 2016 election—Run for Something—recruits young people to run for state and local office as progressives and rather than choosing something in the blue family for their branding, they went with an achromatic black and white color scheme. Another new organization, Demand Justice—which seeks to inform and mobilize Democratic supporters of the stakes of judicial nominations, something the Democratic Party has done far less of than the Republican Party—chose a neon-green color scheme as a way to signal it was doing something new.

Breaking out of usual color schemes typically associated with political and social causes can be a way of breaking out of the pack visually, especially in busy social media feeds.

As has already been stated by many, as a leader in the Fauvism movement, Matisse created works that disregarded the natural colors of things as well as the strong associations people had with colors. In this quote, 'When I put green it is not grass...' he is referring to the flexible nature of color and breaking boundaries in color use. During this period he did not paint things based on their natural color. In his statement, he is referring to all of the other factors that influence his color choices, such as his emotions and creativity. Humans tend to create shortcuts to simplify things, so it makes sense that many people have strong associations between an object and a single color, such as blue for the sky and yellow for the sun. Matisse began to challenge these associations and expand the scope of color.

Color can have many different social and political purposes, and these vary widely between cultures and throughout time. They serve to define political parties or imply certain values. However, these associations are sometimes challenged and become stronger or weaker over time.

Being a little later to the party, as it were, I see color and its application to be more important as we evolve as a global society, and one with a smaller attention span. Color and its use to depict mood, values and even ideals will continually strengthen a candidate's message and overall goal.

One has to wonder, if candidates who society may be biased against, whether it be gender, orientation or other bias, will use color to offset that discrimination. For example, if a candidate is deemed less imaginative or not forward-thinking, will the use of warm colors, reds, and yellow-reds take a more center stage to help the viewer draw the conclusion towards innovation? Will a candidate who may have to deal with a bias based on ideals or values be drawn to be photographed or illustrated using more white to have the viewer see a more purer image?

Time will tell. But as far as I can tell, politicians are just as adept at using color and color meaning to serve their endgame.

I try to respond to these prompts prior to reading others' responses and I'm REALLY late this week (I spent all afternoon wrapping Christmas presents) so forgive me if I'm too far off the rails.

I LOVE this quote. To me, it's everything I ever thought about art... that it is not intended to replicate, but to be uniquely expressive and to challenge the eye of the beholder.

This is meaningful both from a scientific perspective, but also from a social/political perspective. First, our eyes are trained to recognize shapes and pictures no matter the color... as we've learned from this class, color may direct how we view things, but not what they are to us. Grass is grass whether it's green, brown, yellow (all that we experience in real life), blue, pink, or whatever color choice the artist makes. It's like that game where you read aloud the color word, no matter what color the font is. It challenges our mind, but green in word form is always green, no matter what color the letters are.

From a social/political perspective, I think color can mean many things. Color elicits feeling. How the artist uses color yields in specific feelings in the viewer. If a piece is intended to be aggressive, it's likely the artist will choose colors

associated with aggression in that culture. If a piece is meant to be thought-provoking or antagonizing, the artist may choose unexpected colors... the American flag in rainbow colors, for example.



Matisse's comments speak to the representational ability of color. When one paints green and blue, the audience easily interprets this as the sky and the grass. However, in reality, they are just swatches of colors — it's the meaning and the context that we have in society that bring out the artistic understanding of it as "grass" or "sky". Matisse reminds us of this. Green isn't grass. It represents grass.

Thus, color can have a life of its own. In a social and political context, colors can represent more than what it appears superficially and can be used purposefully. For example, a red elephant or blue donkey in America adds political symbolism where a grey donkey or elephant would not. The form, the color, and the social context combined accomplishes more than what each could individually.

One interesting example was one I found quite ingenious and moving. In the 2018 World Cup in Moscow, a group of six activists met wearing soccer jerseys of six different shades. At face value, the colors of their shirts represent their support of different teams — a social use of color already! However, arranged in a line, the colors of their shirts formed a rainbow, an act of activism in support of LGBTQ rights in Russia, where "gay propaganda" is illegal. These colors, taken in this context, take on an agenda of political and social protest, activism, and pride.

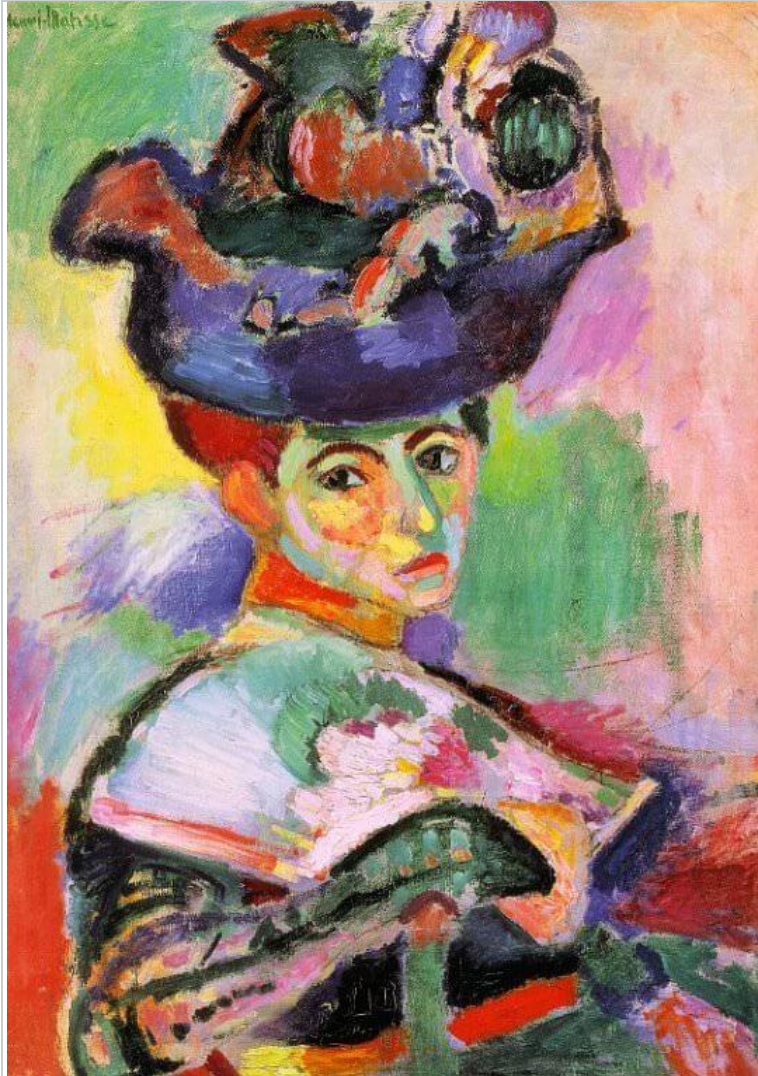
Here is the powerful picture:



Source: <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/gay-rights-activists-protest-world-cup-hidden-rainbow-flag-n890396> (Links to an external site.)

That is a great picture and a great example of how the context of colors can really alter the meaning. The sum is greater than the individual parts. Beautiful and brave considering the potential consequences.

I'm glad to learn something new from your post! I didn't know gay rights are prohibited in Russia. Color helps getting more attention in social protest. Maybe that's why Harvey Milk picked the rainbow flag?



When posing this question I had no other alternative but to do my research. I'd gone to art school many moons ago and very clearly remember sitting in a large auditorium style art history class. Loved it, but the lectures and the details elude me now. So if this quote was taught by my professor, sadly decades later, I do not recall having heard it. I know Matisse, but I do not *know* Matisse. Today I can say that with the proposed topic, and aforementioned research, I've gotten reacquainted with one of the many great movements along the timeline of art history to date.

Fauvism. In English, the French word "fauves" translates into "wild beasts". The movement's name was adopted by the very artists who were criticized for being such "wild beasts" by using vivid saturated colors and and bold devil-may-care brush strokes.

The art world was introduced to the historical modern art movement in 1905 at the Salon d'Automone in Paris. The half length portrait, *Woman with a Hat*, by Henri Matisse was one of the foundational works at the exhibition that appalled, puzzled and clearly appeased some viewers at the Salon. The juxtaposition of this multitudinously colored and loose lined portrait against the traditional impressionists of the time evoked feeling. Although, with the critics especially, not a pleasurable one. So much so that a well known critic in attendance, Louis Vauxcelles, gave the painting a scathing, and down right F Minus review. I don't know his exact words but one could imagine that they went something like, " The Violence! Disgusting! Shame on you...you...you...WILD BEASTS!" Out of utter distain and repulsion of the few works displayed, the critic ended up coining the very name of the movement.

Matisse along with the other Fauvists chose to defy all predetermined ideas and theories of how an artist used color. *Woman with a Hat* was a foundational piece that came to help define the movement.

The Fauves clearly knew this far before Banksy spoke the now famous quote, "Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable."

So did Matisse and the Fauves use color for social or political purpose? The answer is no. They were artists untethered to social and political movements. Their passion and beliefs were invested in art and their own interpretation of a moment captured on canvas. The colors of these paintings were intentionally unintentional, based solely on the artists feelings of their gaze. When Matisse was asked "What color was her dress?", of the *Woman with a Hat* portrait, he responded, "Black of course."