

Elisabeth Condon on Henri Matisse



Henri Matisse, *Tea in the Garden*, 1919, Oil on canvas, 55 1/4 x 83 1/4 inches

Matisse was a traveler, more than we'd think, given the large internal scale of his forms and pared-down, architectonic compositions that establish a sense of timelessness in his best works. *Tea in the Garden*, 1919, was painted after a preliminary sojourn to Nice and predates, by a month, the light-soaked, palm-stripped hotel room tableaux on which he embarked upon his return there. Like the Nice paintings, which in the words of Elaine Scarry, "carry greetings from other worlds within them,"[1] *Tea in the Garden*, his largest in the immediate postwar period (roughly 55 x 83.5 inches), offers an interval of sorts in Matisse's artistic development. We observe the stirrings of the artist's life-long pursuit of hot, saturated light, travel to voluptuous locations, and avid integration of Eastern and African aesthetics under the cool northern light of a family tableau.

At the Los Angeles County Art Museum, when I took art classes as a child, *Tea in the Garden's* cool, leafy space beckoned, its sunlit path a road to

distant horizons. Unconsciously, I understood that its interpenetration of light and shadow wove parallel worlds of middle-class comfort and the traveler's escape together. The fleshy network of binding mechanisms—pathway, trees and fence—encircling the painting's protagonists, reaffirmed by mysterious sunspots echoed in human or canine forms, cedes to the rhythm of brushwork, its dance of warm and cool. A canopy of leaves overhead flattens into a folding screen or painting, which leaks an inchoate, blue-green glowing substance into the idyll, a call to something wild, unknowable and necessary. Margeurite's dress mounts a fragile defense, absorbing organic and inorganic patterns and grounding the point of two triangles as the brushwork gains tempo. Our eye glides along the elongated diamond, alighting on the various options, before releasing to the Veronese green foliage, its movement resonating with the opening and closing of shapes, forms and actions—road, tree, fence, stair, blink of leaves in light, scratch of paw on fur, rhythms of light on light, dark on light, all from the undulating movements of a hog hair round. Yet the sunspots pull us back, third eyes from a world of unbounded desire, among other things, to render light as form and encapsulate time within the brute materiality of paint.

“Bernheim-Jeune claimed they could have sold the picture forty times over if it weren't for the dog looking up from scratching her fleas, and the unsightly blur distorting Marguerite's features. Perhaps potential customers sensed the elegiac undertones in a picture that marked multiple farewells: to a style of painting that had served its purpose (the tea table—up-ended, flattened and severely dysfunctional in the *Pink Marble Table* of 1917—now resumed its familiar three-dimensional format); to the house and garden that had generated so many masterpieces; and to the life the family had led there together,” writes Hilary Spurling in her superb Matisse biography.[2] But *Tea in the Garden's* allure is exactly the mournful luxe, calm, et volupte of time standing still, the heightened awareness that crystallizes the sougning of leaves or the sensation of sunlight on skin, the unlike associations of pure ambivalence. The painting resolves nothing: Matisse will go to Nice, Amelie will take to her bed, another world war will take place, the personal computer

will appear, as will terrorism, robotics, globalization, ...our plans for the day. But its private, self-contained world offers the impossible freedom of belonging, even as we prepare to depart.

[1] Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton University Press, 1999, p 48

[2] Spurling, Hilary. *Matisse the Master, 1909-1945*, Knopf, New York, 2005, p 229



Elisabeth Condon, *Yaddo Trees, Autumn*, 2010, Acrylic and oil on linen, 44.5 x 72 inches

Courtesy Artist Pension Trust