Matisse and Picasso

Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, perhaps the two greatest artists of the twentieth century, had distinct and often opposing approaches to art and each produced artwork that is unmistakably his own (Andreae 1). Their personalities were at odds as well. Matisse assumed an image of respectability while Picasso was viewed as aggressive and egotistical. Nonetheless, they discovered that they shared a common view of the world of art and a sense of their historical place in it, and they were bound by the fact that except for each other they remained peerless throughout their careers (Galassi 40). As a result of these circumstances a rivalry between the two artists developed early in their careers, but in time a friendship emerged as well.

The most extraordinary aspect of their relationship is that it was often expressed through the language of visual art—they communicated ideas to one another through their artworks. Striking similarities in many of their works might be mistaken as one artist’s influence on the other, but in fact these comparable works are the manifestation of that unique artistic dialogue. Matisse and Picasso conversed in this way for over three decades. At times the message was supportive, at times critical and competitive, but the exercise was always mutually invigorating and provoking. The artists occasionally responded to each other with a rivalrous “tit-for-tat” sequence of...
artworks, but sometimes a reply came years later. Matisse’s Still Life with a Plaster Bust (spring 1916) and Picasso’s comparable Still Life: Bust, Bowl, and Palette (March 3, 1932) provide examples of both types of responses (Bois 7-13).

Picasso’s Still Life: Bust, Bowl, and Palette, represents an example of a delayed response to Matisse in a dialogue that began years earlier. Around 1916 Matisse and Picasso participated in an intense episode of exchanges, the final installment of which was Matisse’s Still Life with a Plaster Bust. The significance of this piece to Picasso, a master of Cubism, is that he considered it to be a successful attempt by Matisse at melding his style with the “Cubist idiom” (Bois 11, 15). In the process of arriving at this painting the artists had issued responses to several other works. During the volley, Matisse was reported by the art dealer, Léonce Rosenberg, to have made the observation that Picasso’s Harlequin (1915) was evidence that Picasso had come to “an understanding” of Matisse’s own painting, Goldfish and Palette (1914-15). Matisse was referring specifically to Picasso’s use of color in a way that brings him closer to Matisse’s preferences (Bois 15). Observations such as these were typical examples of the sensitivity that each artist had toward the work of the other, especially as it related to his own work. They seemed to understand each other better than others understood them. In fact, the word, “understanding,” as Matisse uses it above, may seem ambiguous, but it possessed some significance in the lexicon of these two artists.

A writer who interviewed Picasso and then several years later interviewed Matisse, asked each artist to comment on the other:
…I asked [Picasso], “Do you like Matisse?” …[He said], “Well, Matisse paints beautiful and elegant pictures. He is understanding.” …When I visited Matisse…I asked him, “What do you think of Picasso?” [He said]: “He is capricious and unpredictable, but he understands things” (Bois 11).

Bois believes that “the word ‘understanding’ is not to be taken lightly.” Used in the context of the relationship between Matisse and Picasso, the concept of “understanding”... “dispenses with the notion of ‘influence’” (16). That is to say that one artist would present the other with a provocative idea and the challenge for the other was to react to that idea and use it as a catalyst to question and explore his own artistic directions. To understand and respond was not tantamount to succumbing to the other’s influence or agreeing to his principles. This, according to Bois, was the nature of the artists’ dialogue and should be the basis for comparison of their corresponding works (11, 16). The artists valued their mutual dialogue but were far from being preoccupied with the process. Each artist drew from many other sources and spent most of his time developing in his own unique direction (Andreae 2).

The rapid exchange in the dialogue that ended in 1916 was followed by an extended pause. Fifteen years passed until Picasso, preparing for a retrospective, felt compelled to respond to the last exchange with his Still Life: Bust, Bowl, and Palette. Bois, in his analysis of the painting, notes various elements that constitute its striking similarity to Matisse’s earlier still life, but more germane to the painting’s purpose, he points to the differences in how Picasso handled the composition and the colors. By amending Matisse’s color scheme and adjusting the composition, Picasso sent his rival a message. Perhaps he offered a corrective or even attempted to “settle a score.” Interestingly, Picasso did not included this painting in his retrospective (15). Bois suggests that the reason is that a comparison of this work with Matisse’s “would prove
detrimental to Picasso” (16). Picasso was always careful to distance himself from Matisse, his only real competition, as he methodically positioned himself as the premier artist of his time.

In order to achieve the status he desired, Picasso believed it important to be perceived as a “universal artist.” He was a Spaniard but was not considered a Spanish painter. He resided in France throughout his adult life but actively avoided the label of French painter. Picasso took his cue from his seventeenth-century equivalent, Nicolas Poussin. Poussin, a leader of his time, was a French artist whose art was developed in Italy and whose artistic identity remained autonomous. Using Poussin as a model, Picasso not only appropriated ideas directly from the master’s work, but also incorporated Poussin’s use of multiple styles, as well as layers of history and national schools, in his own creations (Galassi 95-97). One of Picasso’s most innovative appropriations, and one that provided his work with a sense of universality, was his exploration of African motifs. Ironically, this successful artistic tack came with a problem that, to Picasso, threatened his image as an independent. The public became aware of an interview that took place in 1907 in which Matisse mentioned that he introduced Picasso to African art. Subjected to discussions on the subject for years thereafter, Picasso became weary of the comparisons of his artwork to African art and the inevitable reference to Matisse. He eventually refused to indulge in the subject and struggled to distance himself from the matter (Bois 17, 20). Matisse was not as overtly possessed as Picasso with developing a public image, yet he too was concerned with his artistic identity.

Matisse felt “the burden of the past” to the extent that the influence of the master has the potential of “strangling the imitator.” While holding fast to the notion of the “unbroken chain of artists,” he nonetheless feared the limitations imposed by the influence of the previous generation of artists. In order to deal with his dilemma he came upon the old idea of “leap frogging” back a
generation. He noted that his own predecessor, “‘Cézanne[,] was limited by Courbet’” and therefore “‘went to Poussin.’” Matisse’s as well as Picasso’s unique artistic identities were not, however, a result of imitating old masters. Instead, the artists found their respective directions as a result of their reactions to those influences. Their responses were a kind of combat in which they struggled to exploit the influences of another artist without succumbing to it—in much the same way that they employed each other’s work (Bois 17). The process produced a rivalry for status in the art world but even from the beginning they operated in separate arenas.

Matisse and Picasso’s first encounters took place in the salon of Gertrude Stein around 1905. At that time Matisse was on his way to becoming the leader of the Fauvist movement and Picasso, twelve years his junior, was being recognized for his blue period and rose period work (Galassi 40). The approaches that each of these artists were taking with his art at that time was different from the other in many ways, but generally characterized, it could be said that Matisse was concerned with “color interplay,” while Picasso focused on “structure and form.” Neither artist could ignore the enormous talent the other possessed and must have felt that he needed to somehow learn to deal with his presence. As it happened, their individual differences seemed to invigorate them, and in that sense, according to Françoise Gilot, “they needed each other as a permanent challenge” (42). The rivalry led to discovery not only about the other’s art but about the other person. Eventually the two found some common ground upon which a true personal friendship developed (Gilot 53).

Gilot, Picasso’s companion from 1946 to 1954, speculates that Picasso and Matisse’s real friendship began around 1930, about the time that Picasso began so favor flat decorative surfaces over the tenets of Cubism. During that time the works of the two artists seemed to overlap. The situation produced ass intense curiosity on both sides and while exploring each others work the
two men discovered that they also shared a philosophical perspective about art and their place in it (50-53). Matisse and Picasso found that they both believed in the process of artistic continuity, whereby past artists are kept alive in other artists’ hearts and minds. They visualized themselves in a kind of art continuum. For example, they saw themselves as carrying the spirit of Manet and Cézanne and wondered who would eventually carry their own spirits on (Galassi 128). More importantly, they recognized a common heritage and historical bond with some of the same past masters, including Delacroix, Velázquez, and Ingres. They acknowledged their own importance in the history of art and Picasso even recognized Matisse as inheritor of the mantle of supreme colorist, handed down from Delacroix (Galassi 133). During the late 1940s and 1950s, Matisse and Picasso often discussed the legacy of the past masters. They viewed the history of art as a “great chain of artists,” and both agreed on the importance of maintaining the links (Gilot 141). Picasso and Matisse, to this end, appropriated from the past masters throughout their careers (Galassi 14).

Picasso’s appropriations were often manifest, especially in his later years, in series of variations on old master’s compositions or themes. For example, from 1954 to 1962, Picasso completed a series of variations on particular works by Delacroix, Velázquez, and Manet. Some critics saw this as Picasso returning, in old age, to his roots, but these were roots that he never really left (Bois 127). Matisse also appropriated from past masters and often they were artists with which Picasso shared an interest. In 1906 Matisse finished a masterpiece, *Joy of Life*, which is a variation on Ingres’s *Golden Age* (1862). Picasso was preoccupied with Ingres as well and the author, Galassi, speculates that the shared “father figure” may have contributed to their rivalry. Indeed, many of Picasso’s variations on works of Ingres are understood to be responses to Matisse’s variations on the same pieces. In this way the artists had a common reference from
which to argued their individual ideas with one another. Picasso’s, *The Joy of Life* or
“Antipolis,” (1946), is his comment on Ingres’s *Golden Age* and also addresses an earlier
comment presented by Matisse (Galassi 40). In November of 1954, Picasso began a series of
paintings based on a master with which he associated closely with Matisse. This series of
paintings was an immediate response to the news that his old friend Matisse had died (M & P).

Near the end of Matisse’s life he is said to have commented to Picasso, “We must talk to
each other as much as we can. When one of us dies there will be some things the other will never
be able to talk about with anyone else.” Indeed, upon hearing of Matisse’s death, Picasso
acknowledged the loss when he remarked, “Who am I going to talk to (M & P)?” Then he
answered his own question when, instead of attending the funeral, he immediately engaged in a
continuation of the unique dialogue that he and Matisse had developed over the past decades
(Bois 231). The response on this occasion was in the form of a series of paintings based on
Eugène Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers*. To Picasso, Delacroix was the supreme master of color,
and he recognized Matisse as the inheritor of that title. Picasso, who was heard to say, “I have to
paint for both of us now,” (M & P) was in part asserting his philosophical inclination to shoulder
the “burden of the past,” and at the same time he was attempting to claim “the mantle of colorist”
for himself. Focusing on the issue of color, Picasso executed a series of fifteen paintings in a
matter of two months. This, and subsequent series of Matissean paintings seems to attest to a
liberation of an aspect of Picasso’s art that he kept repressed during his rival’s lifetime (Bois
236). After Matisse’s death he no longer felt inhibited with expressing qualities in his work that
related directly to those identified with Matisse. In his new works, Picasso paid homage to
Matisse while at the same time he competed for his territory—in this way, the rivalry survived
even in Matisse’s absence (Bois 236).
The relationship between Matisse and Picasso had several interesting facets. It existed because each artist recognized the other as his only peer in the world of art. It was made possible because both men shared a common philosophical view of the world of art and their place in it. Furthermore, both artists respected and admired the other’s work but also understood the danger of passively accepting another’s influence. Consequently they developed an extraordinary dialogue through works of art from which they carried on a mutually beneficial rivalry—at once acknowledging and reacting against the ideas of the other. The transcript of that conversation exists within the astonishing body of artworks produced by these two great artists.
Works Cited

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