

## Henri Matisse

*The Red Studio*. 1911

Illustrated on page 169

**John Elderfield, *Matisse in the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, 1978*, pages 86–87, 88, 89**

A visitor to Matisse's studio at Issy in June 1912 described what the interior shown in *The Red Studio* was really like. The studio was set to one side of the large walled garden that surrounded the Matisse house, "among trees, leading up to which were beds of flaming flowers. The studio, a good-sized square structure, was painted white, within and without, and had immense windows (both in the roof and at the side), thus giving a sense of out-of-doors and great heat. A large and simple workroom it was, its walls and easels covered with large, brilliant, and extraordinary canvases. . . . My main recollection is of a glare of light, stifling heat, principally caused by the immense glass windows, open doors, showing glimpses of flowers beyond, as brilliant and bright-hued as the walls within . . ." <sup>1</sup>

In *The Red Studio*, Matisse has avoided showing any sign of the out-of-doors. What seems to be part of a window appears at the extreme left. If that is what it is, it may not have looked out onto the garden, as a studio plan shows.<sup>2</sup> We are looking at an enclosed interior: at a corner of the studio and about twenty-three feet of one of the walls.<sup>3</sup> The wall of course is not white, as it was in fact, but like the floor and all the furniture is red. "You are looking for the red wall," Matisse observed to another visitor, who came to the studio shortly after the painting was completed; "this wall does not exist at all! As you can see here, I have painted the same pieces of furniture against a wall of the studio of a pure blue-gray color. These are the sketches, the studies if you wish; as pictures they did not satisfy me. When I had found the color red, I put these studies in a corner, and they remain there. Where I got the color red—to be sure, I do not know that. . . ."<sup>4</sup> I find that all these things, flowers, furniture, the chest of drawers, only become what they are to me when I see them together with the color red. Why such is the case I do not know . . ." It is entirely possible that Matisse "found the color red" in the interior shadows of the room. It could well have been produced optically when he entered the dazzling white interior after looking at the green of his garden, for he was particularly responsive to perceptual color substitutions of this kind, though inclined to justify

them as emotive responses to his subjects<sup>5</sup>—which of course they became, regardless of what sparked them in the first place.

Wherever he found it, the mat red that invades the surface of *The Red Studio* is what largely contributes to its being “perhaps the flattest easel painting done anywhere up to that time.”<sup>6</sup> It is Matisse’s boldest attack to date on traditional three-dimensional illusionism. The virtually unreproducible Venetian red modified by the blue-gray underpainting establishes the frontality of the whole surface. It joins background to foreground, top to bottom, and side to side in one frontal plane. The division of floor and wall is mostly hidden and the angle of the corner not shown. The rectilinear architecture of the room itself is used to reinforce the painting’s flatness and rectilinearity, as are the paintings and all the flattened-out objects shown. There are no depicted volumes at all. . . .

The works of art in *The Red Studio* represent a temporal succession of single views on a scarcely varying subject, showing therefore, in the [Henri] Bergsonian sense, the “duration” of the pastoral ideal in the way the past is carried into and constitutes the present.<sup>7</sup> We see in the separate images the growth of that ideal, just as the separate but similar circular leaves on the stem of ivy growing from the pot in the foreground show us the different manifestations of that form of growth. The circularity of these leaves carries the eye to the round face of the clock. Although the paintings on the wall seem at first to be haphazard in their arrangement, they are in fact clustered around this clock without hands, thus enforcing the metaphor of past and present suspended in one timeless state. They are, moreover, fixed and preserved in the red ground, almost as if in illustration of Bergson’s discussion of how separate temporal incidents stand out from the flux of time which bonds them together.

But it is the goldfish that are the key to the significance of this Matisse painting, and temporarily they were to become an emblem of Matisse’s philosophy of life. Here they make an early appearance in his art and over the next few years they reappear frequently. They can perhaps best be seen as an extension of Matisse’s immersion in the world of Islam. Goldfish, long known in the Far East as symbols of luxury and contemplation, had been introduced into Europe in the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> *Goldfish and Sculpture* was executed in the studio at Issy-les-Moulineaux after a two month sojourn in Tangier; and Morocco, in a sense, had been annexed to the East because of its religion. Goldfish appear in the paintings of Matisse’s second working visit to the country, from October 1912 to February 1913. In a key work, *The Moroccan Café*, painted either in Tangier or soon after his return to Issy in the spring of 1913, the two Arabs that occupy the foreground squat and recline on the ground, lost in reverie before a bowl containing goldfish and a small vase of flowers placed next to it.

Matisse’s own goldfish were kept in a large cylindrical laboratory jar. Fascinated as Matisse was by transparency, he insisted that the water must be kept crystal clear, a task assigned to his children.<sup>2</sup> For Matisse the brilliantly coloured fish contained in and gliding through colourless substance were clearly a source of wonder and fascination. Despite the physical presence of the fish they simultaneously act as patches of dazzling, disembodied colour. Matisse’s friend, the painter Jean Puy, was to compare Matisse himself to a goldfish gazing out on the world.<sup>3</sup> In 1930 in Tahiti Matisse was spellbound for long hours looking down into the glass bottom of a small converted boat. Transparency he associated with light. He was to say: “For a long time now I’ve been conscious of expressing myself through light or in light, which seems to me like a crystal within which something is taking place.”<sup>4</sup>