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William Clyde Partin III   April 16, 2013

The Painter as Architect: Two Decorative Commissions by Henri Matisse

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Bachelor of Arts with Honors

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Abstract

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This document makes two interventions and one addition to the literature surrounding Matisse, Mallarmé, and modernism at large. The first intervention is a set of formal claims regarding two of Matisse's best-known commissions: the Barnes *Dance* and the St. Petersburg *Dance*. I argue that the scholarly reception and canonization of *Dance (II)* has overemphasized the work's identity as a moveable easel painting at the expense of Matisse's conception of the work in a larger decorative context. Similarly, I claim that the Barnes *Dance* has been seen almost exclusively in terms of its site-specificity and architectural integration. As a result, the elements of the work that allude to its place in the tradition of European easel painting have been largely overlooked. Both *Dance* commissions attempt to exemplify two competing ideals, the decorative and the painterly, in hopes of creating an art object that is painting *and* architecture.

I also claim that the poetry and poetics of Stéphane Mallarmé have been misrepresented in contemporary scholarship. Mallarmé's "impersonality" has frequently been misread as an invitation to the viewer's free response. As I argue, a better account is offered by Umberto Eco's "The Open Work," which argued that works of art are receptive to the viewer's imaginative life, but only within terms dictated by the artist. I connect Mallarmé's philosophies of composition, suggestion, and expression with those of Matisse. Both artists were committed to expression not through the Romantic notions of "lyric breath" or "passion bursting from a human face" but through composition. By "yielding initiative to the words", or taking inspiration from the nature of painting as a medium, both men sought to create objects that were *themselves* expressive. In other words, they saw their works as suggestive in the sense that Eco described in "The Open Work."

Finally, because of decoration's well-established association with suggestion in fin-de-siècle Europe, I claim that my formal arguments are emblematic of the conceptual duality described in chapter two. By fusing decoration with easel painting, Matisse also combined a tradition that had come to be associated with the viewer's free response with one that preserved authorial intent.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support from many parties I received throughout the entire process of researching and writing. I would like to thank my parents, Kim DeGrove and Clyde Partin for their unwavering support of this project and my pursuit of art history in general. I am also thankful for the support of my friends, two of whom deserve special praise. Caitlin Ryan, for her humor and effervescent personality that kept both of us afloat as we wrote our theses, and Corinne Mitchell, for her excellent editorial eye and meticulous attention to details I would have overlooked.

I am also extremely grateful to the members of my committee, Dr. Molly Warnock and Dr. Elissa Marder for lending me their time and expertise. Finally, and most importantly, my deepest thanks go to my advisor Dr. Todd Cronan, whose expert guidance carried this project from its earliest, nebulous form to the product you are reading today.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, William Clyde Partin Sr., a sixty-year faculty member and administrator of Emory University who continued to serve the Emory community until a few months before his death in 2009. It was among his greatest desires to see me graduate from Emory, and although I am sad he is no longer here, I take solace in the fact that this document and my coming degree would have made him very proud.

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Would it not be best to leave room for mystery?
-Henri Matisse

Introduction:

In his canonical 1909 text "Notes of a Painter," Henri Matisse (1869-1952) wrote

> A distinction is made between painters who work directly from nature and those who work purely from imagination. Personally, I think neither of these methods must be preferred to the exclusion of the other.[1]

The statement is typical of Matisse, whose artistic practice was so often concerned with reconciling seemingly incompatible traditions. Much later in his life, for example, Matisse spoke of his career-spanning desire to resolve the "the eternal conflict between drawing and color."[2]

The scholarly reception of Matisse has seen the artist in terms of his lifelong attempts to resolve contradictory artistic ideals. More than simply being a painter who resolved "color and drawing" or "nature and imagination," scholars have rightly understood Matisse as having brought a wide variety of competing principles into harmony. For example, John Hallmark Neff describes Matisse as both uniting easel and mural painting into the "expressive mural painting," as well as combining his researches in "fauvism and primitivism."[3] Elsewhere, John Klein has claimed that Matisse's portraiture exemplifies the conflict and resolution of "expression and representation."[4]

I do not disagree with this canonical assessment of Matisse. In fact, I mean to add to it. The purpose of my thesis is to address a curious lacuna in the literature surrounding Matisse's oeuvre. Surprisingly, there has yet to be an extended assessment on the role of the beholder in Matisse's oeuvre. As many other scholars have done, I will claim that Matisse sought to strike a balance between two competing principles: Matisse's authority to imbue his paintings with his

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[1] Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter," in *Matisse on Art*, ed. and trans. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 40.
[2] Quoted in, Yve Alain Bois, *Painting as Model*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993): 58.
[3] John Hallmark Neff, "Matisse and Decoration: The Shchukin Panels," *Art in America* 63 (July-August 1975): 39-40.
[4] John Klein, *Matisse Portraits* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): 17.

intended meaning and the ability for the viewer to respond freely to the artwork. Ultimately, I will show that Matisse sought to create works of art that were suggestive, but in a specific sense of that word. I will claim that Matisse hoped to create paintings that appealed to individual viewer's imaginative lives, but did so within a field of possibilities laid out by the artist. In other words, Matisse set out to create works of art that were both "open" and "closed" to the viewer.

My argument will be centered on two of Matisse's most celebrated commissions, the St. Petersburg *Dance* (1909-1910) and the Barnes *Dance* mural (1929-1933). In both cases, I will claim that the works strike a balance between decorative, architectural painting and traditional easel painting. An essential characteristic of this duality is the well-documented relationship between decoration and suggestion in late nineteenth and early twentieth century art. Works that depended upon the decorative ideal were also seen to be suggestive. This association will be critical for the St. Petersburg *Dance* and the Barnes *Dance*, though as I will show, suggestion is a highly fluid term that will require significant clarification.

Chapter one will be devoted to the celebrated St. Petersburg *Dance II* (1909-1910), one of three paintings commissioned in 1910 by the Russian textile magnate Sergei Shchukin. For the most part, *Dance II* has been canonized and treated as a singular work of art in the tradition of European easel painting. While this reception is not misguided, it also fails to address the full complexity of the Shchukin commission. I will argue that *Dance II* was conceived and executed as one piece in a larger decorative ensemble meant to adorn the staircase of Shchukin's Moscow mansion. My interpretation of the ensemble will focus first on the ensemble's decorative aspects, such as its site-specificity and the programmatic nature. As I will show, the content of each work was dependent on its intended placement within the Shchukin mansion, and that every panel also alludes to the experience of viewing the works in succession. Finally, I will consider *Dance II*

itself. My claim will be that *Dance II* exemplifies Matisse's principles of openness and closure through the balance of decoration and traditional easel painting.

Chapter two will situate the formal debates discussed in chapters one and three inside a more general, theoretical context. I will begin by offering several competing accounts of the role of the beholder. The first will be Leo Tolstoy's vision of art as "infecting"[5] the viewer with the artist's emotion at stake. In contrast, I will present Roland Barthes's vision of viewer-driven aesthetics outlined in his famous essay "Death of the Author." The poetry and poetics of Stéphane Mallarmé is central to Barthes's account of the role of the viewer, but I will claim that Barthes's understanding of Mallarmé is misguided. Indeed, I hope to put pressure on the general notion in contemporary scholarship that artistic "impersonality" should be automatically linked with the metaphorical "Death of the Author." Instead, I will argue that a better understanding of Mallarmé is offered by Umberto Eco in his "The Open Work" and Stephen Knapp in his book *Literary Interest: The Limits of Anti-Formalism*. Finally, I will consider Mallarmé's and Matisse's philosophies of composition, expression, and suggestion. Ultimately, I will claim that Matisse's understanding of these concepts is effectively identical to that of Mallarmé. By extension, Eco's and Knapp's claims about the role of the beholder in Mallarmé may be generalized to Matisse's oeuvre.

The final chapter will consider the Barnes *Dance* commission (1930-33). In contrast to my claims about the reception of the St. Petersburg *Dance*, the Barnes *Dance* has been treated almost exclusively as a site-specific, decorative, and architectural work of art. This emphasis has been largely at the expense of the work's allusions to traditional easel painting. As in the St. Petersburg *Dance*, Matisse attempted to create an art object that was both architectural *and* painterly. My reading will begin with the long execution of the work, during which Matisse

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[5] Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2010): 49.

varied his method frequently in order to bring out both the architectural and painterly features of

the work. The chapter will conclude with a my interpretation of the Barnes *Dance*, which will

take into account a number of features that have been brought to light by the Foundations recent

move to Philadelphia.

Chapter I: *Dance*, Decoration, and Environmental Design

Matisse received the commission that resulted in *Dance* [Figure 1] and *Music* [Figure 2]

from the Russian business mogul Sergei Shchukin in March of 1909. Shchukin had recently seen

and been impressed by Matisse's *Nymph and Satyr* (1909) [Figure 3] while touring Western

Europe. Soon after, he asked the painter for three panels to decorate the grand staircase of his

palatial mansion in Moscow. The commission, executed over the next two years, represented

Matisse's first foray into architectural space.

In a groundbreaking study of these works, John Hallmark Neff argued that the formal

restrictions imposed upon the ensemble — the architectural setting of the staircase and

Shchukin's personal demands — actually benefited Matisse by forcing him to utilize the

conventions of decoration to expand the traditional scope of easel painting. This led Matisse to

produce an entirely new genre, the "expressive mural painting."[6] The unprecedented fusion

allowed Matisse to draw upon the best elements of two previously discrete traditions. From the

decorative, Neff writes, Matisse took the large scale of the Shchukin panels, as well as their

"anti-naturalist" figuration and "planar simplifications."[7] These were combined with the

"expressive intensity of color," which up to that point had been identified exclusively with easel

painting.[8]

Neff also argued that the panels can only reveal the full complexity of Matisse's

achievement in the Shchukin mansion when viewed as an ensemble space. I follow Neff in

arguing that the canonization and scholarly reception of *Dance (II)* has often overlooked its place

in a larger decorative ensemble and architectural setting. Instead, scholars have almost

unanimously treated *Dance (II)* as a singular, autonomous work of art in the tradition of

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[6] Neff, "Matisse & Decoration: The Shchukin Panels," 35.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

European easel painting. It is typical for commentators to refer to the later Barnes *Dance* as Matisse's "first confrontation with architecture," as Christian Brouder and Rene Percheron do in their book, *Matisse from Color to Architecture*.[9]

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the St. Petersburg *Dance* in its larger architectural context. I will begin with a 1909 interview in which Matisse describes the original intent of his commission. As I will show, Matisse conceived of the St. Petersburg *Dance* as part of a larger ensemble from the outset. Moreover, Matisse's interview reveals his preoccupation with the works' intended setting, which was essential for determining the content and intended effect of each panel. I will also claim that Matisse saw his ensemble as programmatic, and that he envisioned an ideal experience for the viewer. In my interpretation of *Dance II*, I will argue that the work's compositional system is emblematic of principles of openness and closure, and that this balance also alludes to the role Matisse intended for the ensemble's beholder.

In an April 1909 interview with the Paris daily, *Les Nouvelles*, Matisse described the scope of his project in some depth. At the time of the interview, *Dance (I)* [Figure 4], now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, had already been completed, but Matisse had not yet begun work on the final version that would hang in St. Petersburg. Matisse explained:

> I have a staircase to decorate. It has three floors. I imagine a visitor coming in from the outside. The first flight of stairs presents itself to him...it is necessary to make an effort, by giving a feeling of relief. My first panel represents the dance, this round of figures taking off above the hill. By the second floor one is in the interior of the house; in its spirit and its silence, I see a scene of music with attentive individuals; finally, on the third floor there is complete calm and I paint a scene of repose: some people reclining on the grass, chatting or daydreaming. I will achieve this by the fewest most simple means, those which permit the painter to express most pertinently all his inner vision.[10]

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[9] Christian Brouder and Rene Percheron, *Matisse from Color to Architecture*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (New York: Henry N. Abrams Inc, 2004): 22.

[10] Quoted in, Jack Flam, "Matisse on Art," *The Burlington Magazine* (March 1974): 162.

Matisse's description provides valuable insight into his vision for the decorative ensemble. In addition to providing the basic iconographic plan for the works, Matisse's outline demonstrates that the panels were conceived programmatically. The three panels were originally meant to be experienced sequentially as the viewer climbed the grand stairs of Shchukin's mansion. Matisse also indicates his concern for connecting the content of each work with its localized setting within the space. Matisse further suggests his concern for controlling the viewer's experience of these works. I will consider both of these observations — the environmental setting and viewer's projected experience of it — before turning to *Dance II* itself.

As Matisse described in his interview, each of the panels in the Shchukin ensemble depends upon its immediate setting for its content. For example, at the base of the first flight of stairs, where *Dance (II)* was to be placed, the "round of figures taking off above the hill" functions as a premonition of the beholder's coming action — like the figures, so too will the viewer ascend. On the second floor, where Matisse senses in the interior a spirit of silence, he sees a scene of music with "attentive individuals." Finally, the "complete calm" of the third floor generates a scene of repose that matches the ambience of its setting. By climbing the staircase, the viewer has undergone an artistic journey (loosely) prescribed by Matisse's artistic program, and is presumably rewarded with a scene of repose.

Neff also noted that the horizon lines of each panel rise relative to their location on the grand staircase. In *Dance (II)*, the landscape rises to less than half the height of the canvas, but in *Music*, the horizon line curves across the upper half of the canvas. Likewise, a 1910 preparatory drawing of *Bathers by a River* [Figure 5] indicates that the planned composition would have effectively banished the horizon line entirely. Similarly, Neff observes, the works exhibit a progressive diminution of energy as one traverses the stairs: "the physical exuberance of Dance

is progressively sublimated until it subsides into the total relaxation of the group at the secluded forest stream...the quasi-musical tempo and 'volume' diminish until [the silence of the third panel]."[11] In both cases, each panel reflects its place within a larger ensemble in an architectural setting.

The sequential changes between each panel also allude to the programmatic nature of the commission. There is an essential relationship between these works that can only be experienced in time. *Music*, after all, was not visually accessible from *Dance (II)*. Nor would have *Bathers by a River* been, if it had ever been installed in Shchukin's mansion. The viewer is required to make a conscious effort, lending an experiential and temporal dimension to these works when seen as an ensemble. Even so, the viewer is given a degree of freedom to experience the Shchukin panels as he sees fit. After all, he is free to ignore the prescribed program. One could simply climb a single story, view *Music*, and return down the stairs or walk to another room on the second level of the Shchukin mansion.

As I have suggested, Matisse's *Dance (II)* was intended to produce a set of experiential effects. It is as if the panels, when experienced in succession, allow the monotonous act of stair climbing to be less burdensome. As Matisse said of the first panel, "it is necessary to make an effort, by giving a feeling of relief," implying that by showing a group of dancing figures, the viewer will find his task more palpable.[12] Even so, the intended effect Matisse described is rather general. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of Matisse intending all the specific emotions and responses that might give the viewer the inspiration needed to climb the stairs. For one viewer, the painting might offer the courage needed to undertake the task of climbing. For another, the animation of the depicted bodies might inspire similar action within the viewer. Nevertheless,

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[11] Neff, "Matisse & Decoration: The Shchukin Panels": 45.
[12] Quoted in, Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 30.

one can imagine a wide range of individual responses that might lead to Matisse's intended end. This "field of possibility" is characteristic of Matisse's desire to control, through a mode of "suggestive" effects similar to those described in Mallarmé's "Crisis of Verse," the viewer's response. The beholder is free to respond as he sees fit, but only within terms framed by the artist.

Likewise, in spite of all the allusions to openness present in *Dance (II)*, each is tempered by a corresponding closure. Though the panel possesses mural-like and decorative elements, it remains an easel painting. While *Dance (II)* may appear fresco-like in both its scale and technique, it is ultimately a work made of oil paint on a stretched canvas. Similarly, though *Dance* and *Music*'s vast dimensions may offer the illusion of architectural integration, the canvases are ultimately moveable and independent of their setting. Indeed, the panels' current viewing conditions in the Hermitage (*Dance [II] & Music*) and the Art Institute of Chicago (*Bathers by a River*) are not entirely at odds with their purpose.

In other words, Matisse's preoccupation with designing the harmonious whole did not come at the expense of creating a painting that could stand on its own, outside of its architectural and ensemble context. After all, Matisse was not merely a decorator. He was a painter, though one whose paintings could potentially bring a space into harmony. Describing *Dance II* to Romm, Matisse tellingly wrote "[*Dance II*] still proceeds from the requirements of the easel painting . . . because it can hang anywhere."[13] Matisse includes the qualifying "still" because he worried that that the ensemble might incorrectly be seen as mere decoration. Even though *Dance II* and the rest of the Shchukin suggest a closer relationship between canvas and wall, they ultimately remain independent of the wall. Though they no longer reside in the space for which they were meant, it does not prevent us from enjoying them or seeing them as traditional easel paintings.

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[13] Quoted in, Yve Alain Bois, "The Blinding" *October* (Spring 1994): 83.

This constant play between principles of openness and closure is also in *Dance (II)* itself. In March of 1909, following receipt of Matisse's initial sketches for *Dance*, Shchukin, who shared his mansion with his two nieces, wrote to Matisse that "I cannot at this time place nudes in my staircase . . . Manage to show the same round dance, but with girls in dresses."[14] A temporary solution was reached when Shchukin commissioned an additional version of *Dance*, to be placed in a private zone of the house, but after seeing watercolor studies for *Dance*, Shchukin quickly dropped his concerns, writing that "The watercolor sketch of *Dance* overcomes all reservations expressed in my letters . . . [It] is so noble that I have decided to fly in the face of bourgeois opinion and place 'nudes' over my staircase."[15]

The commission proceeded smoothly until the works' first public display at the 1910 Salon d'Automne, held in Paris at the Grand Palais from October 1 to November 8. Matisse was to show *Dance* and *Music*; it is unclear when or why *Bathers by a River* was removed from the commission. To the dismay of both artist and patron, both of whom were present in Paris for the Salon, *Dance* and *Music* were the target of vitriolic criticism. Leopold Rude, writing for *Gil Blas*, suggested that the paintings were the progeny of genuine "mental illness," and could only be meaningful for "hysterical Finnish women or completely cracked Norwegians."[16] Still, the deepest blow to Matisse came when Shchukin, who was embarrassed by the works' negative reception, canceled the commission prior to his return to Moscow. Writing after her father's death, Marguerite Matisse recalled "the memory of the state of anguish that possessed my father night and day...until the moment when he received the letter written by Shchukin from the train." Only during his return to Moscow, did Shchukin choose to relent and agree to purchase the two

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[14] Quoted in, Christian Brouder and Rene Percheron, *Matisse from Color to Architecture*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (New York: Henry N. Abrams Inc, 2004): 22.
[15] Ibid. 24.
[16] Ibid.

canvases. Writing to Matisse on November 11th of 1910, Shchukin said: "I've thought things over and I'm ashamed of my weakness and lack of courage...I've decided to hang your panels. People may shout and laugh, but since I'm convinced that your path is the right one, perhaps time will be my ally and I shall claim victory in the end."[17] The two canvases were finally delivered to Russia on December 17, 1910, nearly two years after Shchukin's initial request.

Dance II, produced 1910 in conjunction with *Music*, is massive, measuring 102.4 by 153.9 inches, by far the largest work Matisse had produced up to that point. Its monstrous size serves not only to dominate the viewer's field of vision, but also to suggest the scale of the murals Matisse saw in Italy two years prior. In the painting, a quintet of figures, painted in a deep shade of orange, is perched upon an arching green hill, clasping hands and whirling in primitive revelry. The dance motif was a staple of Matisse's oeuvre between 1906 and 1912, appearing for the first time in the allegorical *Joy of Life*.[18] After the Shchukin commission, the dance motif would return in *Nasturtiums & Dance I & II*, *Still Life with Dance*, and, eventually, the Barnes *Dance* triptych. But with the exception of the later Barnes *Dance*, *Dance II* is Matisse's most sophisticated meditation on the dance motif, requiring multiple preparatory drawings and a full scale painting *(Dance [I])* to determine the painting's final composition.[19]

The two panels were worked upon simultaneously in order to maintain an even color scheme, another allusion to their place in a larger decorative ensemble. The luminous effect of Matisse's palette recalls his discoveries during his Fauvist period, while the simplified bodies of

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[17] Quoted in, Christian Brouder and Rene Percheron, *Matisse from Color to Architecture*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (New York: Henry N. Abrams Inc, 2004): 26.

[18] In his article, Neff notes that the dance motif was especially popular in the first decade of the twentieth century, appearing in canvases by Pierre Bonnard and Maurice Denis. He also notes that the dance was most frequently depicted in conjunction with images of the other arts, including music. Matisse wrote that an immediate source for the whirling round of Dancers was a group of Catalan fisherman he had seen in Collioure. See also: Margaret Werth, *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art circa 1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[19] Quoted in, Hilary Spurling, *Matisse the Master: The Conquest of Colour, 1909-1954* (New York: Knopf, 2005): 58.

the figures reveal the more recent influence of primitivist art. Scholars have also noted that *Dance* and *Music* represent a synthesis of traditional easel painting and the decorative arts. This combination has not always been seen in a positive light. For example, Leopold Rude, a critic at the 1910 Salon d'Automne, bemoaned the paintings' failure to be either *tableaux* or *peintures decoratifs*.[20] Though the paintings exhibited the subject held in highest esteem at the Salon, heroic nudes in a landscape, the extraordinary formal departures instantly put *Dance* in tension with its classical subject matter.

Though the basic form of the dance never changes, Matisse made several minor adjustments to the group each time he revisited the motif. Most frequently, he revised the break between the hands two figures closest to the picture plane. Though the hands never touch in any instance of the dance motif, Matisse carefully uses this moment to suggest pictorial and compositional unity. In the preparatory *Dance (I)*, the break between the hands occurs over the fleshy thigh of the left background figure, allowing the deep orange color to be carried throughout the composition. In *Dance II*, the design is more emphatic, with not only color pictorially negating the break but also form and line. The "V" formed between the index and thumb of the lower right hand figure also defines the pose of the back left figure's legs. Describing the canvas's composition, Matisse's German pupil Hans Purrmann wrote that "[Matisse] kept rearranging the limbs of the four figures...and manipulated the entire group as if it were one single figure with eight legs and eight arms."[21]

Matisse's constant revision of this moment indicates its importance to the work as a whole. It is as if a viewer might grab those hands, take his or her place with the figures in the painting, and be whisked away into the painting's world, closing and electrifying the circuit with

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[20] Neff, "Matisse and Decoration: The Shchukin Panels," 37.
[21] Quoted in, Spurling, *Matisse the Master*, 48.

his or her presence. And yet, if there is a sense of a completion through circuitry, it is essential to note that Matisse had already created a closed circuit through pictorial means. If the break suggests that the viewer completes the painting, then the closed pictorial circuit suggests that it would be complete regardless. The painting is largely *indifferent* to the viewer. This should strike us as somewhat surprising, given Matisse's continued recognition of the beholder's potential experience of the work. But it was a mode of experience that could not be *felt* to be directed at the viewer.

The closed circuitry of *Dance II* serves an additional function. Even as the figures in *Dance II* feel pushed outward towards the edge of the canvas by an unseen centrifugal force, their expansiveness is halted by their closed circle.[22] Similarly, the figures, for the most part, never extend beyond the edge of the canvas: as the dancers' limbs approach the edges, they curve away, lyrically in the case of the leftmost figure, and tensely in the case of the rightmost. The figures' careful positioning relative to the edge emphasizes the importance of that otherwise arbitrary boundary. As Lawrence Gowing observes, "the bodies fill the extraordinary design. Feet are pressed against the bottom of the canvas; the upper edge is carried on a bent head and on powerful shoulders."[23]

Throughout this analysis, I have alluded to the constant presence of closure and openness present in *Dance (II)*, both in the formal content of the canvas and in the ensemble. *Dance (II)*, like the Shchukin commission as a whole, is all at once painterly and decorative, static and temporal, expansive and bounded. The figures and the composition lie in suspended animation. These constant dualities should be read as characteristic of Matisse's own concern for producing

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[22] For an extended discussion of Matisse's system of compositional organization, it is best to turn to, Yve Alain Bois "The Blinding" *October* (Spring 1994): 60-121. Bois' study meticulously analyzes Matisse's system of "expansion, circulation, and tension," terms that fit well with my own notions of "openness," "closure," and the balance between the two.

[23] Gowing, *Matisse*: 95.

works that allow for a horizon of possibilities: open, but not contingent. "At the precise moment when raging bands were milling about in front of his huge canvases, tearing him to pieces and cursing him" wrote Matisse's friend Marcel Sembat in 1910, "[Matisse] confessed coolly to us: 'What I want is an art of balance.'"[24]

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[24] Quoted in, Spurling, *Matisse the Master*, 31.

Chapter 2: The False Origins of Viewer-Driven Aesthetics

Up until this point, I have addressed a localized, formal problem in Matisse's oeuvre. My concern has been the reception and canonization of the St. Petersburg *Dance* as a traditional easel painting, and I have claimed that this emphasis has largely been at the expense of the panel's decorative and architectural conception. My intention in this chapter is to consider these conclusions within a larger theoretical context. As I will argue, what emerged originally as a formal concern expands into a much larger conceptual debate within modernism, that of "suggestion" and the role of the beholder.

The place of the viewer will be approached through the writings of a number of authors. At one extreme is Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), who argues that art channels a single, authorially intended effect to a viewer. At the other, Roland Barthes (1915-1980) promotes a viewer-driven account of aesthetics, in which the artwork's meaning is dependent upon the viewer's experience and not the author's intentions. The discussion will then shift to two literary theorists, Umberto Eco (1932-) and Stephen Knapp (1951-), whose alternative accounts of the role of the beholder allow for some degree of free response, but still retain the artist's authority and intentionality.

The poetry and poetics of Stéphane Mallarmé are essential to Eco, Tolstoy, and Barthes' competing accounts of the viewer's relationship with the art object. The frequency with which Mallarmé appears in irreconcilable accounts of the viewer's relationship with the art object indicates that Mallarmé and his poetics are easily misrepresented. Indeed, I will claim that the postmodern, Barthesian identification of Mallarmé as the conceptual ancestor of viewer-driven aesthetics is misguided. As I will show, a more accurate counter-narrative of the viewer's role in modernist art is offered by Eco in his essay, "The Open Work."

Once this narrative is established, Mallarmé will be linked to Matisse through their closely associated philosophies of composition, as expressed in Matisse's "Notes of a Painter" (1909) and Mallarmé's *Divagations* (1897). Both figures link authorial expression with their works' composition, tethering theoretical concerns to formal practices. From this claim, I will show that Matisse and Mallarmé likewise understood the notion of "suggestion" in similar terms. I will argue that Matisse, like Mallarmé, sought to create works of art that allowed for a degree of free response, but within the terms laid out by the artist. Finally, I will claim that this position is manifest in the St. Petersburg *Dance* and the Barnes *Dance* by these works' balance of decorative and painterly ideals.

In his book *What Is Art?* (1897), Tolstoy dismisses the "latest and most comprehensible . . . evolutionary, experimental and productionist" definitions of art.[25] For Tolstoy, these definitions are insufficient as they consider only "the pleasure that art may give" and not the purpose art serves "in the life of man and of humanity."[26] Instead, Tolstoy argues that art must be understood in its context as a "means of interaction between man and man."[27] Simply put, art's nature is communicatory. Describing the activity of art, Tolstoy writes:

> Art is based on the fact that a man, receiving through his sense of hearing or sight another man's expression of feeling, is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it. To take the simplest example: one man laughs, and another who hears becomes merry; or a man weeps, and another who hears feels sorrow . . . It is on this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based.[28]

In this passage, Tolstoy explains the mechanics through which an artist produces an automatic effect in the viewer. When creating a work of art, Tolstoy's artist experiences a certain emotion, which will be reflected by the art object. If the artwork is well made, it will transmit that same

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[25] Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, 48-49.
[26] Ibid., 49.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 49-50.

emotion directly to the viewer. Or, as Tolstoy puts it, the artwork will "infect" its viewer with that specific emotion. Tolstoy's description of art as "contagious" and capable of "infecting" the viewer indicates that he views the affective condition of art as effectively biological. Moreover, the effect of an artwork is unavoidable. Like a virus, the artwork will "infect" the viewer whether he wants to be "infected" or not. For Tolstoy, a great work of art will be surefire: it will transmit these emotions regardless of the viewer's intentions.[29]

Even so, it is essential to note that the artwork *itself* is not expressive: it is only representative of the artist's emotion. By existing exclusively to transmit this emotion, the art object is little more than a conduit that allows the transmission of a specific, intended emotion. Accordingly, Tolstoy's criteria for judging the quality of a work of art depends upon a work's legibility, transparency, and genuineness. In other words, qualities that allow for the "direct, immediate" transmission of the author's emotion at stake. For Tolstoy, great art is art that "infects" the viewer with the artist's emotion with as little distortion as possible. Under these terms, the viewer is powerless to forge his own individualized response to the artwork in question. He is merely mirroring the emotion the artist felt while creating the work.

Bad art, by comparison, inhibits the author's expression through notionally illegible features, such as "haziness," "mysteriousness," and "exclusiveness," which disrupt the clear transmission of the artist's emotion at stake.[30] Among a number of contemporary German and French poets, Tolstoy singles out Mallarmé, criticizing the symbolist's perceived illegibility, writing that: "I have read several poems by Mallarmé, and they had no meaning whatsoever . . .

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[29] Ibid., 50.
[30] Ibid., 77.

There is a whole volume of this prose called *Divagations*. It is impossible to understand any of it. And that is evidently what the author intended."[31]

Tolstoy's worry here is that, because Mallarmé's poetry must be deciphered "like a rebus," the author's emotion at stake will become lost to the viewer.[32] But what Tolstoy criticizes most in Mallarmé is precisely the feature that Barthes praises in "Death of the Author" (1967). The essay questions New Criticism's dependency on authorial intention and biographical context for interpretation. "To give a text an author," thereby yoking the text with a singular interpretation, "is to impose a limit on that text," he writes.[33] Instead, Barthes argues, the imperative to interpret falls to the reader, who effectively rewrites the text in the process of reading.

Barthes contends that his position is not actually new, citing a number of earlier authors, including Mallarmé. Barthes writes:

> Though the sway of the Author remains powerful … it goes without saying that certain writers have long since attempted to loosen it. In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner. For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality. . . to research that point where only language acts, "performs," and not "me." Mallarmé's entire poetics consists in suppressing the author in the interests of writing (which is, as will be seen, to restore the place of the reader).[34]

Barthes identifies Mallarmé as the first to promote the concept of the viewer-driven aesthetic he is attempting to codify in "Death of the Author." For Barthes, Mallarmé's "impersonality" is indicative of a desire to remove himself from the text and cede control to the words themselves, which in turn gives the reader a more active role in producing the meaning of the text. Though Barthes is not wrong in claiming that Mallarmé did indeed intend to loosen the author's grip on

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[31] Ibid., 87-88.

[32] Ibid., 77.

[33] Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 147.

[34] Ibid., 143.

interpretation, he incorrectly assumes that Mallarmé's specific conception of the beholder's role was compatible with his own. Furthermore, though he is correct in claiming that Mallarmé's "impersonality" privileged language itself over the author, his claim that this would "restore the place of the reader" misinterprets one of Mallarmé's most fundamental claims. Unlike Barthes, who insists upon the metaphorical death of the author, the authorial presence in Mallarmé — the "master," as he puts it — is immutable, *even as* the author is absent from the work itself. Indeed, the identification of Mallarmé's impersonality with a viewer driven aesthetic is a common mistake in contemporary accounts of Mallarmé.

Umberto Eco offers a more convincing account of Mallarmé in his essay "The Open Work." Speaking generally, but with Mallarmé in mind, Eco writes:

> This search for suggestiveness is a deliberate move to "open" the work to the free response of the addressee. An artistic work that suggests is also one that can be performed with the full emotional and imaginative resources of the interpreter. Whenever we read poetry there is a process by which we try to adapt our personal world to the emotional world proposed by the text. This is all the more true of poetic works that are deliberately based on suggestiveness, since the text sets out to stimulate the private world of the addressee so that he can draw from inside himself some deeper response that mirrors the subtler resonances underlying the text.[35]

In this passage, Eco acknowledges that through suggestion, Mallarmé intended to open his poetry up to the interpretive capacities of individual readers. Eco also shares Mallarmé's belief that a suggestive text offers the viewer greater emotional and imaginative responses. Most importantly, Eco provides a general description of the action of the reader, claiming that readers adapt their "personal world" to "the emotional world proposed *by the text*." This is the opposite strategy of Barthes, who claims that the "emotional world proposed by the text" is adapted to the reader's "personal world," and not the other way around. In Eco, there is no metaphorical "birth of the reader," just as there is no "death of the author." Quite the opposite, in fact. Eco writes:

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[35] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989): 63.

> The author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work to be completed. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question *will still be his own*. It will not be a different work.[36]

Eco's insistence that the work will, despite the reader's free capacity to interpret, remain the author's is essential. This claim has much in common with Mallarmé's belief about the persistence of the "master," even though the master himself is not present in the text. For Eco, authorship does not cease at the moment a book is read. It continues through the reader's experience, and is present within every response a reader might enjoy.

Still, Eco's description of the reader's interpretive action is rather general. Though his description seems conceptually tenable, it is not immediately clear in practical terms how his description would function. How exactly does a reader apply his own world to that of the text? What might this look like in practice? Stephen Knapp, in his book *Literary Interest and the Limits of Anti-Formalism* provides a practical example of the effects of suggestion, termed here as "implicatures." Knapp writes:

> I see no reason not to expand the intended meaning [to including thoughts that are not identical but (in the right way) related to the thoughts a speaker specifically had in mind]; it seems clear that speakers do, in fact, frequently accept as correct interpretations of their utterances various implicatures that they did not specifically have in mind when they framed the utterances in question — provided, once again, that such implicatures belong to the *set* of implicatures they *did* have in mind.[37]

Knapp argues that suggestive effects of reading allow the reader to individualize or otherwise flesh out what may have originally been put in generalized terms. Such details would be superfluous for an author, but allow the reader to personalize the author's text. For example, an author, in describing a trip made by car, would not necessarily need to include details of the driver's clothing, the color, make, and model of the car, or the fabric used in the car seat. Yet the

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Stephen Knapp, *Literary Interest: The Limits of Anti-Formalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993): 45.

reader may supply these details in experiencing the work, drawing upon his own imaginative life. These dependent and rather superficial descriptions may vary from reader to reader, but in no way do they threaten authorial intent, provided they do not directly contradict implicatures set by the author. Knapp describes a system of interpretation that is both "open" and "closed" to the viewer, giving the text an interpretive boundary in an effort to preserve authorial intent.

This notion is reminiscent of Mallarmé, who maintained that description crushed an object's ability to be expressive. Indeed, the phenomenon described by Knapp seems to be exactly the sort of suggestion Mallamré sought in his own work. But for Mallarme, suggestion did not merely preserve the emotion present in his poetry by opening to the viewer's creative agency. It also included a degree of authorial control over the essential features of an artwork. This specific understanding of suggestion is the same suggestion Matisse sought in his own artistic practice.

> Describing the creative process in "Crisis of Verse," Mallarmé claims that
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> The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields place to the words, mobilised by the shock of their inequality; they take light from mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious stones, replacing the old lyric afflatus or the enthusiastic personal direction of the phrase.[38]

Mallarmé describes a philosophy of composition based the internal relationships between words within a poem. Certain words may be "mobilised by the shock of their inequality," meaning the expressive potential for any given word may be heightened through its juxtaposition with another word. The reciprocal relationship between words is essential for Mallarmé's understanding of composition and expression. Expression, for Mallarmé, is not the "old lyric afflatus" one might find in emotional, romantic poetry. Instead, expression is manifest is the evocative relationships between words, lit up by their "mutual reflection." In addition to describing his artistic process,

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[38] Stéphane Mallarmé, "Crisis of Verse," trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 208.

this passage also alludes to Mallarmé's commitment to impersonality. As he puts it, the poet

"yields place to the words."

These sentiments are largely echoed by Matisse, who contends in his "Notes of a Painter"

that

> Composition, the aim of which should be expression, is modified according to the surface
> to be covered. If I take a sheet of paper of a given size, my drawing will have a necessary
> relationship to its format. I would not repeat this drawing on another sheet of different
> proportions. . . both harmonies and dissonances of color can produce agreeable effects.[39]

Like Mallarmé, Matisse's understanding of composition is based upon the relationship between

objects within the artwork. Relationships between colors "produce agreeable effects," and that "a

living harmony of colors [is] . . . analogous to that of a musical composition." Similarly, the

content of a work must be adjusted to fit the physical nature of its support. Moreover, just as

Mallarmé rejected expression as represented by the "old lyric breath," Matisse claimed that

"expression does not reside in passions glowing in a human face." For both men, expression is

less dramatic. Composition is expression.

It is clear that both Matisse and Mallarmé are taking inspiration from the nature of their

respective mediums. It is also apparent that both figures are interested in depersonalizing

themselves from their artworks. Most of all, for both Mallarmé and Matisse, the artwork *itself* is

seen as expressive, an effect that is explicitly achieved through composition. Whether it be the

"shock of [words'] inequality" or the arrangement of lines and colors on a flat surface, it is

composition that imbues the work with expressive power.

Mallarmé and Matisse also share a similar understanding of the action required by the

viewer. Mallarmé's specific allusions to the viewer's responsibility ("one [is invited to] to open

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[39] Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter" in *Matisse on Art* trans. Jack Flam (New York: Knopf Press, 2007): 28.

or close the page") are echoed in Matisse's own quasi-literary description of his artworks'

beholders:

> Like the book on the shelf in a bookcase, showing only the few words of its title, [a painting] needs, in order to give up its riches, the action of the reader who must pick it up, open it, and shut himself away with it. . . This is what I meant when I wrote that the spectator has to 'reach out' to the picture; to be more precise, I should have written 'go in search of.'[40]

Matisse describes his ideal viewer in terms that are both active and submissive. Though the

reader must "reach out" or "go in search of" the artwork, he must also "shut himself away with

it." A degree of agency is also assigned to the artwork itself, as it is the artwork that "must give

up its riches." Matisse also seems to conceive of his works as being experienced in time. Like

reading a poem, surface presentation — the "few words of its title," as Matisse puts it —

gradually gives way to deeper levels of meaning, the "riches." In this way, the relationship

between the work of art and the beholder is not collaborative, but symbiotic. Artworks need a

reader to seek out and decipher them, the reward of which is the distribution of the artwork's

"riches" *by* the artwork.

  For Matisse and for Mallarmé there is a necessary potential in the spectator. But

ultimately, it is not the potential that Barthes saw in Mallarmé, which was the inauguration of a

tradition of aesthetics driven by the viewer's bodily and natural life. Nor is it the purely receptive

viewer described by Tolstoy, a viewer who is powerless to experience any effect other than the

one the artist intended. Rather, suggestion falls in the space between these two poles: open to the

viewer's personality, but in ways that do not jeopardize authorial intention. Matisse's own

philosophy of art seems most compatible with this system, given Matisse's and Mallarmé's

similar understandings of the expressive powers of composition, as well as their shared

sentiments regarding the role of the viewer. "A painter doesn't see everything he has put in his

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[40]Quoted in, Yve Alain Bois, "The Blinding," 82-83.

painting. It is other people who find these treasures in it," as wrote Matisse in 1944. A painting may be open to responses that the artist did not consciously intend, but such responses do not wrest authorship from the artist.[41] After all, the artist — the "master" — "put them there."

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[41] Quoted in, Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 105.

Chapter 3: Painting, Place, and the *Barnes* Dance

> It was in me like a rhythm that carried me along.[42]
> -Henri Matisse, *Journal*, 1946

As the 1920's drew to a close, Matisse's life and career were at a standstill. For much of

the decade, the painter had abandoned the abstract style that had secured his status as a member

of the European avant-garde in favor of a more intimate, impressionistic style. At first, the abrupt

shift benefited the aging artist, who produced sixty paintings in 1920 alone. As the decade wore

on, Matisse's output sputtered, as his studio practice was disrupted by dramatic upheavals in his

domestic life, increasingly hostile critics, and rising self-doubt. Even his friend and longtime

critical supporter Téraide conceded in 1929 that Matisse was "struggling . . . to maintain the

vigor of his legendary flexibility, the youth of his line, [and] the vitality of his color."[43]

Perhaps to reinvigorate his flagging artistic production, Matisse set off on a number of

intercontinental voyages to Tahiti and the United States. New York, in particular, fascinated

Matisse: "The first time I saw New York, at seven o'clock in the evening, this gold and black

block in the night, reflected in the water, I was in complete ecstasy . . . New York seemed to me

like a gold nugget."[44] When another opportunity later arose to visit the city, Matisse eagerly

accepted. Officially, the purpose of his second trip to America was to serve on the jury for the

Carnegie International Exhibition, whose first prize he had been awarded two years prior. But

much of his trip was spent touring the private holdings of many of the most important American

collectors, including business magnate Dr. Alfred Barnes's mansion in Merion, Pennsylvania.

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[42] Quoted in, Jack Flam, *The Dance* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1993): 81.

[43] Ibid., 14.

[44] Quoted in, Flam, *Matisse on Art*: 60-64. In his footnotes to *The Dance*, Flam wonders (only somewhat rhetorically) whether Matisse, whose financial situation was increasingly perilous in the late 1920's, was possibly thinking of the tremendous wealth of contemporary American collectors.

Following a tour of his extensive collection of modern European art, Barnes informed Matisse that he wished to commission a large mural for the irregular space over the large French windows in his foundation's main gallery. Intrigued by both the patron and the project, Matisse made plans to meet with Barnes again in France and finalize the details of the commission, at that point, the largest project of Matisse's career.

The result of this commission, the celebrated Barnes *Dance* [Figures 6 & 7], is among the most discussed in Matisse's oeuvre. A summation of the first half of his career, the painting combined Matisse's research in the European traditions of easel painting, decoration, and environmental design. Even so, commentators have focused almost exclusively on the aspects of the work that exemplify its architectural integration and site-specificity, while ignoring its allusions to traditional easel painting. I do not aim to suggest that the Barnes *Dance*'s decorative elements have been overstated or misrepresented. Indeed, it should be clear to any viewer that site specificity is integral to the Barnes *Dance*'s success as a work of art. Even so, I shall show that the work's site specificity *does not* come at the expense of its identity as a traditional easel painting. As in the St. Petersburg *Dance*, these seemingly contradictory qualities exist in symbiosis.

The three-year execution of the Barnes *Dance* has already been well documented in Jack Flam's catalogue *The Dance*, so I will not recount the process in detail. Even so, many of the changes Matisse made in his execution of the mural are highly telling and useful for understanding the stakes of the completed work. As I will argue, Matisse did not efface painterly ideals in favor of architectural ones. Instead, Matisse sought to create an object that held these two ideals in suspension. In other words, to make a work of art that was both painting *and* architecture.

In August 1931, Edward Dreibelbis, a teacher at the Barnes Foundation and confidant of Dr. Barnes, visited Matisse's studio in Nice for the purpose of confirming that Matisse's canvas was large enough to fold behind its stretchers. In a report to Dr. Barnes, he included a description of Matisse's studio and initial working method, observing that

> [Matisse's] procedure is thorough — he explains that the garage is of about the length and width of the large gallery [of the Barnes Foundation], the point of view is that from the balcony. Repainted walls duplicate the plaster and a new skylight duplicates the illumination. He speaks vividly of the position of other paintings in the room, the Indian blankets, and the landscape which will appear thru the windows.[45]

Dreibelbis' description of Matisse's preparations indicate that the artist conceived the Barnes *Dance* in decorative and architectural terms from the outset. By attempting to replicate the space that the canvas would occupy, Matisse demonstrated that harmonious environmental design was central to his artistic intentions. Indeed, Matisse's concern for decoration was so pervasive that it extended to the position and qualities of the paintings sharing the space.

And yet, for all these allusions to environmental design, preparatory drawings [Figures 8 & 9] and oils [Figures 10 & 11] reveal a pictorial system in conflict with the decorative ideal. Carefully modeled figures fill the canvas, revealing a constant play of brushwork at odds with the overall architectural surface Matisse sought to create. Lurching, muscled figures dominate the mural, dancing upon a clear foreground that alludes to a landscape, a far cry from the abstract bands of color that would later form the work's background. The color is vibrant, with deep shades of ocher and blue. Matisse's exuberant palette in these watercolors is especially striking when compared to the cool, subdued pink, blue and gray of the finished *Dance*. Matisse's extensive sketches from this period also show his concern for balancing two ideals; for every drawing that shows the work in its architectural setting, there is another that isolates the canvas.

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[45] Quoted in, Flam, *The Dance*, 23.

Flam also notes that in Matisse's earliest sketches, there is a consistent tendency to alter the

architecture to better fit his conception of the mural, perhaps indicating the continuing allure of

the movable easel painting.[46]

Even at this early stage, it should be clear from Matisse's preparations that there are two

distinct artistic systems in suspension here. The first: "pictorial, descriptive, and painterly," and

the other, "flat, decorative, and architectural."[47] Both Flam and I understand this duality to be the

work's starting point. However, where Flam sees the painterly system being subsumed into the

architectural ideal, I perceive a constant oscillation between two conceptual poles in an attempt

to achieve artistic harmony.

After a month of work on the mural, Matisse travelled to Northern Italy to once again

view Giotto's frescoes at the Capella Scrovegni, as he had done before beginning work on the

Shchukin ensemble over two decades before. Upon his return, he abandoned what is now the

Unfinished Dance Mural, and began using a revolutionary new cut paper technique. Flam

describes this technique at some length:

> Matisse engaged a house-painter named Goyo to paint large sheets of paper in the limited
> number of colors that he had decided on for the composition: gray for the figures and
> blue, pink, and black for the background. These sheets of paper were stacked in piles, to
> be used like a palette. As these sheets of paper were employed, they could be cut to
> conform to the shapes that Matisse wanted and secured to the surface of the canvas with
> pins. Matisse would modify the shapes on the canvas by drawing over them with
> charcoal; his assistant would then trim the edges with scissors to conform to the new
> contours. Eventually, when the composition was fine, he plan was to life the areas of cut
> paper and fill in the canvas below with the same color oil paint that had been used on the
> sheets of paper. In fact, the first coats of paint would be applied to the canvases by the
> same house-painter, in order to ensure a wall-like flatness and impersonality of surface.[48]

The effect on the canvas surface was immediate, allowing Matisse to achieve a more

architectural surface than was impossible with the nuanced brushwork he had employed up to

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[46] Ibid., 30.

[47] Ibid., 32.

[48] Ibid., 38-39.

that point. The cut technique also had the practical benefit of allowing Matisse to make large-scale compositional changes very rapidly. Most importantly, the technique depersonalized Matisse's relationship with the surface. This allowed Matisse to better realize his desired architectural surface, while still giving him control over his composition, and therefore, his expression.

Work continued on the canvas through early 1932, when it was discovered that the measurements of the pendentives in the Barnes gallery were incorrect. Upon realizing that he had been working on a canvas of the wrong dimensions, Matisse scraped everything he had done up to that point, much to Barnes' frustration, and began on an entirely new composition in July 1932. At first, work on the new mural was slow, as Matisse turned his eyes towards another outstanding project: his drawings for Mallarmé's *Poésies*. Matisse had agreed to illustrate an edition of Mallarme's *Poésies* for the Swiss Publisher Albert Skira in 1929, shortly before he began his trip that brought him into contact with Dr. Barnes.

These illustrations are particularly compelling when viewed in conjunction with the Barnes *Dance*. A number of drawings made for the book seem to act as figure studies for the mural. For example, the illustrated figure that accompanies "Le Guignon" ["Back Luck"] [Figure 12] is nearly identical to that of the leftmost figure in an exactly contemporaneous study for the *Dance* mural [Figure 13]. Flam also comments that both the Mallarmé illustrations and the Barnes mural share similar "erotic overtones."[49]

Most importantly, when Matisse returned to the Barnes mural in July 1932, he brought with him the working method for the Mallarmé illustrations. He temporarily abandoned the cut paper technique in favor of drawing free hand in charcoal directly on the canvas. Matisse himself

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[49] Ibid., 48.

does not provide a rationale for this change, but one may read his choice to privilege drawing over cutting, as an attempt to re-personalize his relationship with the surface.

On August 20th, 1932, Matisse began his final push to complete *Dance*, once again using the cut paper technique to organize his canvas as the modifications to his composition became slighter, centered mostly on the leftmost section of the canvas. Over the next five months, Matisse and his assistants produced no fewer than twenty-five full-scale copies. In general, successive versions reveal an increasing emphasis on vertical rhythms, as the upward thrusting of the figures in the two outer panels became more powerful. As the months wore on, the changes to the rhythmic, tumbling bodies grew slighter, and the final composition began to emerge.

Work on the final version of the Barnes *Dance* began on February 21, 1933, and by mid-March, all that remained was the application of the paint. As he had done throughout the work's creation, Matisse called upon the house painter Goyo to apply paint to the shaped canvas. Painting finished around April 13, though the panels themselves were not dry enough for shipment until the end of that month. Critically, following Goyo's application of the paint on the final version, Matisse made some final adjustments to the figures. In a letter to his daughter Marguerite, Matisse explained that the texture of the paint on canvas was less matte than it had been on the paper, and some accents would be needed to properly define the articulation of the figures.

> It is probably necessary for me to rework the figures and indicate accents in charcoal in order to underline certain forms . . . The accent of the thigh (in charcoal), which seemed strong, is taking on more and more quality. It is going to be my point of departure.[50]

Even more importantly, Matisse also confessed that the surface Goyo had painted was too "impersonal," a strange observation for a work that has been praised by scholars like Yve-Alain

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[50] Quoted in, Flam, *The Dance*, 59.

Bois precisely for its "diminution of the human element."[51] This final turn in the work's creation

embodies Matisse's commitment to exemplifying decorative *and* painterly ideals in the Barnes

Dance.

The Barnes *Dance* [Figure 14] finally arrived in Merion on May 12, 1933, nearly three

years after the commission's inception. Though the installation was fraught with conflict, the

work was successfully installed and pleased the artist greatly. Describing his mural in its

intended setting, Matisse wrote to his friend Simon Bussy that "[*Dance*] has a splendor that one

can't imagine unless one sees it . . . the whole ceiling and its arched vaults come alive through

radiation and the main effect continues right down to the floor. . . . I am profoundly tired, but

very pleased."[52]

I have claimed thus far that Matisse struggled to maintain a conceptual balance between

painterly and architectural ideals throughout the conception and execution of the Barnes *Dance*.

The same is true of the completed work itself.[53] In comparison to the St. Petersburg *Dance*, the

"open" elements of the canvas are far more immediately apparent, while its allusions to closure

are better hidden, but are nonetheless present. There are three angles from which one might

examine the Barnes *Dance* in its environmental context: architectural integration, depicted

content, and surface action.

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[51] Bois, "The Blinding," 82.

[52] Quoted in, Flam, *The Dance*, 62.

[53] In 2009, faced with increasing financial pressure and lagging attendance, the Barnes Foundation relocated its entire collection from the original mansion in Merion to a new space in downtown Philadelphia. The new building faithfully reproduces the interior Barnes, though several minor adjustments have been made. One of the most dramatic changes is the new, modern lighting system that greatly improves visibility of nearly every artwork, including and especially the *Dance* mural. Regrettably, I never had the chance to see the mural in its original space, so my own reading reflects the canvas in its updated setting. Even so, the changes made do not prevent meaningful analysis *in situ*. Indeed, some of the changes made are telling and call attention to some observations that may have otherwise lain unseen. For more on the new Foundation, see, Roberta Smith, "The Barnes Foundation: From Suburb to City," *New York Times*, May 17, 2012. Accessed March 1, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/18/arts/design/the-barnes-foundation-from-suburb-to-city.html?pagewanted=all

As noted before, I do not mean to suggest that the commentators who have privileged architectural integration in their interpretations of the Barnes *Dance* are misguided. The decorative ideal is a component of the *Dance*. Writing in his journal in 1933, Matisse explained:

> The spaces between the doors are about two meters wide. I made use of the contrast created by these space; I used them to create correspondences with the forms in the ceiling. . . . Thus, I displaced the contrast. Instead of making it between the bright doors and the spaces in between, I put it up in the ceiling so that my very strong contrast united the whole panel, doors, and spaces.[54]

This passage indicates the extent to which Matisse accounted for the architectural elements of the Barnes gallery when conceptualizing *Dance*. The mural was designed specifically to create "correspondences" with its environment, which would place the painting in greater harmony with its environment. Matisse's concern for the work's immediate environment also extended to the gallery's decorative features, which he and Barnes clashed over during *Dance*'s installation. Matisse was upset by Barnes' refusal to remove the two large paintings below the work and replace the frosted glass above the French doors with clear glass, both of which, Matisse felt, undermined the composition's effect on its environment.

And yet, despite these decorative qualities, and as though in tension with them, Matisse still attempted to exemplify the work's identity as an autonomous easel painting. Consider the rhythm set up by the figures in the Barnes *Dance*. The leftmost figure lurches upward and to the right, his back turned away from the canvas's edge, while the seated figure to his right is almost wrapped around the pendentive. This pattern continues across the canvas, setting up a figural rhythm as the eye passes from one side to the other. Taken altogether, the dancers form a horizontal S-curve that articulates the literal shape of the canvas and its space.[55] Similarly, the

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[54] Quoted in, Flam, *The Dance*, 67.

[55] Here, I follow the argument of Michael Fried's 1967 review of Frank Stella's shaped canvases, "Shape as Form.", Fried makes a distinction between the literal shape — the physical shape of the canvas — and the depicted shape, the content of the painting, a notion I find useful for understanding the Barnes *Dance*. Moreover, Fried's essay has

figures on the outer edge of the left and right lunettes both lean inward, away from the canvas'

edge, once again emphasizing the importance of that otherwise arbitrary boundary. The figures

in the middle lunette, however, turn in upon themselves, thus referencing their position at the

center of the composition and the canvas.

The duality between decorative and painterly ideals is perhaps nowhere more apparent

than in the effect on the surface texture generated by the viewer's position within the gallery.

The *Dance* is best viewed from either the floor of the main hall, looking up, or from the equal

height loggia that runs parallel to the mural. The two viewpoints offer radically different

experiences of the surface texture of the *Dance* mural. When seen from below, Matisse's

handling of the paint appears matte. Individual brushstrokes are imperceptible, and the

homogenous texture recalls the wide swaths of paper Matisse employed in the execution of the

work. The surface, in a word, is impersonal. It does not retain any indication that it was worked

at all by Matisse.

But when the work is seen on axis, the hand of the artist is clearly present. Gestural

brushstrokes become apparent, particularly on the figures themselves, and much of the surface

carries traces of more playful brushwork than Matisse's working method would suggest. This

observation, that the surface retains personality when viewed at equal height, has been absent

from many contemporary accounts. Yve-Alain Bois, in particular, praises the canvas for what he

reads as the diminution of the "human element."[56]

From the outset, Matisse sought to create a work that was both "architectural" *and*

"expressive." Flam builds his narrative of the Barnes *Dance* conception and execution as one

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been understood as an attempt to wrest conceptual ownership of Frank Stella from the postmodernists, who had
claimed the artist as their own, a project I see as somewhat parallel to my own. Michael Fried, "Shape as Form:
Frank Stella's Shaped Canvases," in *Art & Objecthood* 77-99.

[56] Bois, "The Blinding," 82. One wonders why this effect has been ignored in so much of the literature surrounding
the Barnes *Dance*. It is possible that this effect has only come into view under the new modern lighting system.

that began with an unresolvable conflict between two pictorial systems, the painterly and the decorative, and ended with the former being neatly folded into the latter. Yet the constant modifications to technique and form from conception to completed work, wavering between those two conceptual poles, indicate that the nature of Barnes *Dance* is more complicated. Matisse's constant employment of techniques from both sides of this conceptual dialectic indicate that creating a work that fit neatly into a single artistic paradigm was never his intention. Instead, Matisse wished to draw out the best aspects of both traditions into a single, harmonious creation, as if he could make an art object that was somehow painting *and* architecture.

Conclusion:

My thesis has made two interventions and one addition to the literature surrounding Matisse, Mallarmé, and modernism at large. The first intervention is the set of formal claims I have made in chapters one and three. In chapter one, I argued that the scholarly reception and canonization of the St. Petersburg *Dance* has overemphasized the work's identity as a moveable easel painting. This has been at the expense of Matisse's conception of the work in a larger decorative and architectural context. Only when the St. Petersburg *Dance* is viewed as both a painterly and decorative art object can the full complexity of Matisse's achievement in the Shchukin be revealed. Similarly, I claimed in chapter three that the Barnes *Dance* has been seen almost exclusively in terms of its site-specificity and architectural integration. As a result, the elements of the work that allude to its place in the larger tradition of European easel painting have been largely overlooked. Like the St. Petersburg *Dance*, the Barnes *Dance* attempts to exemplify two competing ideals, the decorative and the painterly, in hopes of creating an art object that is painting *and* architecture.

Secondly, I have claimed that the poetry and poetics of Stéphane Mallarmé have been misrepresented in contemporary scholarship. Mallarmé's "impersonality" has frequently been misread as an invitation to the viewer's free response, a view advanced by postmodern scholars such as Barbara Johnson and Roland Barthes. As I have argued, a better account is offered by Umberto Eco's "The Open Work," which argued that works of art are receptive to the viewer's imaginative life, but only within terms dictated by the artist. In other words, the work of art is both notionally "open" and "closed" to the viewer.

I connected Mallarmé's philosophies of composition, suggestion, and expression with those of Matisse. Both artists were committed to expression not through the Romantic notions of

"lyric breath" or "passion bursting from a human face" but through composition. By "yielding initiative to the words" (Mallarmé), or taking inspiration from the nature of painting as a medium (Matisse), both men sought to create objects that were *themselves* expressive. In other words, they saw their works as suggestive, but as I argued, suggestive in the sense that Eco described in "The Open Work." Finally, because of decoration's well-established association with suggestion in fin-de-siècle Europe, I claimed that the formal arguments made in chapters one and three are emblematic of the conceptual duality described in chapter two. By fusing decoration with easel painting, Matisse — the painter as architect — also combined a tradition that had come to be associated with the viewer's free response with one that preserved authorial intent.

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