

Cut and colour

EXHIBITION

An understanding of the physics of light allowed the impressionists to create the stunning landscapes and scenes that are familiar to so many of us. But Henri Matisse's unorthodox, bright and non-naturalistic use of colour helped to instigate a paradigm shift in the use of colour in art.

Our fascination with colour has a long history, with scientific literature on colour dating back centuries. Although Robert Grosseteste's medieval work suggests that he had a very advanced understanding of colour, the foundation of our modern understanding is attributed to Isaac Newton, whose work initiated the consideration of colour as part of the spectrum of light.

To represent the interaction of different colours, Newton used a colour wheel, based on the wavelength of the light. These ideas were further developed by Thomas Young and Hermann von Helmholtz, who realized that only three colours were needed to make white light, along with most perceivable colours; James Clerk Maxwell's experiments on spinning tops revealed that these colours were red, green and blue.

Colour wheels are a simple way to show the relationships between primary, secondary and complimentary colours. But there are many other ways to consider how colours interact, which stretch beyond basic wavelength-based mixing. One quite vocal opponent of Newton's description of colour was the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Unlike Newton, Goethe focused on the relationship between colour and perception as opposed to the light spectrum — ideas



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The Clown (1943) by Henri Matisse, from his book, *Jazz*.

that were utilized by artists such as Joseph Mallord William Turner. When it came to the use of colour, however, Henri Matisse had mastery like none before.

Henri Matisse was born in Le Cateau-Cambrésis, France in 1869 and is regarded as the master of colour. His startling use of colour in early creations — beyond what was realistic — earned him the nickname the 'wild beast'. But it is the work he produced during his later years that he is most revered for. At the age of 71, he underwent surgery for bowel cancer that impacted on his mobility. Although still able to paint to some extent, he experimented

with new ways to portray his creativity, developing his famous cut-outs.

Matisse seemed to recognize that people's perception of colour went beyond the optics of the eye. And just as physicists look for the simplest solution, so Matisse stripped his pieces back to their most basic components. Using scissors to cut and slice coloured card, he created dynamic and evocative pieces, able to move the different segments of his work around to see how they would interact before finally pinning them in place. Through a striking use of colours and simple shapes, Matisse was able to portray movement and emotion, bringing his pieces to life.

Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs is a new exhibition that is made up of around 120 works dating from 1936 to Matisse's death in 1954. This gives visitors what is possibly a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see so many of his works in one place, including his masterpiece *Jazz*: a book of his cut-outs published in 1947. Although currently at the Tate Modern in London, the exhibition will move to New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) later this year.

In the modern world, we are surrounded by bright, vibrant colours. Newton's understanding laid the foundations for the technological advances, but it was Matisse's use of colour that instigated the use of colour we see today. This exhibition provides a unique opportunity to see how it all began. □

REVIEWED BY LUKE FLEET

■ *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs* is at the Tate Modern in London from 17 April to 7 September 2014 and at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) from 12 October 2014 to 8 February 2015.