Goldfish
By Henri Matisse
(1869-1954)
Oil on canvas – painted 1912
140 x 95cm.

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Henri Matisse was born in 1869 in Cateau-Cambrésis in northern France. He was the oldest of two children with parents who owned a hardware and grain shop in nearby Saint-Quentin. Considered one of the greatest artists of the 20th century, Matisse demonstrated little interest in art throughout childhood. Growing up with delicate health, Matisse was discouraged from following the expected trajectory of life as a grain merchant like his father but instead was encouraged to pursue a career in law.

Matisse received his law degree in 1888 in Paris and returned to Saint-Quentin in 1889 working as a solicitor’s clerk. The only glimpse we see at this point of any artistic exposure was his attendance in fabric embroidery classes and applied drawing as well as multiple visits to the Lécuyer museum. It was not until 1890 when recovering from appendicitis that Matisse discovered his true passion for art. His mother gave him a paint box and lithographs to copy. He knew from this point on he wanted to be an artist.

Color played a primary role in his artwork making him one of the greatest colorists of the 20th century. Lacking any type of artistic background, Matisse needed to build a foundation from which to learn. He inherited a strong work ethic from his parents which served him well. In Paris he attended Académie Julia in 1891 followed by night classes at the School of Decorative Arts. It was at the artist Gustave Moreau’s studio where he would embrace Moreau’s teaching and meet several of the other painters who would later join him as the Fauves.

Matisse began painting still lifes and landscapes in the traditional style and then ultimately through his own experimentation. He spent a great deal of time at the Louvre copying works of art. Matisse’s painting evolved from the earlier days when he painted in darker tones and then his palette expanded to brighter colors. In 1895 he discovered the works of Paul Cézanne and was influenced by their “rigourousness of construction” and the concept that color in a painting can represent light. Matisse’s art was profoundly influenced by a trip to the Mediterranean in 1898 where he was captivated by the natural light and colors. During the next years he exhibited his artwork multiple times but it was at an exhibition in 1905 where he and several other artists made a great impact on the art world.
FAUVISM

First displayed in 1905, Matisse and several other artists filled an exhibition in Paris at the Salon d'Automne with paintings that resonated with intense, contrasting color. The paintings were composed of vibrant brushstrokes and were infused with such energy and emotion one critic called the artists *les fauves* or wild beasts. Highly criticized, these paintings were like nothing seen previously. The colors of these paintings while evoking great emotion would have been in disharmony with the interiors at the time which were either in the late 19th century fashion with “an over-abundance of furniture, ornaments and wall-hangings” where paintings were made to be displayed on walls complementing the room or in the new “modern” style of Art Nouveau with its graceful curves and sinuous lines.

What really suited Matisse and his fellow Fauves was the Impressionist artists “embrace of nature” and the “heightened color contrasts and emotional, expressive depth” of the Post-Impressionist artists. These concepts shaped the future of Matisse’s artwork and he became one of the leaders of the Fauvism movement.

Following the Fauvist sentiment he studied color in terms of the relationship it generates. Matisse did not want to be defined solely by the Fauvism movement yet he kept from that period that which helped with the development of his painting for the future. Within five years most of the artists associated with the Fauvism movement, though never an official organization of painters, found their own unique styles transforming their use of bold colors into personal representations.

GOLDFISH

Matisse’s Goldfish was completed in 1912 and is now at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. Finished seven years after Matisse’s famous 1905 exhibition this work of art retains some of the bright color and strong linear patterns associated with Fauve works of art however it is a more subdued representation than those earlier works. It combines color, shapes and arrangement in harmonious unity.

Immediately drawing the viewer into the scene the bright orange goldfish are centered on the canvas against a subdued backdrop. The foliage as well as the ornamental railing or back bench rail echo the curves of the table on which the vessel of water perches. The entire composition feels balanced and the use of these colors exudes a sense of soothing calm.
QUESTIONS TO ASK:

• Is this a painting? a photograph?

• Where do you think this is painted? Inside? Outside?

• Matisse felt it was important for the painting to please the viewer. How does this make you feel? Do you think if less vibrant colors were used you might feel differently?

• What is perspective? (Creating the illusion of a 3-dimensional world onto a flat surface). Do you feel that Matisse has used it here? Is there a foreground, middle ground or background or is it all equal on one plane? Does it feel like it is jumping out at you or do the forms feel flattened? Matisse often painted his pictures on a flat plane of color.

• Does it feel like you are standing in front of the painting, below the painting or above the painting?

• Is this a landscape? A portrait? A still life?

• How many goldfish are there in the painting? Do you think the broad brushstrokes on the surface of the bowl are goldfish or reflections of the four goldfish depicted below?

• Do the goldfish swimming in water make you feel calm? How would the painting make you feel if Matisse painted the water splashing out?

• Matisse sometimes used colors in such a way as they would not be seen in nature? Is that the case here?

• What shape is repeated throughout the painting? Circles are thought to convey movement. Do you feel that in this painting?