

Matisse, the dance and the everlasting iconography of joy, life and movement



Henri Matisse, Dance (II), 1910, oil/canvas, 260 x 391 cm, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/henri-matisse/dance-ii-1910>

It is fair to assume that almost all of us are familiar with some variation on Matisse's painting *The Dance*. Be it through art books, the internet, pop culture references or the numerous parodies and remixes. The iconic imagery has had a lasting effect on art and the collective consciousness. But what is it about this painting that has stuck with us ever since its creation?

In 1909 Matisse was commissioned to create two large-scale paintings by the wealthy Russian collector Sergei Shchukin, meant to be hung in his home in Moscow. These commissions would end up becoming the famous *Music* and *The Dance* paintings.

Focusing on *The Dance*, Matisse reused the motif from the background of one of his earlier paintings, *The Joy of Life*, created in 1905. *Dance* had been one of his favourite themes for numerous years. It is said that Matisse was inspired by the sight of field workers dancing on a beach in the south of France, and the concept of dancing and the ability to be moved by music was a common and constant subject in his work that shaped his artistic choices and influenced his style and technique. Between 1906 and 1954, Matisse created over twenty paintings exploring the theme of dance.

The first version of the painting (*The Dance I*) was quite different to the final version we are familiar with today. There is a distinct emotional difference when viewing the two side by side. *Dance I* has noticeable lightness and a sense of pleasure and joy. The figures are drawn loosely dancing in a circular motion, seeming almost weightless and expressing a feeling of play and cheerfulness. In the final version, however, there is more definition to the figures, their colouring is a strong orange, and although the feel of life and rhythm is still there, the painting has been described as forbidding,

menacing, tribal, ritualistic and even demonic at the time. I disagree with this reading, but nevertheless, I believe it is important to point out how some subtle changes and decisions can completely flip the perception of each painting and their reading.



Henri Matisse, *Dance (I)*, 1909, oil/canvas, 260.4 × 390.4 cm, MoMA, NYC, USA. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79124>

The way the dancers are placed in the space can allow for numerous readings. First off, the hands of the two dancers, seemingly closest to us, are parted, but this is done in such a way that the brake overlaps with the leg of a background dancer so as not to break the circular movement and illusion of motion. This choice brings up a question. Why is this done? Why break the circle in such a way? I think that this can be interpreted as an invitation to join the dance. On the other hand, the curved shape and folding of one of the figures in the back expresses such animation and brings the feeling of being lost in the moment. But this also reinforces the circular shape, making it more dynamic and supporting the illusion of movement. The figures seem to hold quite a bit of weight compared to *Dance I*, and the hills beneath them seem to warp under their weight, moving along with the dancers.

And all this to say that *The Dance II* is one of the most celebrated works by the artist. It is a radical celebration of life, freedom, emotion and joy that abandons realistic details to focus on the raw emotionality, energy and connection.

With all of this in mind, it is in no way strange to imagine how this piece became an inspiration and a point of reference to many. Not only is the work recreated, reimagined and referenced by other well-known artists such as Roy Lichtenstein (*Artist's Studio, The Dance*, 1974), Salvador Dalí (*Satirical Composition (The Dance by Matisse)*, 1923) and Keith Haring (*Dancing Figures*, 1985), but it also remains a pillar in pop culture. We can see parodies of the work in TV shows, children's books, editorial illustrations, advertising and social media posts. There are numerous vignettes in papers such as *The Times*, *The New Yorker* and *The Guardian* directly referencing the painting. The painting's iconography has been deeply anchored in the cultural zeitgeist, making it instantly recognisable. As a result, artists

use it in socially charged commentaries, like artist Tammam Azzam in his work *Matisse*, Syrian Museum series or Sasho Violetov in *The Dance (Matisse)*. Juxtaposing the joyous freedom of *The Dance* with unmistakable examples of human destruction and oppression emphasises the messaging.



Tammam Azzam, *Matisse* from Syrian Museum Series, 2012, Archival Print On Canvas, 45 x 60 cm. <https://www.tammamazzam.com/syrian-museum>

To conclude, the undeniable soul the original painting carries brings out a fondness and familiarity with the subject matter, which makes it such a referential and remixable piece. It is present in all spheres of culture, in both high and low art, and it will continue to thrive in the media landscape.

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