

Exercise: Room with a view

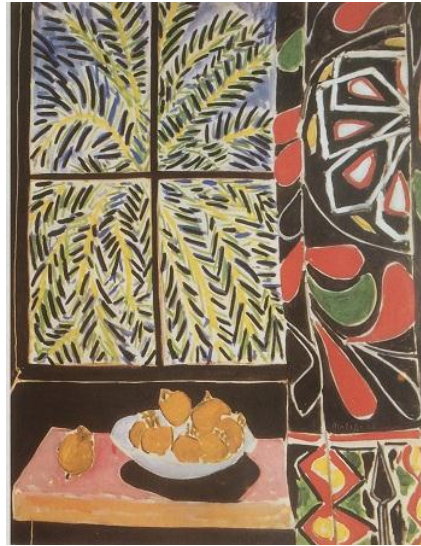


Figure 1 *The Egyptian Curtain*, 1948, oil on canvas, Henri Matisse.

For this exercise I must choose a painting that has a window as a significant feature – either a view in or a view out. I must start by analysing the image in formal terms, with particular attention to the use of perspective (both linear and aerial or atmospheric perspective) and the overall composition.

How does the artist contrast the worlds on either side of the window? What effect does this create? An interior that's safe and secure from the outside world or a yearning for something beyond?

A brief description of *The Egyptian Curtain, 1948, oil on canvas, by Henri Matisse (in the form of three spider diagrams)*

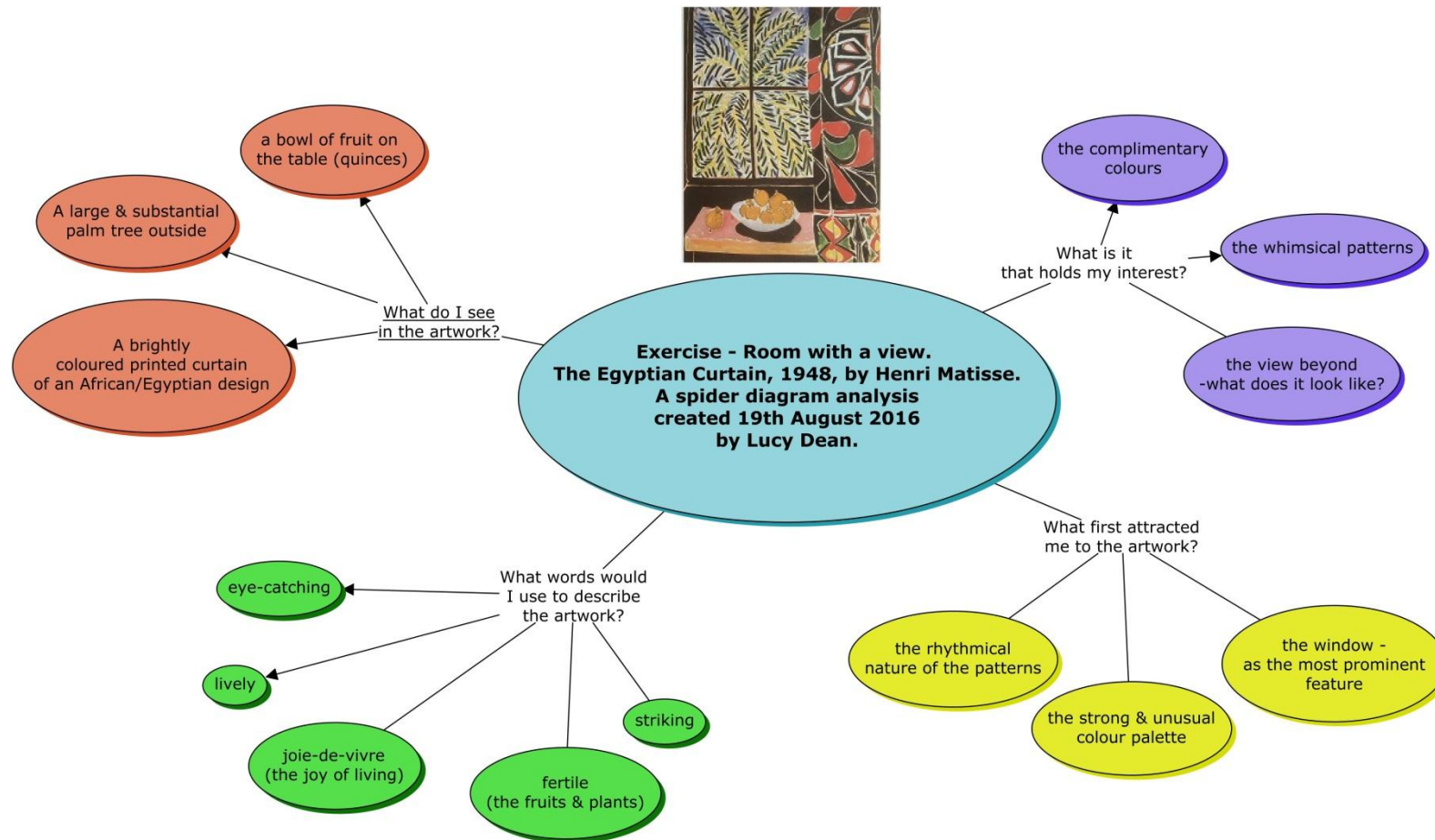


Figure 2 Spider diagram 1 of 3.

Describing and relating *The Egyptian Curtain, 1948, by Henri Matisse* (spider diagram 2 of 3)

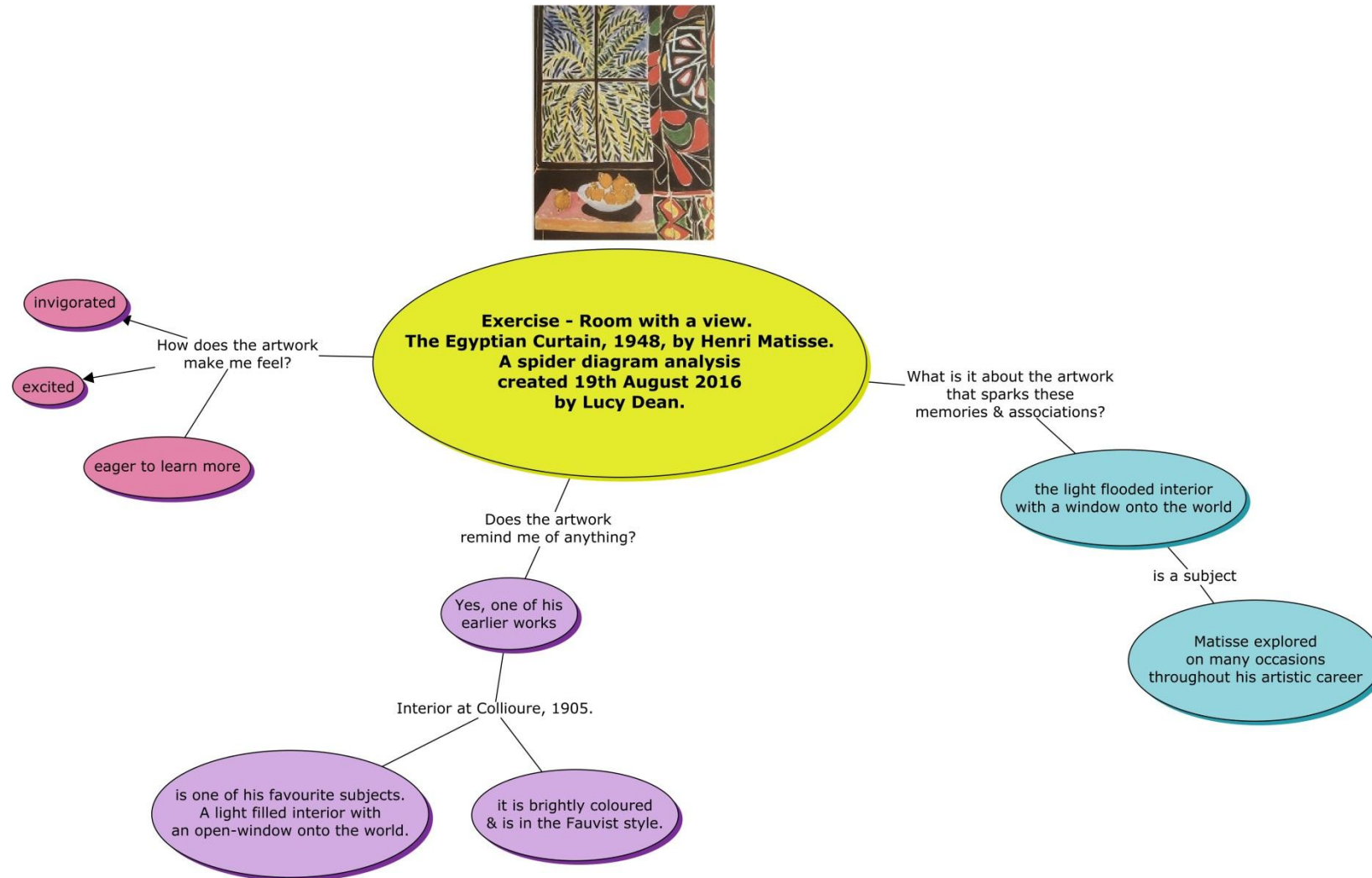


Figure 3 Spider diagram 2 of 3

Describing and relating *The Egyptian Curtain, 1948, by Henri Matisse* (spider diagram 3 of 3)

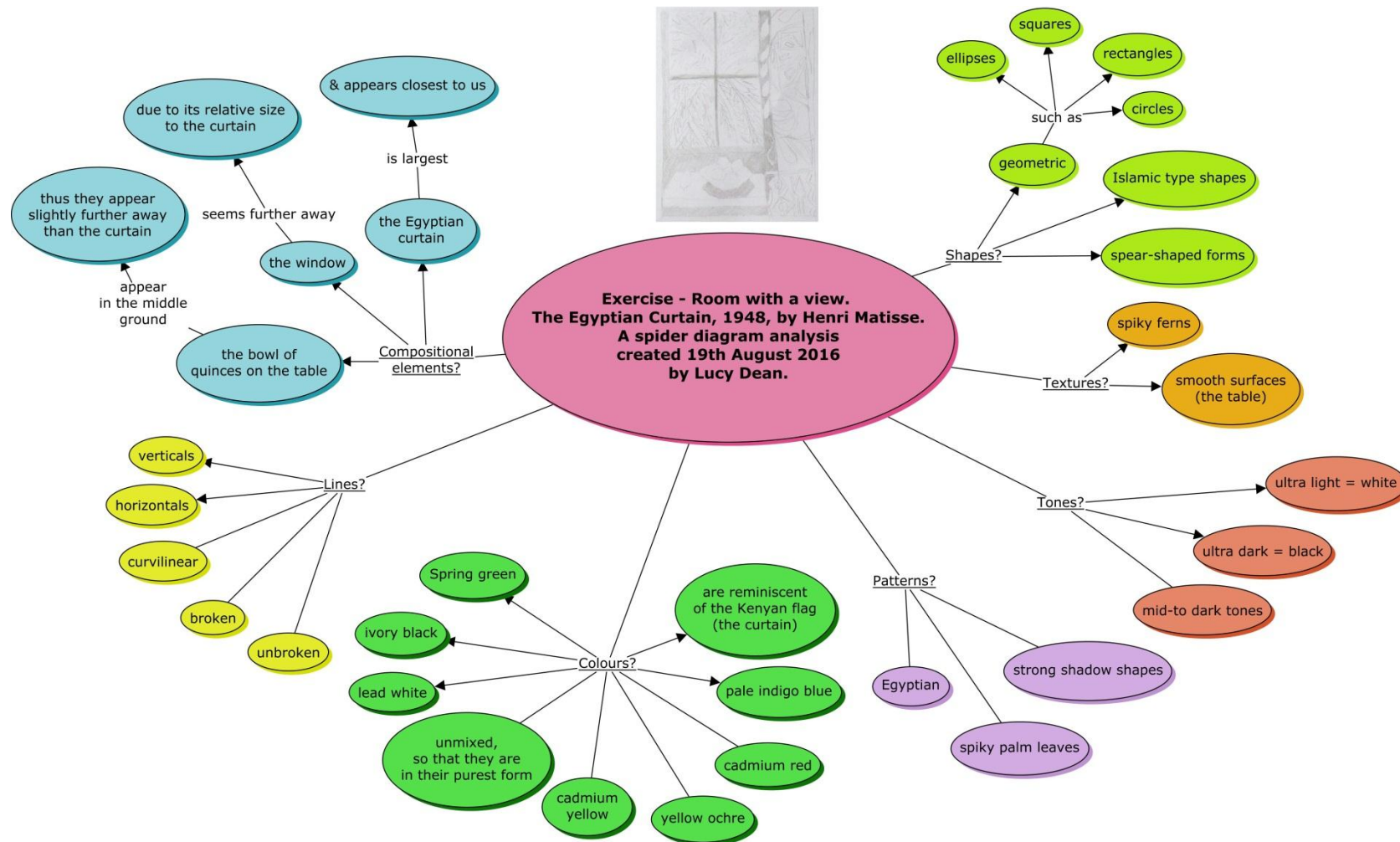


Figure 4 Spider diagram 3 of 3.

Describing the processes and techniques of *The Egyptian Curtain*

- *The Egyptian Curtain* is an oil painting on canvas.
- It was made by applying the pigments onto the canvas slowly and carefully.
- I am unsure how long it took the artist to produce, but Matisse preferred to work slowly and methodically and often made plenty of revisions to his works before settling on a final concept.
- Also, after 1948 (the year it was painted); Matisse stopped painting and undertook no other commissions for several years. So *The Egyptian Curtain* is likely to have been one of his last paintings during this period. From 1948-51 he worked on the design of the *Chapel of the Rosary* at Vence. Which was regarded by him as “the crown of his life’s work” (Rendall, 1982). He worked solely on this project rather than concentrating on his painting, as this commission enabled him to create a total work of art from the ground upwards, inside and outside.
- In his later years Matisse had an assistant, Lydia Delectorskaya who aided him in his work, so she may have contributed to the design. He may also have asked his artist friends for compositional advice also. He belonged to the select circle of bohemian artists who flocked to the home of Gertrude and Leo Stein. Many of the well-known names of the day (Picasso, Matisse etc.) were supported financially by the Steins and visited them to discuss life, literature and art.
- I am unsure how the canvas is framed as I have been unable to find any information pertaining to the frame. However, as with his other works, I am certain there is a substantial frame to support the work.



Figure 5 Pencil drawing of *The Egyptian Curtain* After Matisse, by Lucy Dean, August 2016.

Interpreting *The Egyptian Curtain*

- In this painting Matisse is exploring the “joie de vivre”, that is to say the joy of living. The vibrant colour palette and highly stylised drafting combine to reflect the artists’ desire to produce art works which are pleasing to the eye.

Context

- The artwork was produced in 1948 when the artist was living in Nice as a semi-invalid. Early in 1941 he’d had intestinal surgery which reduced his capabilities significantly. He was largely bed-ridden as a result of a permanently weakened abdominal wall. So he painted and produced his infamous cut-outs from his bedside.
- His secretary-housekeeper Lydia Delectorskaya assisted him in his activities and ensured that he was comfortable.
- Life in post-war France was challenging due to the necessary reconstructions, as the war had caused extensive damage. Many of Matisse’s projects were delayed due to the fighting, the air raids and the subsequent liberation. A new government was drafted in from 1944, spearheaded by General de Gaulle. The Vichy government and its German collaborators were disposed of.
- The new government sought to establish and improve education, social security, culture, transportation and many other areas of French life.
- I think the artwork reflects the artist’s state of mind at the time. Although partially disabled by his surgery, he continued to enjoy his life and produce his art. Interestingly, very few of his works reflect the current state of affairs in the country and the war itself appears to have had very little effect on him. There is a total lack of mention of anything war-like. During the Second World War the French collaborated with the German occupying forces and over 75,000 Jews and other non-desirables were deported to concentration camps. Matisse’s art glosses over all of the horrible events of the war and the destruction it caused.
- Henri Matisse enjoyed a long and distinguished career as an artistic innovator. I believe this is due to his ability to create commercially viable works for patrons who admired his art as a form of escapism. In fact his paintings of rooms which include alternating views of indoor and outdoor scenes proved highly popular, so much so that he returned to this theme again and again throughout his career.

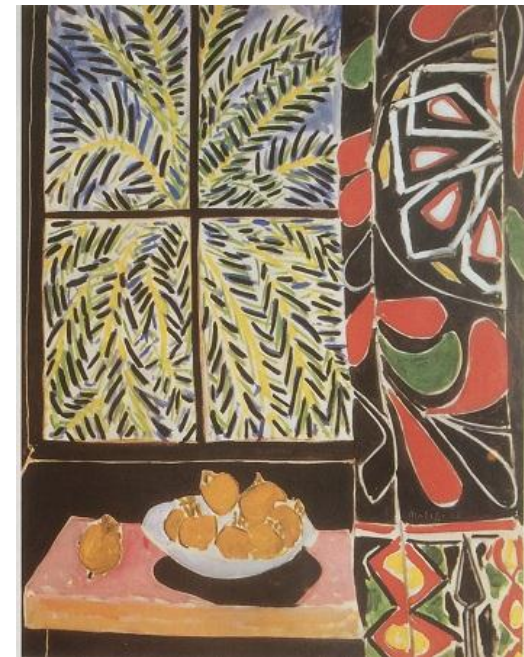


Figure 6 *The Egyptian Curtain*, 1948, oil on canvas, Henri Matisse.

Matisse and his methods

Matisse was born in 1869 at a time when the art world was still dominated by the academies and official exhibitions. His early training was strictly traditional and encompassed the Renaissance techniques of training the eyes to see and draw better. The emphasis of this system is on technical accuracy rather than the development of a specific style.

The Renaissance or Academic methods consist of drawing using charcoal from plaster casts and the nude figure. Ideally students study both concurrently in order to understand how the proportion, the gesture and the anatomy inform each other. Once the student has mastered the first three stages then they can progress towards using colour. For Matisse and others this manner of teaching inhibits and restricts their creativity; but many artists nowadays pursue this system, as it is highly instructive and educational. As an art student who has been instructed in this way I can certify that it is useful and highly beneficial; as it enabled me to create convincing and properly realised works of art. It also really improves ones' hand-eye coordination.

By the 1870s artists such as Monet and Renoir had become respectable, although the more radical art of the Post-Impressionists was poorly known and had made very little impact on the system of fine art training.

In the 1890s Matisse removed himself from the academic art movement and instead steered himself towards a more modern approach. After dabbling in Impressionism and Pointillism he reinvented his oeuvre again to become a Fauve – a “wild beast” (Rendall, 1982). Matisse and his fellow Fauvist artists caused controversy when they exhibited their work in 1905 at the Salon d'Automne in Paris. Their oeuvre was considered scandalous due to their bold colour palettes and childish compositions. Fauvism as it was known was controversial as for the first time artists were exploring the idea that their art had its own logic, and that they were creating art for art's sake. The hues were utilised as an expression of emotion or design rather than to match reality. According to himself, Matisse dreamed: “of a pure, tranquil art, free of disturbing subjects, that would soothe the mentally fatigued as effectively as....a good armchair” (Rendall, 1982).

I think *The Egyptian Curtain* was intended for practical purposes as it perfectly encapsulates the ideas of Matisse. It reflects his joy of life, his sense of calm and also of the more pleasurable aspects of life.

It seems to me that due to its subject matter the canvas was intended either for a gallery or more likely for use in the home. The setting is domestic and dreamy and would suit the interior of a home or even of a hotel perhaps. There is a languid feel due to the palm trees outside which give the painting an exotic air.

The Egyptian Curtain is similar in style to an earlier work entitled: *Composition: The Yellow Curtain, 1914*. *Composition: The Yellow Curtain* reveals a window through which we can view a very abstract landscape. The painting as a whole is highly simplified, but due to his style of drafting it is possible to discern a patterned curtain pulled back over the window. It frames the spectacle so that the viewer can draw his or her own conclusions about the subject matter.

Composition: The Yellow Curtain differs stylistically from *The Egyptian Curtain* as Matisse utilised a far bolder series of pigments and included far more details. In the latter painting for example, a sense of perspective is discernible due to the overlapping forms of the curtain, window and side table. The strong vertical and horizontal lines also bisect, which helps the viewer interpret the scene and read the linear perspective.

Evaluation

The Egyptian Curtain is a painting which encapsulates the joy of living and the expressive use of colour. The image is very abstract but in spite of this it is possible to discern the forms of the appliqued curtain, the low side table and the large window which frames the profusion of palm trees outside. In short this canvas could be viewed as a picture within a picture.

The Egyptian Curtain reflects the artist's belief in all that is good and kind in terms of the restful subject matter. The bold colours reference the idea of optics as the interior is mostly black to contrast with the lighter values outside. This mimics the effect of different light levels on the eyes, as on a really bright day our eyes take time to adjust to the interior gloom and vice versa.

The Middle Eastern style of the applique is of interest as it can viewed as a precursor to the paper cut-outs which he began to explore in more depth later on in 1948. The canvas as whole is unified in terms of its colours and forms and clearly shows a progression from his painting to his collages.

The only real story is the contrast between the worlds on either side of the window. The interior is very exotic and richly coloured which is contrasted by the gloriously sunny weather outside. The spiked palm leaves make a sharp statement when compared to the softer curvilinear lines of the embroidery. Also, the proximity of the palm trees to the window creates a claustrophobic quality which makes the canvas feel severely compacted. The yearning is for something beyond as the exterior view is oddly mysterious.

I strongly believe that if Matisse had used a different colour palette then it would transform the canvas into something else. The current design works well as the composition is refined and the values are relatively close to each other. The patterns are hugely inspiring as they lend the painting an air of exoticism that is unusual. The predominant use of black and red makes the canvas stand out.

I think it would have interesting for Matisse to recreate it in paper in the form of one of his cut-outs, although I imagine this would take some time, as it is highly detailed. I'm sure though that it could be simplified.

The canvas is best suited to a domestic or hotel environment as the subject matter is non-contentious and inoffensive. Due to its inherent delicacy (as a painting) it would be totally unsuitable situated elsewhere.

Due to the close proximity of the plants to the window, Matisse generates a sense of yearning in the viewer to learn what exists beyond the picture plane and to know more about the scenery. Perhaps there is a beach outside, or some parkland, at any rate the spectator is eager to know more.

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