

*Of
Citrus
and
Matisse*

a short article
celebrating the paintings of Henri Matisse
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You and I, Mr Matisse, we are men of the mandarin. As you painted oranges over the years, I have used other descendants of the citrus ancestor, in the making of citrus oils, such as clementine and satsuma, as well orange and the great progenitor.

Tell me if I'm wrong, but was 'Lemon and Blue Pot,' one of your first paintings with a citrus input? I'm not a critic, just a lover of citrus, but that 1897 painting seems to me like the Spirit of Blue passed across it and blessed it with an exhibition of itself: interspersed with purple, pink, red and white. And in amongst the aforementioned colours and their shades, is the yellow of one of my three favourites – the others are lime and grapefruit - of the wonderful Rutaceae family: the lemon. And these are the paintings that I will mention: my favourites amongst those that feature *citrus limon*.

In the 1925 painting 'Pink Tablecloth: Vase of Anemones, Lemons and Pineapple,' its the lemons that attract me, almost magnetise me! You might say I'm biased, but its your choice of yellow: you certainly knew your yellows! You gave us lemon luminescence. I like they way the lemons are spread round the table - not in a bowl – for each individual, like talismanic items for personal and domestic joy, like how they use the Bhudda's Hand - another citrus relative – in China and in Japan. We have to thank you Mr Matisse, for bringing us the blessings of yellow.

Going onward, the 1927 'Lemons On A Pewter Plate,' is the one that has me thinking of making a lemon water drink! We see three yellow gifts – one is mainly hidden - to one side of the light grey-pale green plate, which rests on a plain pink tablecloth, against a backdrop of striking orange and white. They are amonsgt the smallest items in the painting, but the most striking. I love the way you caught the reflection of the fruit on the plate, in a golden hue; and the glints and shading of yellow-green, on the leaves of the fruit. Three left on the plate: what were the others used for? What would they be used for now? Lemon Tart, Lemon Duck, Lemon Sorbet, Lemon Yogurt Cake, Lemon Chicken, Lemon Madeleines....

What might be called a more vibrant work, is your 1943, 'Oysters and Wooden Armchair' featuring the aquatic beings of the title, another non-human favourite of yours, alongside citrus. There is yellow wallpaper, emblazoned further with what looks like a dance of roses, enjoying an afternoon waltz. On the pale blue tablecloth, there is a blue and white pot, a turquoise-green goblet, opened oysters and five lemons: like yellow light bulbs, waiting to celebrate in lights, each and everyone who gathers there. The back of the armchair has a zig zag pattern, coloured red; it compliments the flowers and the red coming through the window. I wonder to myself Mr Matisse, so I will ask you. Did the red in this painting, carry any symbolism of blood? With the yellow wallpaper and the lemons, was the painting a reflection on the brightness and darkness, of war during summertime?

Also in 1943, you gave us 'Black Philodendron and Lemons,' which features a two-tone tablecloth of orange and red, a background, possibly a fence, depicted in stripes: yellow, red, orange and brown. Leaves of the flower of the title overhang the table, which is festooned with ten lemons. Around the white plate they sit, like yellow knights of the orange table. If these yellow balls could be pressed into the red-orange covering, you'd have an award winning textile; to be hung on a wall or spread across a table.

And in 1948, you gave us 'The Egyptian Curtain.' The palm tree outside, happily waving to those inside; a brilliant, almost linear, intermingling of yellow, green, black and white, against a blue sky. The window and tree take up most of the scene; to the right is a curtain, a base of black with the addition of red, yellow and green, plus a little white here and there. I wonder to myself Mr Matisse, whether the geometric designs on the curtain, are a result of years of interest, in the art of such people as the Kuba, the Fang and the Vili. And to the left of the curtain, on a pink table top with yellow sides, in a bowl coloured white, are half a dozen lemons, with one on the table: like scared offerings, on offer to one and all. To me, this is one of your greatest celebrations of colour and culture: a homage to Africa.

You and I Mr Matisse, in our individual ways, are both custodians of citrus.