

Outline of the presentation of the painting

The XRF scan you have just worked on refers to one of the most important canvases by Henri Matisse (1869 - 1954), whose title is actually *Bathers by a River*, now exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago.

This painting was first conceived in 1909 and was commissioned by a Russian collector, Sergei Shchukin. The artwork would have been destined to the decoration of a staircase of his estate in Moscow, together with other two Matisse's masterpieces, the *Music* and the *Dance*. These two latter paintings were accepted by the commissioner (that is why they are still exhibited in Russia, at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg). On the contrary, *The Bathers* was rejected already when the painter was preparing the first sketches. Despite this refusal, the artist decided to continue working on this painting, which eventually became an important witness the reconstruct Matisse's artistic research.

As mentioned, the XRF witnesses different compositions of the canvas. Indeed, the painting underwent several radical changes between 1909 and 1917 and some scholars even argue that some minor modifications may have been implemented in the early Twenties. The Art Institute of Chicago has published an open access catalog where the description and the historical reconstruction of the *Bathers* has been enriched with conservation data, such as cross-section photomicrography, a technique which allows to verify the presence of different colors under the pictorial film and hence invisible to the naked eye. Current reconstructions hypothesize more than sixteen versions.

The studied verified that very different pigments were actually used in the first version of the painting: they were indeed close to the other commissions by Shchukin, *La Musique* and *La Danse* for the use of bright, vivid and high-contrast color. Different factors may have caused such a radical shift in the disposition of the figure and in the used palette. Among this, the impact of Picasso's Cubism (the original title, *Les demoiselles à la rivière*, might contain a reference to the Cubist Manifesto *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, painted in 1907) and of the journey to Morocco may have led to a quest for a major composition eurythmy and the systematic use of brownish hues.

Besides this changes, which may have taken place around 1913, scholars have put forward other hypotheses. One of the most acceptable ones refers to the biographical and historical background of the painting, in particular the Great War. In this period, the position and the physiognomy of the bathers became more and more abstract, and the almost Arcadian environment was unsettled by the introduction of a snake at the center. The use of predominantly grey and dark palette may be referenced to this period. The painting seems now pervaded by a sobriety and a hint of danger, which are likely to reflect the artist's concerns during the terrible, war-torn period. Being rejected by the French army in December 1914, the painter later confessed to his friend Charles Camoin: "I'm not in the trenches, but I worry anyway".