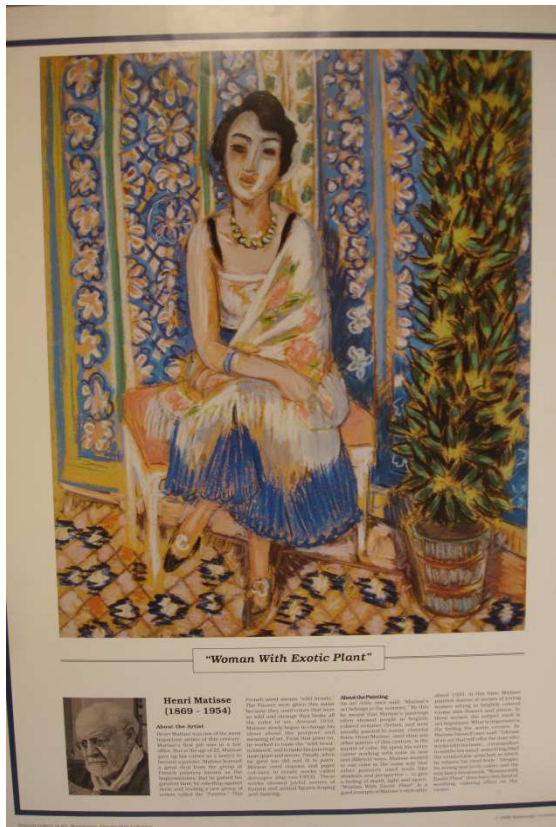Henri Matisse "Woman with Exotic Plant"

Artwork Overview:

In the painting "Woman with Exotic Plant", Henri Matisse shows a person in bright colored clothing and in a colorful room. Matisse's paintings often showed people in brilliantly colored summer clothes, and were usually painted in sunny cheerful hues. He spent his entire career working with color. Matisse wanted to use color in the same way that other painters used tools like shadow and perspective - to give a feeling of depth and light. "Woman with Exotic Plant" is a good example of Matisse's style after about 1920. At this time he painted many scenes of young women sitting in brightly colored rooms. In this scene the subject itself is not important. What is important is the feeling in the scene. The artist wanted to depict a calm setting in this painting. Do you feel calm when you look at this painting?

Edouard Manet "Gare Saint-Lazare"

Edouard Manet painted "Gare Saint-Lazare" in a railroad station. The scene shows one of Paris' main railroad stations, the Gare Saint-Lazare. The cloud of smoke tells us that a train has just passed. But the real subject of the painting is the two figures in the foreground. Who are they? Manet gives us few clues. Are they mother and daughter? Are they sisters? Do they know each other at all? Manet sets up a series of contrasts between the two figures. The adult figure is seated. The child is standing. The woman is wearing dark heavy clothing while, the child is wearing summer clothing. Notice the figures are not posed as they might be for a portrait. The uncertainty and unanswered questions in the painting help to convey a sense of the confusion of life in the modern city.

Topic for Discussion:

1.   The colors are very different in these two paintings. Can you find the different colors each artist used?
2.   Look at the background in each painting - can you find similarities - differences?
3.   What do you think is going on in Manet's painting of the two girls?
4.   How do you think the woman in Matisse's painting feels?
5.   Can you find a pattern in these paintings? Both have strong repeated vertical lines.
6.   If you could go into one of these paintings, which would you choose? Why?

Hands-On Art Activity: Paint a Figure with Background

Teacher Preparation: Think about having a model (teacher, priest, etc.) to sit for the class.

Materials: 11 x 15 Halifax Watercolor paper
Water color paints
Water color brushes
Water tubs
Newspapers
Paper towels
Smocks
Crayons & pencil (kids supply)

Directions:

1.   Have children look carefully at each print. How are the people posed? Do the people fill up the paper or not?
2.   Choose a person sitting in the classroom to paint first, making the person the most important object in the painting.
3.   Carefully draw the person's outline.
4.   Draw a pattern in the background and on the floor.
5.   Paint the shapes with watercolors. Use lots of bright colors.

About the Artists:

Henri Matisse (1869-1954)

Henri Matisse was the leader and most important member of a group of artists called "Fauvism". Fauvism was the first important art movement of the 20th century. The Fauves - "wild beasts" in French - used strokes of bright, often clashing color to create their images. Their use of color violated all traditional notions of competent painting, and shocked the art world as well as the general public.

Matisse was born in Le Cateau, France, in 1869. Like Cezanne, Matisse studied law in school. But he took up painting to pass the time following an operation in 1890. The next year, he moved to Paris to begin a formal study of art. During the late 1890s, Matisse became acquainted with the works of Cezanne, which exerted a strong influence on his style. Together with other artists, including Maurice Vlaminck and Andre Derain, Matisse began experimenting with non-realistic depiction. Matisse wanted his painting to communicate the pleasures of pure color. The subjects of his paintings were still recognizable - portraits, still lifes, and interiors - but the colors were intense and unnatural. Matisse's works were also highly decorative, with elaborate and colorful patterns of line and form. This aspect of his work was the result of his interest in Eastern art, particularly the tapestries of ancient Persia.

Matisse was more than a great painter. He was also a gifted sculptor, a skilled illustrator, and an architectural designer. In his later years, Matisse produced colorful works called decoupes, in which he cut shapes from colored paper and pasted them onto fields of white. Throughout his long and prolific career, Matisse never stopped experimenting. He took great joy in the act of creation. As one critic wrote of this remarkable artist, "A vase, a woman's form, so small a thing as a leaf - these were enough to awaken within him a sense of pleasure, for he possessed a childish wonder which enabled him to look at the world with new eyes and a fresh sensation of discovery."

Edouard Manet (1832-1883)

Edouard Manet was a French painter who broke tradition by using his subject matter in unexpected ways. Manet's subjects often combined elements of traditional art with themes of the life of his time. He painted in a bold and simplified manner with an emphasis on the visual effect. Since Manet's time painting has been dominated by the importance of the painting itself, rather than the paintings storytelling power. He has often been called the first truly "modern" artist. Early in his career he was unpopular and reviled by critics and the public.

Manet was born to a wealthy and aristocratic family in Paris in 1832. His father wanted him to become a lawyer, but Edouard soon discovered a love for drawing and decided to become a painter. The choice outraged his family, to appease his father Edouard attempted to join the French navy. But he failed his half-hearted attempt at the entrance exam. Finally, with his father's blessing, he went to study at he studio of the famed French painter Thomas Couture. But Manet and Couture had a very different ideas about art, and after six frustrating years Manet left to open his own studio.

Manet began painting at a time of great upheaval in European life. After years of social and industrial revolution, life in France had changed and would never again be the same. The basic theme of Manet's work - the glorification of modern life through the day-to-day activities of the middle classes- had already been explored by many writers and philosophers of the time.

Manet did not consider himself a true Impressionist painter, and he often refused to exhibit his works alongside those of artists such as Monet, Pissaro, and Renoir. But his work helped pave the way for Impressionism and changed forever the way artists and the public thought about painting.