



The Matisse Stories

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British novelist and short story writer A. S. Byatt possesses a lively visual and verbal imagination, and in these three stories, both aspects of her powers are ably displayed.

“Medusa’s Ankles” is inspired by Matisse’s *LE NU ROSE* (1935) and further illustrated by his line drawing, *LA CHEVELURE* (1931-1932). Most of the action occurs in the modern temple to beauty, the hair salon, where middle-aged Susannah confronts the effects of age. Lucian, her hairdresser, talks incessantly about his extramarital affair. After a vacation in the Greek isles, Lucian announces to Susannah that he has decided to leave his wife. Susannah, disappointed by her hairdo and apparently sensing some parallel between the wife’s situation and her own, erupts in fury, hurling bottles against mirrors until the shop is a wreck. Ironically, her husband for once notices and approves of her new hair style.

“Art Work” draws inspiration from *LE SILENCE HABITE DES MAISON* (1947) and the drawing *L’ARTISTE ET LE MODELE REFLETES DANS LE MIROIR* (1937). The longest of the three, it features a triangle of artists—Debbie, who supports her family by magazine work; Robin, her husband, who enjoys the luxury of Debbie’s financial and emotional support; and Mrs. Brown, their cleaning lady. In a surprising twist, it is Mrs. Brown who lands a one-woman show at a trendy gallery, and Debbie whose wood engravings win critical acclaim. Robin, in a jealous fury, changes his painting style and perhaps, the ending suggests, infuses his work with emotional significance for the first time.

The apparent conflict at the heart of “The Chinese Lobster” is a charge of sexual harassment made by a suicidally inclined female doctoral candidate against visiting professor Peregrine Diss. Dr. Gerda Himmelblau must sort through the ambiguities of the case without endangering the college or crushing the insecure young woman. The compromise she finds is less important than the self-realization she achieves during her luncheon meeting with Diss.

All three stories can be read as feminist tracts, but Byatt is less interested in simple politicizing than in exploring her characters and their relation to aesthetic ideas. Her style is a blend of forceful simplicity and rococo delight in form and color—like Matisse’s work. With its illustrations and color reproductions, this book is a visual and literary treat.

Sources for Further Study

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The Matisse Stories: The Matisse Stories

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