

The Museum of Modern Art

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269

COLORFUL CHURCH VESTMENTS DESIGNED BY MATISSE ON VIEW DURING HOLIDAY SEASON AT MUSEUM

In 1952, when I last saw Matisse in his studio at Nice there were a score of the chasuble designs spread out on the walls like gigantic butterflies. I could easily understand Picasso's enthusiasm for them. They seemed to me among the purest and most radiant of all Matisse's works.

--Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (1955)

Five brilliantly colored black, white, green, red and violet silk and satin church vestments designed by Henri Matisse in the early 50's will be on view from November 9 through January 5 in the Main Hall of the Museum of Modern Art. Installed by Arthur Drexler, Director of The Museum's Department of Architecture and Design, the Matisse chasubles were designed for the Chapel of the Rosary of the Dominican Nuns at Vence in Southern France. The Museum's set is the only one of its kind except for the one in use at the Vence Chapel.

"Very rarely, if ever, in the history of art has the greatest painter of his generation designed ecclesiastical vestments," Alfred H. Barr, Jr., then Director of the Museum Collections, pointed out when the Matisse chasubles were first shown at the Museum in 1955. From 1948 to 1950 Matisse worked not only on the vestments but also designed the architecture, stained glass, murals, altar and furniture for the Vence Chapel.

Matisse first made some twenty full-size designs in colored paper for the chasubles. More than 80 years old and bedridden, he mixed the colors and cut the patterns while his assistant, under his direction, pinned the sections on the walls of the artist's bedroom. The paper maquettes were then sent to the Ateliers des Arts Appliqués in Cannes where Dominican nuns made the vestments from silk with appliques of silk, satin and velvet.

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Each chasuble is cut on a simple pattern consisting of two great semi-circles almost seven feet in diameter which are sewn together. From the shoulders the chasuble hangs like a full cape. The front and back are subtly different in design.

Five chasubles constitute the full liturgical complement. White is worn by the priest when saying Masses at Christmas and Easter and on the festivals of the Virgin Mary and the saints, except the martyrs. Red is used for martyrs' feast days and Whitsuntide; violet for penitential Masses, vigils and Sundays during Lent and Advent; green for Masses on other Sundays; and black for funerals and Masses for the dead, All Souls' Day and Good Friday.

The Museum's white chasuble was used in the consecration ceremony of the Vence Chapel on June 25, 1951, but the weight of the chasuble was so great for the officiating priest that the Museum of Modern Art arranged with the Mother Superior and Matisse to commission for the Chapel a lighter replacement, and thereafter acquired the heavier chasuble for the Collection through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. Later, the other chasubles were given individually by Philip C. Johnson, Mrs. Charles Suydam Cutting, Mr. William V. Griffin and Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon.

On the occasion of the first showing of the chasubles at the Museum, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., observed:

The chasubles for the Vence Chapel offered a decorative problem which Matisse solved magnificently with scissored images and symbolic palm leaves, quatrefoils, halos, fish symbols, stars and crosses. His cut-out paper designs have been translated into vestments of silk, satin and velvet with magnificent effect. They were in fact more successful than his similar paper maquettes for the stained glass windows of the Chapel where the problem of translucent color caused unexpected difficulties.

Photographs and additional information available from Mark Segal, Assistant and Elizabeth Shaw, Director of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 Street, New York, NY 10019. Telephone (212) 956-7504; 956-7501.
