

Henri Matisse, a retrospective : September 24, 1992-January 12, 1993

Author

Matisse, Henri, 1869-1954

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Henri Matisse

A RETROSPECTIVE

SEPTEMBER 24, 1992 – JANUARY 12, 1993



Les bêtes de la mer...
H. Matisse 58

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

The exhibition is sponsored by Philip Morris Companies Inc.

Additional support has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts
and The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

An indemnity for the exhibition has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

This comprehensive exhibition of more than four hundred examples of Henri Matisse's art focuses on his paintings and also includes a large selection of his work in other mediums. Its aim is to reveal the extent and depth of Matisse's achievement and to clarify his identity as a modern artist. Recent exhibitions have examined particular aspects of his work — his drawings or sculpture, for example, or the Moroccan period — but it has been over twenty years since the last major retrospective, held in Paris in 1970. Now, with the unprecedented cooperation of museums in Russia, Western Europe, and the United States, and through the generosity of many international lenders, we have an extraordinary opportunity to see his best-known works as well as those less familiar or rarely exhibited.

HENRI MATISSE was a twenty-year-old law clerk convalescing from appendicitis when he first began to paint, using a box of colors given to him by his mother. Little more than a year later, in 1890, he had abandoned law and was studying art in Paris. Painting, he said, opened for him “a kind of paradise” set apart from the ordinary world. Over the next six decades, until his death in 1954, he sought to render the image of his personal paradise.

Matisse stated that his aim was to create a calm and luxurious art that would soothe and please the viewer, and offer relief from the press of everyday life. Nonetheless, his art was rooted in his direct observation of the world around him, which he then transformed to express his inner vision. To describe this imagined paradise, Matisse developed and continually replayed a group of particular subjects, such as domestic interiors, often with female figures; or nudes in landscapes; or models posed in the artist's studio. Sometimes he included images of his own earlier works, re-created whole or in fragments within later paintings.

Matisse's art is more complex than it at first appears, encompassing a range of contradictory tendencies. Although his pictures often look as if created spontaneously and with ease, he acknowledged that he had to work hard to hide his labors; sequences of studies precede the final versions of many paintings. While he draws upon visible realities, he takes great liberties, coloring the same room deep blue in one painting, for example, and pink or red in another. With exactitude he outlines a table or chair receding in space according to conventional perspective, but then applies a broad area of flat color or a continuous pattern of lines over the surface, thereby challenging that illusion of depth. He simplifies and reduces some images to the point of abstraction, and yet they remain representational, showing vestiges of recognizable forms. The delicate balancing of these conflicting elements produces a pleasurable tension that gives Matisse's art its distinctive beauty.

1890–1905

DISCOVERING MODERN ART

At the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Matisse embarked on the traditional program of drawing from plaster casts and nude models and of copying paintings in the Louvre. He soon rebelled against the school's conservative atmosphere but was still affected by its emphasis on the human figure and the heritage of the past.

By the late nineties, he was replacing the dark tones of his earliest works with brighter colors that reflected his awareness of Impressionism. *The Dinner Table* of 1896–97 contains elements that will become familiar in Matisse's subsequent work: an interior scene, a table laden with the bounty of nature, and a woman preoccupied with her task, not meeting our gaze. With clearly visible brushstrokes and distinct patches of color, he paints pinks and blues in the shadows and reflections around the carafes, plates, and glasses in a style recalling Claude Monet or Auguste Renoir.

Over the next years, Matisse looked to the advanced artists of the immediately preceding generation to find new ways of picturing the world. He experimented with the optical effects of Georges-Pierre Seurat, breaking down color into confetti-like dots in a number of still lifes and landscapes. He studied Paul Cézanne's methods of construction and composition, resulting in the rugged, substantial figures of *Male Model* of 1900 and *Carmelina* of 1903–04.

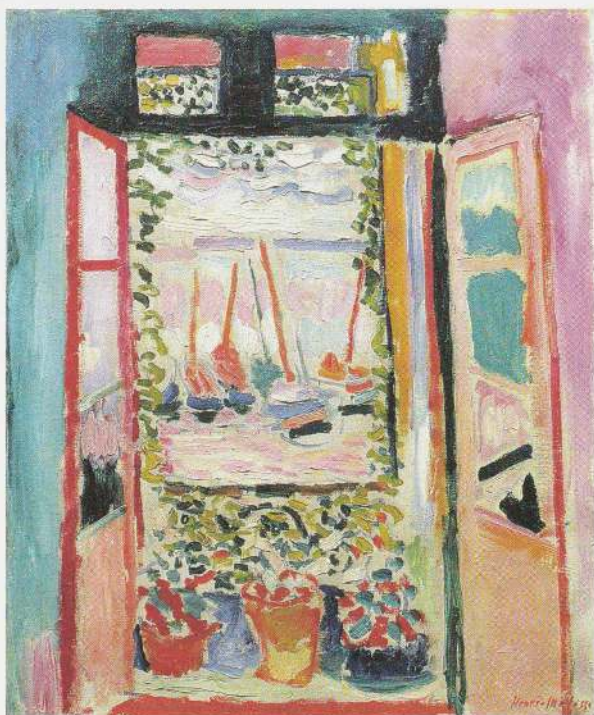


The Dinner Table. Paris, autumn 1896–spring 1897. Oil on canvas,
39 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 51 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (100 x 131 cm). Private collection

1905–1907

THE FAUVIST EPOCH

Matisse spent the summer of 1905 working with André Derain in the small Mediterranean seaport of Collioure. Inspired in part by the works of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, they used bright and dissonant colors and often left parts of the canvas bare. When Matisse, Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck, and other colleagues exhibited together in the autumn, they



The Open Window. Collioure, summer 1905. Oil on canvas, 21 3/4 x 18 1/8" (55.2 x 46 cm). Collection Mrs. John Hay Whitney

caused a sensation. The critics and the public considered their paintings to be so crude and so roughly crafted that the group became known as *les fauves* ("the wild beasts"). Even a patron as supportive as Leo Stein could declare that one of Matisse's pictures was "a thing brilliant and powerful but the nastiest smear of paint I had ever seen."

The Open Window, painted during the summer of 1905 in Collioure, exemplifies

Matisse's Fauve period. From the artist's room, we look out at vividly colored fishing boats bobbing on a pink and pale-blue sea. The scene is framed by flowerpots on the balcony and tumbling green ivy, and is reflected on open glass doors. Contrary to our expectations, the background of boats and sea refuses to recede. Instead, vertical and horizontal strokes of thick paint press forward, on an equal plane with the ivy. Broad strips of wall, blue-green on the left and violet-pink on the right, further emphasize the flat surface of the canvas and act as a foil to the animated center section. The essential revolution of Fauvism for Matisse was drawing in paint, whereby he replaced underlying preparatory sketches with direct, impulsive markings of intense colors on white canvas. The result was a dazzling effect of vibrating light.

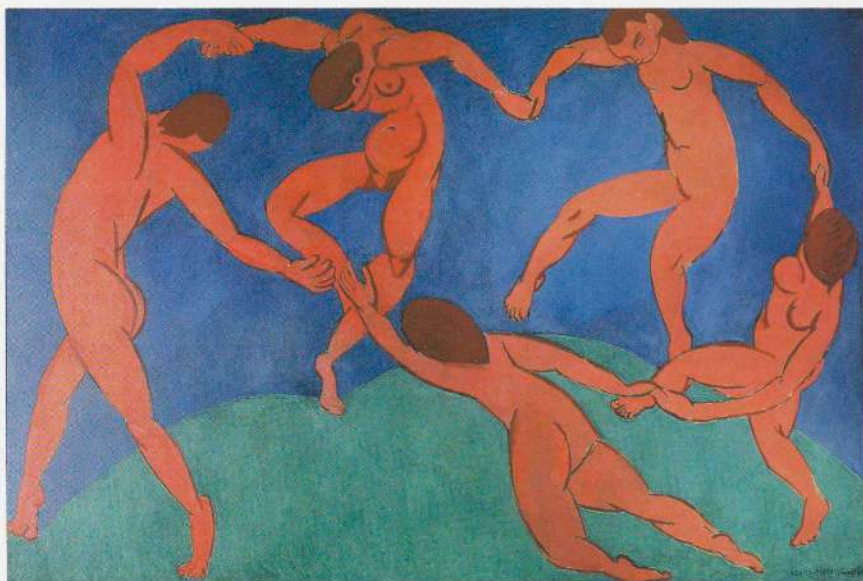
By 1907, Matisse moved on from the concerns of Fauvism and turned his attention to studies of the human figure. In *Blue Nude: Memory of Biskra* of 1907, the reclining pose was derived from a small clay sculpture he was making at the time. He had begun to sculpt a few years earlier and thought of it as a complement to his paintings. Indeed, this painted nude possesses the weight and volume of sculpture; blue shadows and pale pink highlights carve out the full curves of her hip and breasts. But at the same time, she is flattened out on the canvas: colors extend beyond the edges of her body, and her arms, hands, and feet are distorted and turned as if seen from another viewpoint. Painted in the same year as Pablo Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, Matisse's *Blue Nude* is a challenging, transitional work.

In compositions that followed, Matisse began to eliminate three-dimensional modeling with light and shadow, and to cover large sections of the canvas with flat color contained within outlines. On a trip to Italy in 1907, he had seen early Renaissance frescoes and was especially moved by

the expressive power and simplicity of the fourteenth-century wall paintings by Giotto. This led him to create simpler, more monumental figures such as those in the second version of *Le luxe* or in *Bathers with a Turtle*, works that look ahead to *Dance*.

1908–1913

ART AND DECORATION



Dance II. Issy-les-Moulineaux, late 1909–summer 1910. Oil on canvas, 8' 5 5/8" x 12' 9 1/2" (260 x 391 cm)
The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

"What I dream of is an art of balance, purity and serenity," Matisse wrote in "Notes of a Painter" of 1908. During these years, he confidently advanced the use of brilliant color and decorative pattern for which his art is best known. In *Harmony in Red* of 1908 he paints most of the canvas with one vibrant, continuous field of color, embellished by a pattern of freely curving lines. The linear pattern at first appears to be a design in the tablecloth, which breaks to show the edges of the table, but then it continues to climb onto the wall, surrounding the woman on the right. The very same lines signify tablecloth, wallpaper, flowers in a vase, or nature outside. The composition reimagines *The Dinner Table*, sharing with it the subject of domestic interior and preoccupied female. But a comparison of the two works demonstrates how Matisse has boldly rethought the roles of color and line to redefine what a painting can be.

Harmony in Red was owned by the Russian collector Sergei Shchukin, one of Matisse's most loyal patrons in the years before World War I. In 1909, Shchukin commissioned Matisse to make two panels on the themes of dance and music for the stairway of his home in Moscow. Matisse painted these large works in his new studio at Issy-les-Moulineaux in the suburbs of Paris. He conceived *Dance* as a kind of pagan celebration set in an idyllic Golden Age. The female dancers are entirely absorbed in their movements and unaware of any onlookers; they pull to the edges of the

canvas, swaying to a music we cannot hear. The figures are so extremely simplified, so “modern,” that many of Matisse’s contemporaries were shocked. Shchukin, too, was dismayed by the unfettered sexuality of nudes dancing with such abandon, and he initially refused the work, but quickly came to appreciate the dynamism of its simplified colors and forms.

When Matisse saw an exhibition of Islamic art in 1910, he was fascinated by the Persian miniatures shown there. The small manuscript illustrations, composed of multiple patterned areas each in its own pocket of pictorial space, offered him an alternative to Western perspective and opened up a private world of the imagination. He adapted the decorative universe of the miniatures to his interiors of 1911. To experience *The Red Studio*, for example, we must give up our fixed position in front of the picture and, in our imaginations, enter it and move about, examining the separate contents of the room and the art works presented within the art.

As a continuation of his interest in the “exotic,” Matisse made extended trips to Morocco in 1912 and 1913. Morocco embodied aspects of his aesthetic ideal. The radiance of its landscape and the brightly colored costumes of its people reinforced his own vision and inspired paintings of luminous and tranquil harmony.

1913–1917

ABSTRACTION AND EXPERIMENTATION

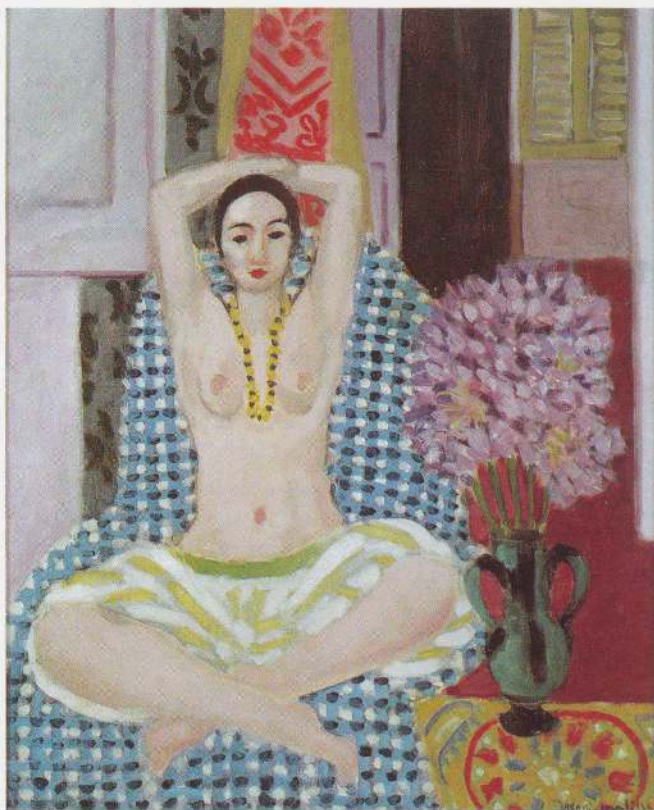


Portrait of Mlle Yvonne Landsberg. Paris, spring–early summer 1914. Oil on canvas, 58 × 38 1/8" (147.3 × 97.5 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection

The years just before and during World War I are often considered the least “Matisse-like” period of the artist’s career. It was a time of restless experimentation that led to highly abstracted, untraditional compositions. Prompted by his contact with the Cubists, especially Picasso and Juan Gris, Matisse absorbed their use of fragmentation and of geometric design. We can see the Cubist influence, for example, in the blocky figures and seemingly disjointed composition of *Bathers by a River*, completed in 1916.

Among the most extraordinary works

from this period are the portraits. In making studies for them, Matisse often started with a relatively naturalistic portrayal and progressed to the more abstract. His aim was, as he said, "to condense from the succession of moments . . . a truer, more essential character." In *Portrait of Mlle Yvonne Landsberg* of 1914, great incised curves spring out from the core of the body into the surrounding space, transforming a portrait of a shy young woman into a bursting centrifugal image.



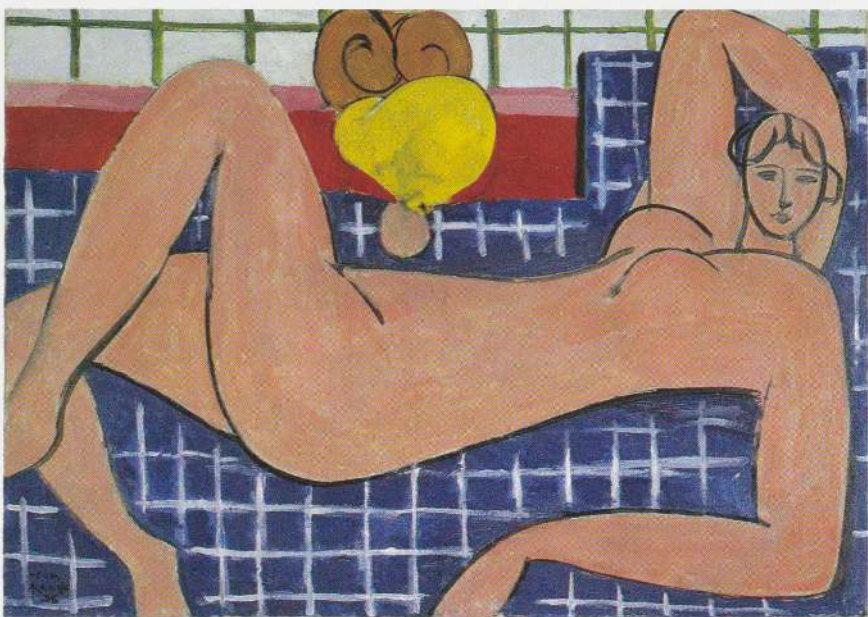
The Hindu Pose. Nice, winter-spring 1923. Oil on canvas, 32 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (83 x 60 cm). Private collection

1917-1930

THE EARLY YEARS AT NICE

At the end of 1917, Matisse moved to Nice; he would spend part of each year there for the remainder of his life. Characteristic of the works he made in Nice during the 1920s are light-filled, profusely decorated interiors with languorous or seductive models. Matisse infused these scenes with a sense of both domestic order and luxurious calm. Applying paint thinly and carefully, he filled out every part of the canvas with rich tones of color and gently pulsating patterns.

The world of these paintings is extremely artificial: the rooms, their decoration, and the models' costumes are not spontaneously observed subjects, but carefully arranged make-believe. In *The Hindu Pose* of 1923, for example, the model sits bare-breasted on a blue-checked chair, her pose contrived to mimic the shape of the vase on the right. She looks out impassively, as Matisse's models often do, presenting an image not of sexual passion but detached serenity.



Large Reclining Nude (The Pink Nude). Nice, April–October, 1935. Oil on canvas, 26 × 36 1/2" (66 × 92.7 cm).
The Baltimore Museum of Art. The Cone Collection, formed by
Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland

1930–1943

THEMES AND VARIATIONS

During the early thirties Matisse was engaged in designing murals for the Barnes Foundation near Philadelphia. He was also commissioned to illustrate a number of books, for which he made etchings. The practice of incising fine lines into copper plates renewed his interest in the potential of spare, unshaded line against white paper. Subsequent pen-and-ink line drawings of models convey with minimum means an eloquent grace and abundant sensuality.

In contrast to the softer images of models during the early years in Nice, the many paintings of female nudes at this time display the crisp clarity of his recent drawings. A single black outline, filled in with a terra-cotta color, delineates the recumbent figure in *Large Reclining Nude*. Splayed across the picture, the figure's torso, arms, and legs reinforce the rectangular shape of the canvas. Successive states of this painting (recorded in photographs taken in the artist's studio) show how Matisse manipulated the proportions of the figure to perfect the composition. Compared to *Blue Nude* of nearly thirty years earlier, he has vastly simplified and reduced *Large Reclining Nude*, producing an interlocking, more "abstract" pattern in which the figure and the spaces around it are given equal prominence.

Although the artist suffered a serious illness and underwent surgery early in 1941, he was able to continue drawing. *Themes and Variations*, a large portfolio of drawings published in 1943, recapitulated the subjects that had engaged him throughout his life. Producing them in bursts of activity, and often at great speed, Matisse called these suites of successive images "the cinema of my sensibility."

1943-1954

THE FINAL YEARS

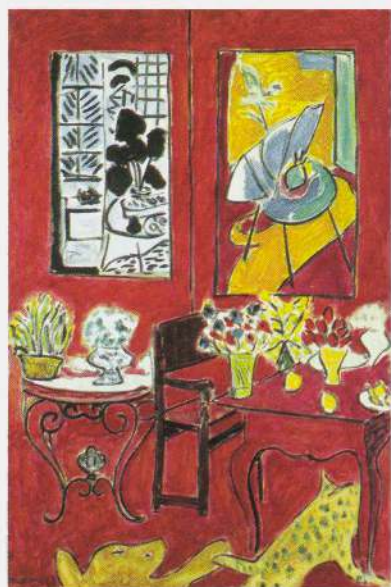
Matisse's last paintings are studies on his favorite themes: decoratively costumed female figures and interiors, including *Large Red Interior*, painted in Vence in 1948. He had developed the habit of erasing a previous day's efforts to keep his colors fresh; in these final paintings, radiant color seems to overflow the limits of the canvas.

Eventually, as Matisse became increasingly infirm, he often worked from his bed. His art took two principal forms: first, drawing in black paint with a broad brush to create what he thought of as a new kind of "monochrome painting"; second, cutting out shapes of pre-painted colored paper and arranging them on the wall. Both the brush drawings and the paper

cutouts liberated his art from what he called "the eternal conflict between drawing and color." By cutting into colored paper with scissors, he said, "instead of drawing an outline and filling in the color . . . I am drawing directly in color."

The playful cutouts made to illustrate his book *Jazz* in 1943-46 are composed of shapes that wiggle and dance across the white paper ground, recalling the spirited markings of the Fauvist period. In the following years Matisse would use the cutout technique in his elaborate designs for the Dominican chapel in Vence.

The last decade of Matisse's life, before his death at age 84, saw an outpouring of monumental cutouts that replay some of his favorite themes

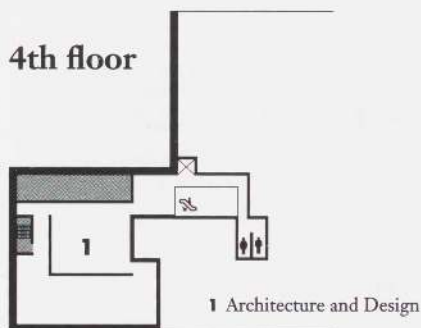


Large Red Interior. Vence, winter-spring 1948.
Oil on canvas, 57 1/2 x 38 1/4" (146 x 97 cm).
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre
Georges Pompidou, Paris

with astonishing vitality. Bathers frolic in the water of *The Swimming Pool*, made to decorate the walls of his dining room in Nice. In *The Beasts of the Sea* watery creatures lazily spiral over blocks of color stacked eight feet high. *Memory of Oceania*, covered with slabs of warm tropical hues, suggests a figure on a sailboat and the shimmering water and light of Tahiti, where the artist had traveled twenty years before. Although the cutouts at times seem overtly abstract, their voluptuous forms and luscious colors also convey the sense of recognizable references. With these masterly final compositions — and throughout his art — Matisse offers us the luxury of contemplating a private paradise, a place of pleasurable ease and harmony that he has fashioned from the ordinary world.

EMILY KIES FOLPE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

4th floor

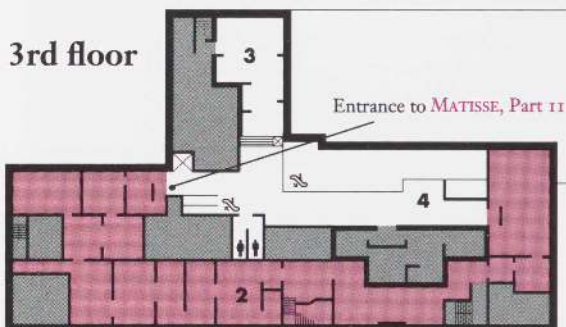


Legend

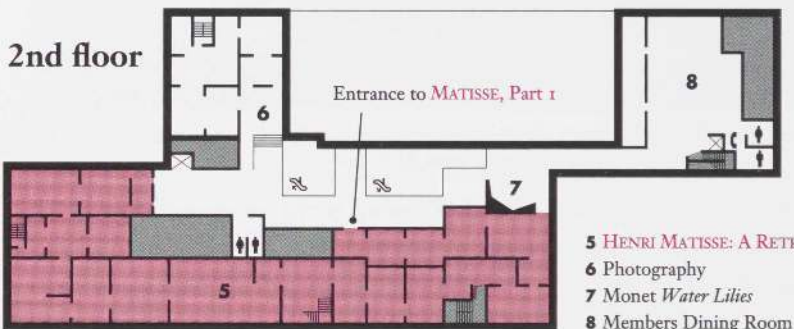
- ♂ Men's room*
- ♀ Ladies' room*
- ☎ Telephone*
- ⊠ Elevator*
- ↗ Escalator
- ≡ Stairs
- ♿ Mobility access
- Nonpublic areas
- HENRI MATISSE: A RETROSPECTIVE

* Accessible to visitors with disabilities

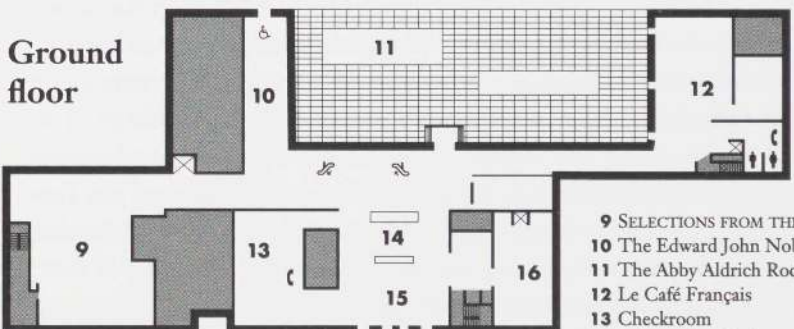
3rd floor



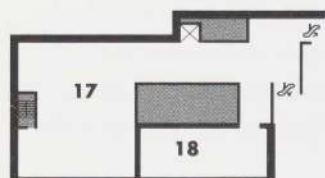
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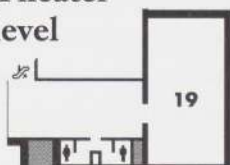
Ground floor



Lower level



Theater level



HENRI MATISSE: A RETROSPECTIVE

has been organized by John Elderfield, Director, Department of Drawings,
and Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture,
The Museum of Modern Art,
with the assistance of Beatrice Kernan, Associate Curator, Department of Drawings.

LECTURES

October 29 *Matisse: A Kind of Paradise*
John Elderfield, Organizer of the exhibition

November 5 *Matisse and the Cinematic Moment, 1914-1925*
Catherine Bock-Weiss, Professor of Art History, The School of The Art Institute of Chicago

November 12 *Matisse's Sculpture: The Heroic Perception*
William Tucker, sculptor

November 19 *Matisse's Late Works*
Jack Flam, Professor of Art History, City University Graduate Center,
and art critic for *The Wall Street Journal*

These programs will take place at 8:30 p.m. in The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1.
Infrared assistive listening headsets are available free of charge at the Lobby Information Desk.

Tickets \$8.00; Members \$7.00; Students \$5.00, available at the Lobby Information Desk
and in The Edward John Noble Education Center.

TWO-SESSION COURSES

September 22, 29
The Art of Matisse. Lecturer: Vivien Knussi

October 13, 20
Jazz and Other Paper Cutouts. Lecturer: Mina Roustayi

December 1, 8
Matisse: Color and Light. Lecturer: Susan Cooke

November 17, 24
Matisse and the Orient. Lecturer: Jill Snyder

Tuesdays from 6:00-7:30 p.m. in The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2.

The fee for each two-session course is \$55 (Members \$45) and includes one ticket
to the exhibition at designated time. All courses will be sign-language interpreted.

Infrared assistive listening headsets are available free of charge at the Lobby Information Desk.

To register for programs, inquire in The Edward John Noble Education Center, off the Garden Hall.

SLIDE TALKS ON MATISSE: September 15-December 20. Introductory slide lectures
in the Education Center are scheduled daily. Refer to schedule at the Lobby Information Desk
or in the Education Center. Seating is limited. A personal FM amplification system
is available free of charge in the Education Center.

For more information on Education Programs for HENRI MATISSE: A RETROSPECTIVE,
call 708-9480 (voice) or 247-1230 (TDD).

PUBLICATION: *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* by John Elderfield.

The most comprehensive visual survey of Matisse's career. 480 pages, 592 illustrations
(320 in color). The catalogue section of this volume was prepared by John Elderfield
with Beatrice Kernan and includes a chronology compiled with Judith Cousins.

\$75.00 clothbound; \$37.50 paperbound. Published by The Museum of Modern Art.
Clothbound edition distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

SPECIAL BROCHURES: Large-print and braille brochures for
HENRI MATISSE: A RETROSPECTIVE
are available upon request at the entrance to the exhibition.

ACOUSTIGUIDE: A 40-minute audio tour of the exhibition is available in English,
Spanish, and French for \$3.50. Headsets may be rented in the Ground Floor Garden Hall.
Amplified headsets and written transcripts are available.

GENERAL INFORMATION

MUSEUM HOURS: Friday through Tuesday 10:30–6:00;
Wednesday 12:00–6:00; Thursday 10:30–9:00

MOBILITY ACCESS: ♿ All galleries and facilities are accessible to wheelchairs, which are available in the checkroom. Elevators to the exhibition are located on the Ground Floor, near the entrance to the International Council Galleries.

LOST AND FOUND: See Lobby security supervisor or call 708-9460.

CAMERAS: Photography is not permitted in HENRI MATISSE: A RETROSPECTIVE. Photography is permitted elsewhere in the Museum only with hand-held camera and electronic flash. No photographs taken in the Museum may be reproduced, distributed, or sold without permission from the Museum.

SMOKING: No smoking except in designated areas.

CHECKROOM: All umbrellas, parcels, bags, and purses larger than 14 inches must be checked. Wheelchairs are available.

LE CAFÉ FRANÇAIS: Self-service food and beverages in a French café setting. Friday – Tuesday 10:30–5:00, Wednesday 12:00–5:00, Thursday 10:30–8:00

THE MEMBERS DINING ROOM: Elegant dining overlooking The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden. Lunch seatings Thursday through Tuesday 11:30–2:30, Wednesday 12:00–2:45, dinner Thursday 5:30–7:45. Reservations required (708-9710).

THE MOMA BOOK STORE: 11 West 53 Street. Hours: Friday – Tuesday 10:00–5:45, Wednesday 10:30–5:45, Thursday 10:00–8:45 (708-9700).

An assortment of MATISSE-related postcards, notecards, print portfolios, blank books, calendars, address books, posters, matted prints, and books is available at The MoMA Book Store off the Museum Lobby. A limited selection is also available in the MATISSE Exhibition Shop on the third floor (at the exhibition's exit) and in The MoMA Design Store.

THE MOMA DESIGN STORE: 44 West 53 Street. Hours: daily 10:00–6:00, except Thursday 10:00–8:45 and Sunday 11:00–6:00 (767-1050).

GENERAL INFORMATION: Current exhibitions, film screenings, gallery talks, and lectures are listed in the monthly calendar, available at the Lobby Information Desk; or call 708-9480. Other information: 708-9500. TDD (Telephone Device for the Deaf): 247-1230. Fax: 708-9889.

FILMS: 🎬 Films are shown in The Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters. Tickets (included in the price of admission) are available at the Lobby Information Desk. Advance tickets are a privilege extended to Members for a small service charge. Infrared assistive listening headsets are available free of charge at the Lobby Information Desk.

THE EDWARD JOHN NOBLE EDUCATION CENTER: Education program information is available at the Lobby Information Desk and the Education Center. For blind and severely visually impaired visitors, a sculpture touch-tour of the Collection is offered by advance appointment. To schedule call 708-9639 (voice), 247-1230 (TDD).

COVER CAPTION: *The Beasts of the Sea...* Nice-Cimiez, 1950. Gouache on paper, cut and pasted, on white paper, 9' 8 3/8" x 60 5/8" (295.5 x 154 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

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