

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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CHURCH VESTMENTS BY MATISSE ON VIEW AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Five brilliantly colored silk and satin church vestments, originally designed by Matisse for the Chapel at Vence in France, will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, December 21st through January 15th. Four of the five chasubles were commissioned for the Museum Collection through Matisse's cooperation shortly before his death in 1953. They were executed from Matisse's designs at the Atelier d'Arts Appliqués at Cannes. The donors of these four recently acquired chasubles are Mrs. Charles Suydam Cutting, Mr. William V. Griffin, Mr. Philip C. Johnson and Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon. The fifth chasuble was acquired three years ago through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest from the Chapel itself by exchange for a similar vestment of more practical weight. At the same time the Museum will exhibit a striking paper maquette, or model, for a large stained glass window designed by Matisse in 1952 and lent to the Museum by Mrs. Albert D. Lasker.

From 1948 through 1950 Matisse worked almost exclusively upon the Chapel of the Rosary of the Dominican Nuns at Vence, a small town in the hills back of Nice. He designed not only the architecture, stained glass, murals, altar and furniture, but also the vestments.

For the chasubles alone, Matisse made some twenty full size designs in colored paper. Over eighty at the time, the artist was bedridden, but he himself mixed the colors and with scissors cut the patterns which his assistant then pinned together on the walls of his bedroom under his direction. The original maquette, or model, for the red chasuble, previously acquired by the Museum, is included in the present exhibition.

The paper maquettes were then sent to the Atelier d'Arts Appliqués at Cannes, a convent where nuns expert in needlework made the vestments in silk, satin and velvet. Matisse carefully supervised the selection of materials, rejecting for instance French silk for the violet chasuble in favor of a silk which had to be especially dyed in Indo-China, thereby causing many months delay.

Each chasuble is cut on a very simple pattern of two great semicircles almost seven feet in diameter which are then sewn together leaving a hole in the center for the head of the priest. From his shoulders the chasuble hangs like a very full cap. In Matisse's chasubles the front and back are subtly different in design.

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Ordinarily five chasubles, predominantly white, red, violet, green or black, make 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, excepting 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; black for funerals and Masses for the dead, All Souls Day and Good Friday.

Except for the chasubles owned by the Vence Chapel itself, the Museum's set is unique. The Museum's white chasuble is accompanied by its four smaller pieces, the stole, maniple, chalice veil and burse, each used for a different purpose during the ceremony of the Mass. These white vestments originally belonged to the Chapel and were in fact employed in the consecration ceremony on June 25, 1951, but the satin of the chasuble was found to be too heavy for the officiating priest so that by arrangement with the Mother Superior and Matisse the Museum was able to acquire it by commissioning a lighter replacement for the Chapel.

Concerning the chasubles, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Director of the Museum Collections, says: "Very rarely, if ever, before in the history of art has the greatest painter of his generation designed ecclesiastical vestments. The chasubles for the Vence Chapel offered a decorative problem which Matisse solved magnificently with scissored images of symbolic palm leaves, quatrefoils, halos, fish symbols, stars and crosses. His cutout 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.

"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."

The exhibition has been installed by Arthur Drexler, Curator of Architecture and Design, and Greta Daniel, Associate Curator. Father C. E. F. Hoefner, S. J., has kindly given expert information on the liturgical usage.

On exhibition near the chasubles:

Design for a stained glass window. Commissioned 1952; completed 1953. Gouache on cut-and-pasted paper mounted on canvas, 9'4-1/2" x 9'4-3/4". Lent by Mrs. Albert D. Lasker.

Photographs and checklists available on request from Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York City, Circle 5-8900.