

The Museum of Modern Art

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PRESS PREVIEW:

Friday, December 17, 1965

11 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Four brilliantly colored silk chasubles designed in 1950-52 by Henri Matisse for the Chapel of the Rosary of the Dominican Nuns at Vence in the south of France, will be on view in the Main Hall of The Museum of Modern Art during the holiday season, from December 18 through January 9. The black, white, red and green vestments will be installed by Arthur Drexler, Director of the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design.

Made of silk decorated with appliques of silk, satin and velvet, these liturgical vestments were executed from Matisse's designs by the Dominican Nuns of the Atelier des Arts Appliqués in Cannes.

Matisse first made some twenty full-size designs in colored paper for the chasubles. Over eighty, and bedridden at the time, he mixed the colors and cut the patterns with scissors which his assistant, under his direction, then pinned together on the walls of the artist's bedroom.

The paper maquettes were sent to the Atelier des Arts Appliqués, where nuns expert in needlework made the actual vestments. Contours of the shapes indicate the process of cutting with scissors, and the corded outlines used for some of them, as well as the stitching, were carefully considered as part of the design.

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 the shoulders the chasuble hangs like a very full cape. In Matisse's chasubles the front and back are subtly different in design.

Concerning the chasubles, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Director of 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.

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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.

"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."

At the time of the exhibition, the Museum will issue a set of six postcards reproducing the chasubles in full color. Text and captions on the cards are by Mildred Constantine, Associate Curator of Design of the Department of Architecture and Design.

Except for the chasubles owned by the Vence Chapel itself, the Museum's set is unique. Five chasubles 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, 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 black chasuble was the gift of Philip C. Johnson; the red, the gift of Mrs. Charles Suydam Cutting; the green chasuble was given to the Museum by Mr. William V. Griffin; all three were acquired in 1955, and five chasubles were first shown at the Museum at that time. The white chasuble was acquired in 1952 through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest and is accompanied by the stole, maniple, chalice veil and burse which will not be shown in the current exhibition. The violet chasuble, and an unfinished rose-colored vestment, which will not be on view, were given by Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon in 1955.

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Lynn Traiger, Assistant Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. Circle 5-8900.