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Royal Academy of Arts
Exhibition in Focus



Matisse

in the Studio

An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

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For the Learning Department
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Matisse in the Studio
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Exhibition organised by the Royal Academy of Arts, London,
and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,
in partnership with the Musée Matisse, Nice.

FRONT COVER **Cat. 114**, *Odalisque on a Turkish Chair*, 1928
BACK COVER **Fig. 2**, Matisse painting the model Zita at 1 Place Charles-Félix, Nice, 1928 (detail)

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The RA is a unique organisation that remains true to its origins in 1768 as a place where art is made, exhibited and debated. Our aim is simple: to be a clear, strong voice for art and artists. The RA's Learning Department fulfils this objective by engaging people in the practice of art through hands-on creative experiences and exploring the art of the past and the present.

Introduction

Over the course of his life, Matisse amassed a large collection of objects which he kept in his studio and that were central to his artistic practice. He purchased items both at home in France and on his travels abroad, as well as receiving gifts from friends and family. Among them were Andalusian glass vases, French pewter jugs, Chinese porcelain pots, classical and medieval sculpture, and African furniture, masks and sculptures. Most had little monetary worth but possessed enormous significance. Each item appealed to Matisse personally and had a profound emotional effect on him. He responded differently to objects depending on their relationship with other items and the space around them. Throughout his life, he remained loyal to certain objects, returning to them again and again in his work, manipulating them to play different roles.

Matisse was born in December 1869 in Le Cateau-Cambrésis, a small town in northern France, close to the Belgian border. In his early twenties, he abandoned a promising career as a lawyer to become an artist in Paris. After enrolling at the École des Beaux-Arts, Matisse spent five years training in the Parisian studio of Gustave Moreau (1826–1898), an artist of the previous generation known for painting biblical and mythological subjects. Matisse married in 1898, and after gaining recognition at the Salon d'Automne in 1905, he set up a painting school in 1908 at his own home and studio in Paris. This marked the beginning of a career spent living in his work spaces and working in his living spaces. In 1917, he moved to Nice, where he lived in hotels until he finally settled in an apartment in the old town at 1, Place Charles-Félix. Later, at his villa in Vence, and subsequently at his studio-apartment in the Hôtel Régina in Cimiez, an area of Nice, Matisse's studios became immersive environments in which he was to work and live until his death in 1954.

Matisse always lived and worked among his eclectic collection of objects. Displayed on trestle tables, mantelpieces, and free-standing cabinets, these decorative curiosities contributed to a rich and inspiring working environment. Even in temporary studios, the objects became a fundamental feature of the space, constantly prompting creative activity. Matisse reveals their importance in letters to his family, in which he requests that certain belongings be moved from one location to another. Writing to his wife in 1920, he told her, 'These objects keep me company ... I am not alone'. In the 1940s, Matisse immortalised his collection by commissioning a series of photographs from Hélène Adant, the cousin of his studio assistant. Adant photographed the objects in varying combinations, occasionally arranging them to 'enact' compositions in Matisse's earlier works (fig. 1). Adant took this photograph in Vence in 1946. She grouped the items to give them an almost human sensibility. Placed in ordered rows and at varying heights, the all-important objects are lined up as though they are posed for a formal family portrait. On the reverse of this photograph Matisse wrote, 'Objects which have been of use to me nearly all of my life'. Indeed, this curated display – or

'What is significant is the relation of the object to the artist, to his personality, and his power to arrange his sensations and emotions'

Henri Matisse,
On Modernism and Tradition, 1935



Fig. 1
Hélène Adant
 (1903–85)
 annotated on the reverse
 by Matisse, 'Objects
 which have been of use
 to me nearly all my life,'
 Villa Le Rêve, Vence,
 1946

Archives Henri Matisse
 Photo © Archives H. Matisse
 © Succession H. Matisse/DACS 2017

'palette of objects' as it was later called – gives due prominence to many of these heroes of Matisse's oeuvre.

The Royal Academy *Matisse in the Studio* exhibition explores the relationship Henri Matisse had with his studio, once described by art historian and curator Georges Salles as 'a fantastic laboratory of visual alchemy'. By bringing together a representative selection of Matisse's paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures, and placing them alongside specific objects from his collection, *Matisse in the Studio* sheds light on the fluid interchange between objects collected and works created by one of the leading artists of the twentieth century.

'The object is an actor: a good actor can have a part in ten different plays; an object can play a different role in ten different pictures.'

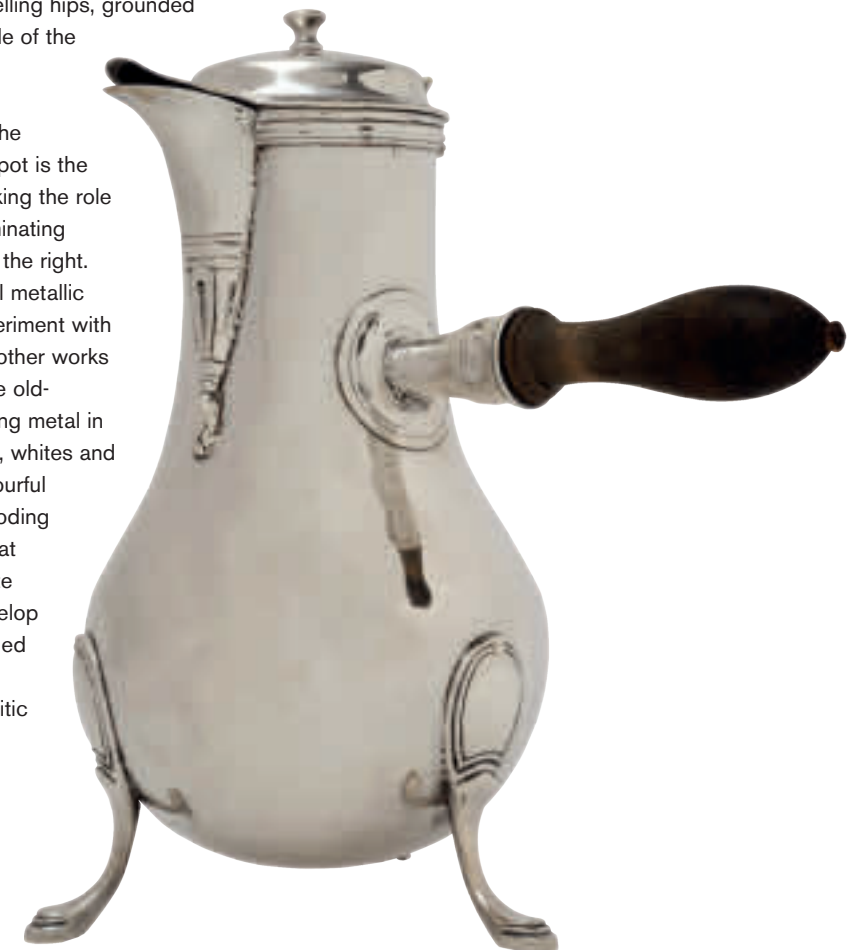
Henri Matisse, *Testimonial*, 1951

The Object as Actor: The Chocolate Pot

Cat. 33 Matisse continually revisited certain objects in his collection, often varying the ensembles and configurations, depicting them from different angles and via a wide range of media. Perhaps the most famous 'actor' in his cast of treasured objects was the chocolate pot. Matisse received this pot – which may in fact have been intended for coffee – from his friend, the artist Albert Marquet (1875–1947), probably on the occasion of his marriage to Amélie Noellie Parayre in 1898. From one side of this distinctive silver vessel, a wooden handle protrudes, whittled to fit perfectly into the palm of the hand. The pot's bulbous lower half sits a little above the base of its three supporting legs. The pot's bulbous lower half sits a little above the base of its three supporting legs. From the neck of the pot projects a beak-like spout, embossed with simple decoration. The unusual shape of the object must have appealed to Matisse, and throughout his career the chocolate pot motif appears again and again in varied contexts and roles.

Cat. 38 In 1902, Matisse painted *Bouquet of Flowers in a Chocolate Pot*. In this still-life, he isolates the object at the centre of the composition, which draws attention to its striking form. He places the object centre-stage and in three-quarter profile, a composition traditionally used for portraits. The handle is foreshortened and extends towards the viewer like a nose, and the bulging lower half of the object is exaggerated to evoke swelling hips, grounded

by firmly-rooted legs. The role of the chocolate pot as an actor is particularly apt given the anthropomorphic nature of the vessel. Here, the chocolate pot is the sole protagonist, proudly taking the role of a vase and casting a dominating shadow as light enters from the right. Rather than using the playful metallic surface of the vessel to experiment with colour – as he had done in other works – here Matisse reverts to the old-fashioned manner of depicting metal in a restrained palette of greys, whites and browns. Rather, it is the colourful arrangement of flowers exploding from the neck of the vase that anticipates the vibrant palette Matisse would go on to develop in subsequent years, which led to his title of *Fauve*, or 'wild beast', given to him by art critic



'Isn't it precisely the privilege of the artist to render precious, to ennoble the most humble subject?'

Henri Matisse, *The Role and Modalities of Colour*, 1945

Cat. 33
Chocolate Pot, France,
 19th – early 20th century
 Silver and wood, 31.4cm

Private collection. Former collection of Henri Matisse
 Photo © Private collection



Louis Vauxcelles following the Salon d'Automne exhibition of 1905. In *Bouquet of Flowers in a Chocolate Pot*, Matisse's realistic treatment of the object remains firmly embedded in his formative training, which focused largely on copying and painting still-lives. In Gustave Moreau's studio, Matisse had learnt to depict objects, but in 1908, after Matisse opened his own school in Paris, his pupil, close friend and patron Sarah Stein, records Matisse's attitude to still-life painting: 'To copy the objects in a still-life is nothing; one must render the emotion they awaken ...'

Cat. 38
Bouquet of Flowers in a Chocolate Pot, 1902
 Oil on canvas, 64 × 46 cm

Musée Picasso, Paris, RF1973-73 (R)
 Photo © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.
 Photograph by René-Gabriel Ojéda
 © Succession H. Matisse/DACS 2017

Cat. 45 For Matisse, painting an object became a practice of introspection rather than just observation. It was a way in which he could learn to understand himself. In 1940, Matisse would return to the chocolate pot in *Still Life with Seashell on Black Marble*. Here he paints a different chocolate pot, with the undulations of its turned handle distinguishing it from that depicted in *Bouquet of Flowers in a Chocolate Pot* (Cat. 38). The motif of the chocolate pot is revisited, this time painted red, one among a distilled composition of objects. Rather than painting the pot as a single item at the centre of the composition, it has become a peripheral member of the acting 'cast'. Suddenly, the object's interaction with its surroundings imbues it with symbolic meaning. The inclusion of the pot here is perhaps an allusion to the original wedding gift and to his marriage, which had failed only a matter of months before the painting was created. Here, Matisse includes this particular object not in celebration of its form, but instead as a symbolic representation of time past. The black marble table surface, the cumbersome contours given to the delicate objects and the sinister spikes of the 'spider conch' shell all contribute to the disquiet of this work. Matisse took great care over this painting, working on it for three months, making constant revisions and photographing it at different stages. He consciously chose to include objects that had been collected decades before along with others he'd acquired more recently (the seashell, for example, was brought back with him from a trip to Tahiti in 1930). Interestingly, earlier iterations of the painting reveal that the handle of the chocolate pot had once extended closer towards the jug. By retracting the handle in the final version (Cat. 45), Matisse pushes the chocolate pot further into the corner of the composition, separating it from its fellow 'actors'. With the all-over composition and shallow, panoramic viewpoint, the edge of the canvas aggressively truncates the pot's form, acting as an abrupt reminder of ephemerality. Matisse experimented with the interaction of the objects depicted in this painting by creating a maquette made from cut-paper shapes. Pinning the individual shapes on to a canvas allowed him to play with their configuration and, in turn, their relationship to one another. This was a technique that Matisse went on to develop, and which would eventually dominate his later years with the creation of his celebrated 'cut-outs'.

Cat. 45
Still Life with Seashell on Black Marble, 1940
 Oil on canvas, 54 × 81 cm

The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
 Photo © Archives H. Matisse
 © Succession H. Matisse/DACS 2017

How do these two paintings illustrate Matisse's idea that an object such as the chocolate pot could play a different role in different works of art?

Compare and contrast the painting style in the two paintings, one from 1902 the other from 1940. How did Matisse's style change over time?



African Art and the Portrait

In the autumn of 1906, Matisse bought his first African sculpture from a dealer in Paris. This purchase was the start of a life-long fascination with African artefacts and, just two years later, Matisse had accumulated over twenty African masks and statues. It was after Matisse started collecting African art that his work began to dramatically challenge Western attitudes to the human form and the traditional definition of beauty. His engagement with art from non-Western cultures, and from Africa in particular, was to have a significant impact on his representation of the figure in both sculpture and painting. In African art, Matisse saw a simplification, authenticity and freedom of expression that he admired. Matisse believed that the strong linear definition employed by African artists revealed 'a truer, more essential character' beneath 'the superficial existence of beings and things'. By visually simplifying his subjects, Matisse believed he was able to portray the sitter as the most truthful version of his or herself.

'I discover amid the lines of the face those which suggest the deep gravity that persists in every human being!'

Henri Matisse, *Notes of a Painter*, 1908

Cat. 90 Matisse's pursuit of his idea of a true representation of identity is best exemplified in the *Jeannette* portrait busts. This series of five sculptures depict Matisse's friend and neighbour, Jeanne Vaderin, who in 1910 had temporarily moved in with Matisse's family in their home in Issy-les-Moulineaux, just outside Paris. During her stay, Jeanne modelled for Matisse, and he went on to sculpt five busts of her over the course of several years. These can either be seen as a progressively abstract series or each one as an individual work in its own right. The first, third and fifth of the *Jeannette* series are included in this exhibition. *Jeannette I* was created from life and is the most representational of the sculptures, but by the time Matisse arrived at *Jeannette V*, he had completely simplified his sitter, moving further from an accurate physical portrayal and closer to what he understood to be her true identity. Matisse's sculpture was a far cry from the smooth contours and delicate handling of the traditional and 'ideal' Western model, but rather a considered accumulation of individual features. Matisse was inspired by the jutting forms of nude African statuettes in his own collection and the abrupt transition between body parts, which created a dynamic interplay between positive and negative space. In the same way, the displaced features in Matisse's fractured portrait give the sculpture a visual rhythm, and, as Matisse explains, 'it is this rhythm which creates the likeness'.

Cat. 98 Matisse's exploration of African art was multifaceted. He would rarely reproduce or copy any of the specific artefacts that he owned, and features of his own work would often influence the choice of African works that he collected. For example, Matisse owned a late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century Kuba mask from central Africa, which he may have purchased in a 1937 auction in Paris, long after the completion of the *Jeannette* portrait series. Yet the close resemblance of its form to his *Jeannette V* suggests Matisse's interest in the physical qualities of the mask. The individuation of features that are seen in *Jeannette V* can also be



Cat. 90
Head of Jeannette V,
modelled 1913,
cast 1954
Bronze, 57.7 × 20.8 ×
29.5 cm

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Institution, Gift of
the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1972
Photograph by Cathy Carver
© Succession H. Matisse/DACS 2017



seen in the mask, sharing the same bulbous forehead and wide, heavily contoured eye sockets. The mouths of the mask and of the sculpture are pronounced and they both have small, accentuated, low-set ears. Acquiring this mask reveals that Matisse's collecting habits were also shaped by works of art he himself had created and thus highlights the complex relationship Matisse had with his objects.

Soon after Matisse acquired his first African artefact, he showed it to Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and later remarked that 'it was then when Picasso noticed negro sculpture'. Although the two artists did not share an aesthetic, or necessarily intellectual, sensibility (Picasso once stated that he and Matisse were as different as the North and South poles), their shared obsession with African art and its impact on their work was fundamental to their strong friendship and rivalry. The association of African art with a simplified style has unsurprisingly raised ethical questions about early twentieth-century attitudes to cultural appropriation. Yet Matisse's interest in African objects very much lay in the formal qualities of the works themselves rather than the culture from which they originated.

What is the difference between a mask and a portrait?

Why do you think Matisse was attracted to the mask decades after he had made the *Jeannette V* sculpture?

The Studio as Theatre

In 1910, Matisse travelled to Munich in Germany to see an important exhibition titled *Masterpieces of Mohammedan Art*. It included tapestries, reliefs, metalwork and other decorative arts produced in the near East during the Middle Ages, surveying the relationship between European and middle-Eastern culture. The exhibition had a significant impact on Matisse, and describing the experience much later, he explained how 'revelation thus came to me from the Orient'. It inspired him to take trips to southern Spain and North Africa between 1910 and 1913 and encouraged an interest in collecting Islamic objects.

Cat. 108 Matisse had previously 'detested collections and collectors' along with their connotations of connoisseurship and wealth, and this was very much reflected in his own purchasing habits. It is difficult to know when and from where objects entered Matisse's collection because he often selected items of little value from markets and junk shops, and although many of the objects he owned were of foreign origin, he purchased most of them in France. One of these objects that we know very little about – except that Matisse includes it in several of his paintings, drawings and prints from the 1920s – is an octagonal chair, probably of Moroccan or Algerian origin. The chair appears to have appealed to Matisse for its intricate and colourful decoration and the juxtaposition of positive and negative space within its structure.

Cat. 98
Mboom mask, Kuba kingdom, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 19th-early 20th century
Wood, textile, shells, pearls, seeds, copper, and mixed media, 32 × 37 × 23.5 cm

Musée Matisse, Nice. Former collection of Henri Matisse. Bequest of Madame Henri Matisse, 1960, 63.2.137
Photo © François Fernandez, Nice

Fig. 2
Unidentified photographer, Matisse painting the model Zita at 1 Place Charles-Félix, Nice, 1928

Archives Henri Matisse
Photo © Archives H. Matisse
© Succession H. Matisse/DACS 2017



'A picture is the coordination of controlled rhythms.'
Henri Matisse,
On Modernism and Tradition, 1935

Cat. 108
Octagonal chair, probably
Algeria or Morocco, 19th
century
Painted wood and cloth,
H. 66 cm

Musée Matisse, Nice. Former collection of Henri Matisse. Gift of Michel Gaudet, 1981, 81.1.2
Photo © François Fernandez, Nice

Matisse's fascination with North-African artefacts and culture was shaped in part by colonial history. Algeria, which Matisse visited in 1906, was then a French colony, and Morocco was made a French protectorate in 1912. Art and design reflecting, and fictionalising, North Africa and the Middle East had been extremely popular with the French public in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A particularly fashionable subject in paintings of this time was the depiction of the 'odalisque', a female concubine in a harem. Between the years of 1921 and 1928, Matisse focused on a series of his own Islamic-inspired 'odalisque' paintings, departing from the eroticism of the female nude that had been so central to its appeal in previous centuries, and focusing more on the visual stimulus that evoked the exoticism of Islamic culture. In these paintings, he uses the objects he has collected – coloured fabrics, traditional Islamic 'haiti' (perforated wall hangings), embellished clothing and elaborate furniture – to fashion foreign and decorative universes in his studio.

In 1917, Matisse moved to Nice, where he would spend most of the rest of his life. After several years of working in small studios and hotel rooms, in August 1921 he moved into a two-room apartment on the Place Charles-Félix. Photographs of this period give an accurate impression of the artificial, theatrical world that would dominate Matisse's apartment in Nice throughout much of the 1920s. In 1919, Matisse was invited by Sergei Diaghilev, founder of the Ballets Russes, to design the set, costumes and curtain for Igor Stravinsky's *Le chant du rossignol* in London. Although the ballet was received poorly by the critics, Matisse's taste for set design



had clearly been ignited. The photograph (fig. 2), taken in 1928, shows Matisse seated upright at his easel before the model Zita. Lounging on her right elbow and dressed in low-slung pantaloons, Zita is positioned on a raised platform, surrounded by an array of props and elaborate fabrics. The cord falling into the picture frame reveals the hanging mechanism, reminding us of the scene's artifice. Yet it was through the exotic objects depicted here that Matisse was able to transport the viewer to a distant world in his odalisque paintings, and in doing so, he broke into uncharted realms of colour and space.

Cat. 114 If there is a protagonist in the odalisque paintings, it is pattern itself. In a 1935 essay, Matisse says, 'For me, the subject of a picture and its background have the same value, or, to put it more clearly, there is no principal feature, only the pattern is important.' In the painting *Odalisque on a Turkish Chair*, the model becomes camouflaged as part of the decoration that surrounds her; the fabric and setting dominate the arrangement and she is but one element of the whole composition. Rejecting conventional perspective, Matisse uses the relationship between the individual entities to create depth. Colour is fundamental in making these relationships, and here, Matisse connects the black-and-white chequering of the chessboard with the alternating beads on the model's anklet and the white staccato markings on her clothing. His use of pattern and colour to link separate elements in the picture, unifies and gives them equal importance, while also positioning them within the space. It is interesting to note the *pentimenti* (earlier traces of paint) beneath the chessboard, which has been revised by Matisse to overhang the edge of the platform, giving the picture more depth. The swirling culottes, a mélange of soaring curves and straight lines, locate the model in front of the backdrop, but her foreshortened leg and overhanging foot set her deep within the space. The simple and perfectly oval face of the model is stark in comparison to her surroundings. In the same way that the objects are given a sense of liveliness and vitality, the model's face is plain and inanimate, constructed with just a few lines.

Odalisque on a Turkish Chair is a compelling example of Matisse's ability to fuse different elements into a coherent composition. By interlacing the model with the Algerian chair in this painting, he at once enhances the importance of the object, while simultaneously diminishing the role of the female subject. Here, the model's right forearm divides the empty space between the back panels, almost as though she is part of the chair's structure. Choosing to omit the decorative pattern on the chair, Matisse employs a flesh-pink, and the medallions on the back supports of the object have been projected onto the abstracted floral motif on the wall behind. This pattern, in turn, is imitated in the gaps between the chair legs. At once, Matisse has blended person, object and place.

Compare the photograph of Matisse's studio to the painting, *Odalisque on a Turkish Chair*. How are they similar and in what ways are they different?

How does Matisse use pattern and colour to create an exotic world in this painting? Do you think he succeeds? Why, or why not?



**'What you are aiming for,
above all, is unity.'**
Henri Matisse, *Sarah Stein's
Notes*, 1908

Cat. 114
Odalisque on a Turkish
Chair, 1928
Oil on canvas, 60 × 73 cm

Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris. Gift of
the artist, 1932.
Photo © Archives H. Matisse
© Succession H. Matisse/DACS 2017

'The briefest possible indication of the character of a thing. The sign.'

Henri Matisse,
Conversations with Aragon,
1943

The Language of Signs

The traumatic years of World War II brought much personal hardship for Matisse. In 1941, cancer of the small intestine led to complicated, near-fatal, surgery. Recovery was slow, and permanent damage to the muscular wall of his abdomen left him weak. The threat of war caused Matisse to move, in 1943, from Nice to Villa le Rêve (literally, 'Villa of Dreams'), a house situated 20 kilometres inland in the small hill town of Vence. Despite his poor physical health, this period was Matisse's most prolific: in less than a decade, he produced over 200 works. The second half of the 1940s saw the most dramatic stylistic change of Matisse's career. The 'cut-out' technique that dominated this period, was, he explained in 1951, 'the simplest and most direct way to express myself'. During the summer of 1946, he stayed in an apartment on the Boulevard Montparnasse in Paris, where he started experimenting with cut paper on a large scale, and from the outset, these cut-out shapes became part of the architecture of Matisse's living environment. Initially fixing the cut shape of a swallow to the wall 'to cover up a stain, the sight of which disturbed him', Matisse developed an entire composition on the walls of the apartment. Through a practice that he felt combined drawing, painting and sculpture, Matisse's life-long thirst for simplicity, colour and line was finally sated.

The Eskimo, 1947, is divided into five separate panels. Each motif is created from sheets of paper painted with coloured gouache, a water-based, opaque, matte paint. Some sheets were covered in dense pigment, while others (the light green and blue sheets) were thinned with water so that the brushstrokes remained visible. After the painted sheets were dry, they were cut to create a variety of colourful shapes. After Matisse's operation, he had to use a wheelchair, but continued to work either seated or from his bed. Assistants provided help, guiding larger sheets of paper during the cutting process, and following Matisse's instructions on how to configure the shapes. The cut-out forms were then assembled onto board – as they were for *The Eskimo* – or, for larger compositions, on the wall of his studio. The cut paper was fixed using pins and nails, which allowed Matisse to adjust the spacing and orientation of the individual shapes. The pin holes remain visible in the final, mounted works. Once the composition had been decided, it was traced and the separate entities were then fixed to a portable support. For the early cut-outs, Matisse used the technique of 'spot-gluing', which involved gluing the shapes at specific points so that the works' fluttering, animate nature was maintained. Yet Matisse's concern for the preservation of these works led him to collaborate with the well-respected art-supply firm Lucien Lefebvre-Foinet, who helped him develop a mounting technique specifically designed for the cut-outs.

Just like the objects he depicted in his paintings, the relationship and interaction between cut shapes and the juxtaposition of positive and negative space were focal to the overall effect of the cut-out (see Cat. 45). *The Eskimo*

demonstrates this effectively, where the mask-like face is positioned on a purple rectangle, which in turn is suspended on a larger blue sheet, then set into a yellow background. Here, Matisse clearly defines the object and the space that surrounds it. However, in the black-and-green panel he uses a dark background and a luminous interior shape. In contrast to the neighbouring yellow, the eye struggles to define whether it is the green or the black that makes up the 'empty' space. This ambiguity and symbiosis were part of the appeal of the cut-out for Matisse, where 'the contour of a shape and its internal area were formed simultaneously'.

Cat. 13 On the occasion of Matisse's 60th birthday in December 1929, his wife Amélie gave him a lacquered wood Chinese calligraphy panel. Matisse was intrigued by the principles of Chinese design. Describing a visit to the British Museum, London, in 1919, he explains how 'the Chinese a thousand years ago had already seen our problems and had resolved them more or less in the same way we have today.' In the same year, this interest manifested itself in the Asian-inspired costume and stage set he designed for Stravinsky's *Le chant du rossignol*, and soon after, in Nice, he started collecting Chinese objects. What Matisse found most exhilarating about Chinese art was the energetic relationship between figure and ground, which is strongly reflected in his later works. Like the panel, Matisse's cut-outs give as much prominence to negative space as to the shape suspended in it; by affixing his larger cut-out compositions to the walls of his studio, Matisse gave presence to the absence between the forms.

The four large carved Chinese characters of the calligraphy panel appealed to Matisse on both an aesthetic and symbolic level. The literal meaning of the characters varies according to how they are pronounced, and can be interpreted either as 'a river to the south, seen through transparent curtains' or as 'pure and virtuous like the southern river'. The connection between form and meaning was of great interest to Matisse, who at the time was experimenting with simplistic brush-and-ink drawings, where bold lines of black ink embodied complex meaning. In a 1951 interview, almost at the end of his career, Matisse describes the cut-outs

Cat. 13
Calligraphy panel, China,
19th century,
Qing dynasty
Lacquered wood with
gilding, 65.5 × 193 × 4 cm

Musée Matisse, Nice. Former collection of Henri Matisse. Bequest of Madame Henri Matisse, 1960, 63.2.134
Photo © François Fernandez, Nice





The Eskimo, 1947
Gouache on paper, cut and
pasted, 40.5 x 86 cm

Designmuseum Danmark,
Danish Design Archive
Photo © Designmuseum Danmark, Photo
Pernille Klemp
© Succession H. Matisse/DACS 2017



Fig. 3
Lydia Delectorskaya
 (1910–98)
 Chinese panel
 surrounded by cut-out
 elements from *Blue Nude*
 with *Green Stockings*,
Women and Monkeys
 and *The Parakeet and the*
Mermaid, Hôtel Régina,
 Nice, 1952

Archives Henri Matisse
 Photo © Archives H. Matisse
 © Succession H. Matisse/DACS 2017

as a summation of his life-long struggle to represent meaning in the least complicated way possible: 'There is no break between my old pictures and my cut-outs, except that with greater completeness and abstraction, I have attained a form filtered to its essentials; and of the object that I used to present in the complexity of its space, I have kept the sign that suffices ...' As the Chinese panel had done, Matisse had finally found a way of expressing himself through a pure visual language, one imbued with great depth, but conceived in the simplest possible way.

The cut-out's preliminary 'state', before being removed from the wall and transformed into an autonomous object, was to be fixed to the interior of the studio, having more in common with an installation or a mural than with an easel painting. The studio, which had always been so central to the content of Matisse's work, now

not only featured, but became integral to the final composition. A rich archive of documents and photographs provide evidence of Matisse's immersive working practice during these years. Fig. 3 shows the Chinese calligraphy panel hanging defiantly above glass vitrines displaying a number of the objects from his collection (including the Kuba mask, mentioned earlier). The calligraphy panel is embedded within a colourful cut-out composition, with blue and purple leaves designed to be extensions of the panel itself. Here, the simplicity of the characters appears not only to have been used as inspiration for the cut-outs, but like the studio wall, the object has itself been incorporated into the design of Matisse's work.

Look at the Chinese panel on the wall of Matisse's studio. How are Matisse's cut-outs on the wall and in *The Eskimo* similar to the Chinese characters?

How does Matisse use colour to experiment with positive and negative space?

Conclusion

The studio is an artist's most constant and intimate companion. It is witness to their creativity and production, experimentation and struggle, success and defeat. For centuries, studios have watched artists develop from student to master. Yet for Matisse, the studio did not just observe, it became an active participant, inspiring his work, taking a role in it, and eventually becoming part of the work itself.

When Matisse died in November 1954, he was buried in a cemetery in Cimiez, an area of Nice. During the course of his life, he worked in many studios. Though the locations varied, the importance of his working environment remained constant. He spent his final years in Nice making designs for the Chapel of the Rosary of the Dominican Nuns at Vence, described by Matisse as 'the ultimate goal of a whole life of work'. Akin to the studios of his final years, the chapel was created as a habitable work of art, in which congregations and visitors could immerse themselves in Matisse's world of line and colour. The theatricality that persisted throughout Matisse's career had reached its pinnacle: the viewer had become the object of the artwork, taking part in a dynamic installation in which relationships were ever-changing as bodies moved about within the space.

His formative years as an artist were spent copying the works of masters in the formal setting of the Louvre in Paris, which taught him technique but left him unchallenged. For Matisse, the environment and the object inspired emotion and fantasy. Through innate curiosity, extensive travel and exchanges with his contemporaries, Matisse acquired a diverse collection of personal treasures that formed a strong dialogue with his work. Often returning to objects more than once, these humble and inanimate companions ignited in Matisse feelings that became central to his working practice, and helped to distinguish him as one of the most innovative artistic figures of the twentieth century.

'It was interesting to see that he lived the way he painted – when you entered the house, you were in his universe.'

Françoise Gilot, on seeing Villa le Rêve, Vence, 1946

'One starts off with an object. Sensation follows.'

Henri Matisse, *Interview with André Verdet*, 1952

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Fig. 1 detail
Hélène Adant
Villa Le Rêve, Vence,
1946





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