

Matisse the Master: A Life of Henri Matisse: The Conquest of Colour: 1909-1954

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"If my story were ever to be written down truthfully from start to finish, it would amaze everyone," wrote Henri Matisse. It is hard to believe today that Matisse, whose exhibitions draw huge crowds worldwide, was once almost universally reviled and ridiculed. His response was neither to protest nor to retreat; he simply pushed on from one innovation to the next, and left the world to draw its own conclusions. Unfortunately, these were generally false and often damaging. Throughout his life and afterward people fantasized about his models and circulated baseless fabrications about his private life.

Fifty years after his death, *Matisse the Master* (the second half of the biography that began with the acclaimed *The Unknown Matisse*) shows us the painter as he saw himself. With unprecedented and unrestricted access to his voluminous family correspondence, and other new material in private archives, Hilary Spurling documents a lifetime of desperation and self-doubt exacerbated by Matisse's attempts to counteract the violence and disruption of the twentieth century in paintings that now seem effortlessly serene, radiant, and stable.

Here for the first time is the truth about Matisse's models, especially two Russians: his pupil Olga Meerson and the extraordinary Lydia Delectorskaya, who became his studio manager, secretary, and companion in the last two decades of his life.

But every woman who played an important part in Matisse's life was remarkable in her own right, not least his beloved daughter Marguerite, whose honesty and courage surmounted all ordeals, including interrogation and torture by the Gestapo in the Second World War.

If you have ever wondered how anyone with such a tame public image as Matisse could have painted such rich, powerful, mysteriously moving pictures, let alone produced the radical cut-paper and stained-glass inventions of his last years, here is the answer. They were made by the real Matisse, whose true story has been written down at last from start to finish by his first biographer, Hilary Spurling.

Hilary Spurling was born in England and educated at Oxford University. She has been theater critic and literary editor of *The Spectator* and a book reviewer for *The Daily Telegraph*, and has written biographies of Ivy Compton-Burnett and Paul Scott. The first volume of her biography of Henri Matisse, *The Unknown Matisse*, was an Editors' Choice book of *The New York Times*. Since its publication, Ms. Spurling has written and lectured extensively on Matisse and originated an exhibition about the importance of textiles in the artist's life and work that opened at the Royal Academy in London in the spring of 2005 and at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in the summer of 2005. 1909: Paris, Cassis and Cavaliere

Returning from Berlin to Paris in January 1909, Henri Matisse got off the train partway to visit one of his few German supporters. He had just said good-bye to his majestic *Harmony in Red*, leaving it behind in a gallery in Berlin, where people said his latest paintings were senseless, shameless, infantile monstrosities or sick and dangerous messages from a madhouse. The French felt much the same. *Harmony*-the goal Matisse desired more passionately than any other-was the last thing his art conveyed to his contemporaries.

His host at Hagen, a few miles along the Ruhr from Essen, was the collector Karl Ernst Osthaus, who had already bought five works from Matisse and was about to commission a

sixth. Osthaus insisted on showing off his latest acquisition, a mosaic design installed in a modern crematorium newly built on an industrial waste site. When they entered the building on a cold, grey, rainy Sunday afternoon they found an organ playing softly in the gloom and a coffin sinking into the ground in front of them. Tired, depressed and deeply shaken by what had happened in Berlin, Matisse lost his usual composure and let out a scream: "My God, a dead body!"

Osthaus explained that the body was a fake, part of a public relations exercise put on to counter the local workers' instinctive mistrust of cremation. But Matisse could not forget it, and often marvelled afterwards at the strange way Germans chose to amuse them on a Sunday afternoon. He had a second shock when he got home and received a parcel from Germany containing what looked like a gigantic funeral wreath. In fact, it was a wreath of bays posted by a young American admirer, Thomas Whittemore of Tufts College, to console Matisse for the failure of his Berlin show. Trying to lighten her husband's nervous tension, Mme Matisse tasted a bay leaf ("Think how good it will be in soup"), and said brightly that the wreath's red bow would make a hair ribbon for their fourteen-year-old daughter, Marguerite. "But I'm not dead yet," Matisse said grimly.

The work Matisse stopped off to see in Hagen was his own *Nymph and Satyr*. It was a relatively conventional set of three ceramic panels showing a stocky muscular nymph doing a stamping dance, then falling asleep and being tentatively approached by a hairy, hopeful satyr enclosed in a frieze of grapes and vine leaves. In January 1909, Matisse had recently completed an oil painting of the same subject (colour fig. 1). This time the satyr (who had been more of a tame faun on Osthaus's glazed tiles) started out with a little beard and pointy ears, but turned into something far more violent and raw. Matisse's final version is unequivocally human: a clumsy, graceless, lustful male advancing purposefully on a naked female huddled with her back turned at his feet. The man's pink, thinly painted flesh is outlined in red, the colour of arousal. So is the woman's, but every line of her expressive body-bent head, drooping breasts, collapsing limbs-suggests exhaustion, helpless weakness and enforced surrender.

This is the mood of Paul Cézanne's *The Abduction (or The Rape)*, where another masterful naked man carries off another pale, limp, fleshy female. The fierce erotic charge in both paintings is reinforced by harsh colour and rough handling. In Matisse's case, the texture of the paint was itself an outrage. The choppy stabbing brushstrokes, the landscape's crude contours filled with flat scrubby green, the blurry patches round the man's head, crotch, left hand and right knee, all convey extreme disturbance. His picture, like Cézanne's, is both personal and symbolic. Both suggest an image spurting up from some deep, probably unconscious level of the imagination on a tide of bitterness and rage. Matisse's satyr looks as if he means to strangle his victim with his outsize red hands. Matisse himself said that this was how he always felt before he began a painting.

For him each painting was a rape. "Whose rape?" he asked, startling his questioner (perhaps also himself) with the brutal image that surfaced in his mind during an interview that took place more than three decades after he painted *Nymph and Satyr*: "A rape of myself, of a certain tenderness or weakening in face of a sympathetic object." He seems to

have meant that he relied on his female models to arouse feelings that he could convert to fuel the work in hand. He confronted whatever underlay that process head on in *Nymph and Satyr*. The displaced emotion here is at least in part aesthetic. The last time Matisse put classical nymphs into a picture was in 1904 in *Luxe, calme ET volupté*, an uneasy experimental composition that led directly to the explosive canvases dismissed by most people the year after as the work of a wild beast, or Fauve. In the winter of 1908-9, Matisse was once again grappling with, and violating, the ancient canons of a debased classical tradition in a canvas that commits pictorial and depicts sexual rape.

This coarse, powerful, primitive painting was earmarked for the Russian collector Sergei Ivanovich Shchukin, a man in process of committing himself as unreservedly as Matisse to liberating painting from the academic tyranny of Beaux-Arts aesthetics. Shchukin was an inordinately successful textile manufacturer with a patchy education and no academic training. People dismissed him, in both Paris and Moscow, as gullible and uncouth, an ignorant boyar who made no attempt to cultivate the refinement that enabled other Moscow merchants to build up more serious art collections. It was Shchukin who had commissioned the *Harmony in Red* currently hanging in Paul Cassirer's gallery in Berlin. Shchukin came to see it there and, unlike the German art world, was powerfully impressed. On 9 January he followed Matisse to Paris to inspect work in hand in the studio, including the *Nymph and Satyr*.

Shchukin took delivery of six Matisse paintings in the month after he got back to Moscow. The painter said that in some ways he came to dread the visits of this particular collector because of his unerring knack for picking out the latest breakthrough canvas and carrying it off, sometimes with the paint still wet. Shchukin grasped at once that *Nymph and Satyr* was an affront to decency and morals, which only increased his impatience to possess it. This new canvas could not easily be displayed in mixed company, let alone in public. It was quite different from the sexy pictures other men kept behind locked doors in their private rooms and cabinets. Its secret kick for a subversive like Shchukin was precisely that it violated every sacred Beaux-Arts precept enshrined in the flawless public nudes that filled the Paris salons.

The contemporary French incarnation of those precepts in the eyes of fashionable Moscow was Maurice Denis. Shchukin himself owned several pictures by Denis, who had once embodied the last word in sophistication for him, too. In January 1909, Denis was making waves in Moscow. He had come to install his latest work in the home of another Moscow merchant, Ivan Abramovich Morozov (who had also made a fortune out of textiles). Morozov, who was Shchukin's close friend and only Russian rival in the field of modern art, had ordered seven huge painted panels telling the story of Cupid and Psyche for his music room.

Denis pictured Cupid as a plump, life-size, naked youth wearing wings to match his predominant colour scheme of pink, green and blue. His Psyche is a solid girl with cushiony breasts, buttocks and hips. The couple's sturdy build adds to the absurdity of their chaste embrace as they dangle cheek to cheek in midair with nothing touching below the waist. The décor of Cupid's palace with its garden ornaments, mauve silk drapes and floral

sprays is more reminiscent of an expensive modern florist than of ancient Greece. This is seduction with any hint of desire or danger airbrushed out. It went down well on its first showing at the Paris Autumn Salon, and it made an even bigger splash in Moscow. So much so that Morozov, who was thinking of hiring Matisse to decorate his dining room, dropped the idea in favour of commissioning six more panels from Denis.

It was Shchukin instead who commissioned wall paintings from Matisse. The painter never forgot the lunch at the Restaurant Larue in Paris where the pair of them together hatched a plan to end all blue-pink-and-green decorative schemes peopled with dancing nymphs and piping fauns. Matisse's Dance and Music grew from their conversation at this lunch. "I hope that when they see your decorations, the tumult of admiring cries to be heard at present will die down a little," Shchukin wrote in May, describing the fuss over Denis's Psyche. "At present they talk of it as a great masterpiece. They laugh at me a little, but I always say, 'He who laughs last, laughs best.' I trust you always."

Nymph and Satyr, one of the starting points for the new scheme, was finished, crated up and posted off to Moscow in early February. By this time, Matisse had left Paris for the Mediterranean coast. He planned to spend a month at the little Hotel Cendrillon in Cassis, replenishing the stocks of energy depleted by the gloom and strain of a Parisian winter. Walking along the steeply shelving shore at Cassis and in the chestnut woods on the cliff top, he studied air, water, light, sun glinting on spray, waves pounding on rocks as he had done further along the coast at Collioure four years earlier. "There is . . . a cove near Cassis," wrote Marcel Sembat, who spent a day with Matisse in early March, "where the green of the open sea on the horizon brings out the deep blues and foamy whites of the tide trapped between cliffs, which you can see jostling and throwing up little blade-like crests in the full sun."

Movement preoccupied the painter i...

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Learning to Draw / A History, Learning to Draw / A History is an evolving and transformative narrative sketch, alternately prose and poetry, that serves to document a personal and yet collective history with a roving artist's eye. Previously serialised in a number of small journals and zines, the work has met with some acclaim and this is the first complete version in a new architectural alignment. Although from post-war Britain, Basil King's literary lineage harkens back to the projective verse style of Pound and Williams, sweetened through his working associations with the likes of Blackburn, Ginsberg and Baraka. The weaving of subjects in this work is not unlike the purposeful mixing of colours on an artist's palette.

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