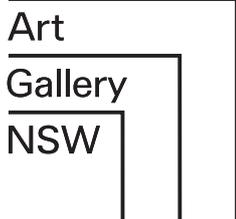


Exhibition themes

Matisse Life & Spirit

Masterpieces from the
Centre Pompidou, Paris

20 November 2021 –
13 March 2022



© Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2021
Reproduction in part or in whole is prohibited
without written authorisation

Introduction

Born and raised in the cold grey north of France, Henri Matisse (1869–1954) was once described as someone who ‘discovered a more remote and far more marvellous country. He discovered Joy.’ After receiving a box of coloured paints from his mother during a long illness, his world changed:

The moment I had this box of colours in my hands, I had the feeling that my life was there. Like an animal that rushes to what it loves, I plunged straight in ... Before, nothing interested me; afterwards, I had nothing on my mind but painting.

But Matisse’s search for ‘lightness and joyousness’ was a paradoxically anxious one, characterised by constant self-questioning, tireless work, and many moments of rupture and regeneration. *Matisse: Life & Spirit* follows that journey across nine chapters and six decades, from his blazing early adventures in colour, through his travels and personal trials, to the spiritual and sensuous achievement of his late cut-outs.

More than 100 works have come to Sydney from the collection of the Musée national d’art moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris and select private and public collections. Through these works we find Matisse renewing his vision time and again, continually seeking new ways to celebrate life as he saw it and express the spirit he felt within it.

Towards fauvism (1895–1909)

‘Slowly I discovered the secret of my art. It consists of a meditation on nature, on the expression of a dream which is always inspired by reality.’

At the age of 22, Matisse moved to Paris and began his long apprenticeship as a modern painter. Rejecting his initial academic training as too rigid, in 1892 he joined the studio of symbolist painter Gustave Moreau and there found the freedom he needed. Within a decade, Matisse was producing the bold, brilliantly coloured and spontaneously brushed paintings that would make him famous.

Travels were important. From Belle-Ile off the coast of Brittany, to the south of France, then later Algeria, Italy and beyond, Matisse was invigorated by new places and actively sought them when at a crisis in his work.

He went to southern France for the first time in 1904 to visit the artist Paul Signac, but soon saw the limits of Signac’s strict ‘divisionist’ method, with its carefully ordered dabs of colour. In the summer of 1905, at Collioure near the Spanish border, Matisse and friends André Derain, Albert Marquet and Henri Manguin produced paintings that would shake the art world, their ‘orgy of pure colours’ earning these artists the name *fauves* (wild beasts).

By 1907, influenced by the simplified forms of the African sculpture he was discovering, Matisse began a series of large decorative compositions. Revisiting themes and conventions of European painting in startlingly modern ways, he sought to reach what he called a ‘state of condensation of sensations which makes a painting’.

The radical years (1914–18)

‘A work of art must carry within itself its complete significance and impose that upon the beholder even before he recognises the subject matter.’

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 shattered the calm in which Matisse’s art had developed. Artist friends were mobilised. Dealers and collectors were dispersed or in exile. Matisse’s sons Jean and Pierre were enlisted. Matisse himself tried several times to enlist but, at the age of 45, was not mobilised.

Amid this discord, Matisse created some of his most radical paintings – works of challenging beauty that reveal an artist testing himself and testing the conventions of painting. Complicating Matisse’s reputation as an exponent of intense light and wild colour, these paintings are sombre, sonorous, tirelessly worked and reworked, and deeply meditative in spirit.

Across the course of the war, Matisse devoted special attention to the subject of his own studio – a space of provisional calm and fragile wholeness in a war-torn world. His major portraits of the period, with their mask-like faces, similarly convey a sense of anxious stillness and waiting.

A parallel search (1909–30)

‘Sculpture does not say what painting says. Painting does not say what music says. They are parallel ways, but you can’t confuse them.’

It has been said that if Matisse was survived by only his sculptures he would still have to be regarded as a major artist. The four monumental reliefs titled the *Backs* are essential works of modern sculpture. They reveal, as do the portrait heads in this space, his way of working serially – exploring a problem in new ways across time.

Matisse’s *Backs* can be thought of as one sculpture that passed through successive stages. Beginning each successive *Back* with a plaster cast of the previous version, Matisse worked in plaster – sometimes adding on, sometimes carving in – to simplify, abstract and monumentalise.

Matisse made sculpture as a way to ‘order [his] thoughts’ in a different medium. But he also remarked that he conducted this ‘parallel search’ from the perspective of a painter. When Matisse began to create his cut-outs in the 1940s, he said the process of cutting forms from painted paper was like ‘the direct carving of sculptors’.

Figures and interiors (1918–29)

‘Do you remember the way the light came through the shutters? It came from below like footlights. Everything was fake, absurd, terrific, delicious.’

By 1918, Matisse had moved permanently to Nice and in 1921 found a new studio, a kind of ‘rococo salon’ that he adorned with richly patterned carpets, screens, hangings and other props from Algeria, Morocco, and Parisian dealers. Here the austere innovations of the 1910s would give way to a theatre of female figures in interiors.

The image of the odalisque – a sensual, exotic woman, or concubine – had been circulating in French painting for at least a century. Matisse, in his revisiting of the theme, foregrounds the artificiality of this fiction. His models are surrounded and sometimes overwhelmed by a profusion of pattern. Henriette Darricarrère, his favourite of these models, is seen also in his sculptures on display.

Matisse’s Nice period was seen by some as a postwar retreat. But *Decorative figure on an ornamental background* reveals the eruptive energy that Matisse also located in his interior theatre. Here the ‘live’ model has been made to resemble a sculpture, while inanimate objects and patterns have come to life.

Expansion and experiment (1930–37)

‘I continually react until my work comes into harmony with me. Like someone who writes a sentence and, rewriting it, makes new discoveries ...’

Though Matisse’s art conveys lightness and joy, he was a fiercely self-critical artist whose working life was punctuated by periods of intense doubt and creative anxiety. One such moment came in the late 1920s, when Matisse, nearing 60, felt himself to be at risk of resting on his fame and honours. In 1929 he wrote to his daughter Marguerite, ‘I settled down several times to paint, but in front of the canvas I was out of ideas.’

The works in this section reveal how Matisse worked his way through those doubts to a new expansiveness and openness. His mural on the theme of the dance for the Barnes Foundation in Pennsylvania, United States, introduced architectural scale and a monumental, almost abstract serenity. Also crucial in this period was Matisse’s renewed engagement with line – that ‘life-giver’ – in drawings and prints that abbreviate bodies into dynamic signs and energise the pages they inhabit.

From Nice to Vence (1938–48)

‘Each age has its own beauty – in any case I still work with interest and pleasure. It’s the only thing I have left.’

The late 1930s and early 1940s were years of personal turbulence and wider upheaval. In 1939 world war erupted. Matisse separated from his wife Amélie. In January 1941, Matisse was sent to a hospital in Nice for emergency treatment and then transferred to Lyon where he underwent surgery for duodenal cancer. Towards the war’s conclusion, Amélie and his daughter Marguerite were jailed and tortured for their activities in the French Resistance.

The works in this section tell a related story of recovery, resourcefulness and renewal. Working from a bed or wheelchair in the wake of his operation, Matisse unfurled the many drawings that became *Themes and variations* and later painted his radiant Vence interiors. This was also the period when Matisse created the first of the experimental cut-outs that appear in the rooms ‘Tahiti, journeys and memories’ and ‘The cut-outs’.

Having come close to death, Matisse attained new clarity and urgency of purpose. His works of the 1940s demonstrate (in scholar John Klein’s words) the flow of his imagination in defiance of physical debility.

Chapel of the Rosary, Vence (1948–51)

‘I believe my role is to provide calm. Because I myself have need of peace.’

From 1948 onwards, Matisse created the masterpiece of his late years: the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, the hill town in the French Riviera where he had found shelter during World War II.

The chapel was conceived for the Dominican nuns, a Catholic religious order, and was shaped by Matisse’s desire to create a *‘grande composition’*. He designed the building (with the aid of Brother Rayssiguier, the monk in charge, and architect Auguste Perret) as well as its furniture, decoration, windows, murals, vestments and liturgical objects.

Matisse wanted visitors to the chapel to ‘experience a lightening of the spirit. So that, even without being believers, they find themselves in an environment where the spirit is elevated, where thought is clarified, where feeling itself is lightened.’ Speaking with an interviewer about the chapel, Matisse remarked, ‘All art worthy of the name is religious.’

The project was part of a wider postwar attempt to modernise sacred art in France. It is also a pivotal work in the modern history of artist-designed chapels, which includes Stanley Spencer’s Sandham Memorial Chapel (1926) in Burghclere, England and the Rothko Chapel (1971) in Houston, United States.

The chapel project had its roots in personal encounters during World War II. One of Matisse's former carers and models, Monique Bourgeois, had taken orders and, as Sister Jacques-Marie, informed him of the nuns' wish to build a new chapel in Vence.

In 1948, the project commenced. The simple white building, perched on a hillside, was to be pierced by stained-glass windows. Matisse created three sets of cut-out studies, of which those in this room came second. The complexity of these second studies, with their lagoon leaf forms, made them difficult to realise. The third and final version features a tree of life, inspired in part by Islamic art.

Matisse spoke of the importance of illumination and clear sight within the chapel services. 'This lightness arouses feelings of release, of obstacles cleared, so that my chapel is not "Brothers, we must die." It is rather, "Brothers, we must live!"'

Executed in three colours – yellow, blue and green – the final windows for the Chapel of the Rosary bathe the sacred space in coloured light. Two large compositions on white ceramic tiles portray Saint Dominic, the order's founder, and the Virgin and child. A third ceramic mural, at the rear of the chapel, presents the 14 stations of the cross as a single composition – a work whose urgent lines Matisse knew would disconcert some visitors.

In 1952, with his work on the chapel at an end, Matisse too found a sense of completion: 'It gave me the opportunity to express myself in a totality of form and colour.' Made by an artist at the end of his life and the height of his creative powers, the Chapel of the Rosary is, as he put it himself, 'the culmination of a lifetime of work, and the coming into flower of an enormous, sincere and difficult effort.'

Once the chapel's design was finished, Matisse created liturgical objects and vestments – including the butterfly-like chasubles – in the six traditional Catholic colours used for specific seasons and services. The cut-paper maquettes displayed here are for the black chasubles worn during Catholic funeral masses and Good Friday masses. The chasubles that were realised in fabric are still in use today.

Matisse considered the chasubles, along with the nun's black habits, to be a living and moving part of the overall composition. His conception of the chapel as a total work of art was informed by his experience designing sets and costumes for ballet productions.

Tahiti, journeys and memories (1930–46)

‘I have often travelled in my imagination, and since the main goal of my work is clarity of light, I asked myself, “What must it be like on the other side of the hemisphere?”’

Of the many journeys that inspired Matisse, none had a larger effect than his 1930 trip to Tahiti – and none took longer to come to full fruition in his art.

Departing for Tahiti in search of renewal at the age of 60, Matisse carried with him assumptions about Polynesia as an earthly paradise that was available for European picturing. Yet after arriving in Papeete and finding ‘everything marvellous’, Matisse also wrote that ‘the country doesn’t speak to me, pictorially’. The pivotal experience was a journey to Fakarava, an atoll in the Tuamotu Islands, where he marvelled at the interplay of sea and sky in the seemingly boundless lagoon.

A few paintings and works on paper emerged from this experience in the 1930s. But it was in the 1940s, as he developed his cut-out technique, that Matisse returned in earnest to his Tahitian memories. Of special note in these works is the influence of Tahitian *tifaifai*, appliqué quilts created by women for domestic settings and ritual occasions.

The cut-outs (1930–1954)

‘By creating these cut-out and coloured papers, it seems to me that I go happily ahead of what is to come ... But I know that only later will people realise just how much what I do today is in harmony with the future.’

Matisse first used cut and pinned paper shapes in the early 1930s, to test colours and compositions for his mural *The dance* 1932–33, and in 1933, when creating studies for the stage curtain for the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo (see *Two dancers*).

Matisse returned to the technique and reimagined its potential in 1943, not long after the operation for cancer that in 1941 almost cost him his life. Working from a bed or wheelchair due to his fragile condition, Matisse began guiding long tailor’s shears through sheets of paper prepared with brilliant gouache. The result was the artist’s book *Jazz*.

Matisse thus embarked, with the help of his assistants, on an extraordinary ‘second life’, using the cut-out medium to distil the observations of a lifetime and convey a lightness that defied his physical condition. Matisse said that creating these shapes gave him the sensation of flying.