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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

Light and Composition in Matisse's Nice Paintings, 1918 - 30

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INTRODUCTION

Matisse's Nice paintings, 1918 - 30 mark a considerable change in his style. He referred to this time as a 'tranquil period of transition', (5, p. 240) after a decade of experimentation and discovery which started with Fauvism and continued with the adoption of the decorative arabesque, inspired by the Oriental aesthetic. During the Nice period he brought together all that he had learned to date about art. He also felt the need to return to the source of his inspiration through the study of nature before his art ran the risk of becoming mannered or austere. Matisse's aim was always to paint light. 'A picture must possess a veritable power for generating light' (11, p. 31). During different periods in his career Matisse alternated between representing naturalistic light and a more subjective light. His Nice paintings mark a change from a more wilful choice of colours that had saturated earlier room interiors, for example Harmony in red, 1910. Although Matisse's choice of colours in the Nice pictures still rely on his intuition, their combination and subtlety of tones evoke the beautiful silver light of the Mediterranean. Constant sunlight enabled Matisse to maintain equilibrium in his pictorial compositions. The superficial depiction of transient weather conditions would detract from the sense of stability that Matisse wished to create.

The quality of the light in Nice was suitable for Matisse's studies in light and space. Its intensity softened tonal contrasts in the atmosphere. The light of Nice reminded him of Tangiers, Morocco which he had visited in 1912. Pierre Schneider referred to this light as having contradictory qualities because its brightness defined forms clearly without making their outlines appear sharp (11, p. 33). Schneider included a quote from Pierre Loti's book *Au Maroc* (1):

"Although one distinguishes with extreme sharpness the slightest details of every object, the least crack in every wall, they are separated from us by a kind of luminous mist, which lends a vagueness to their bases renders them almost vaporous. They look as if they were suspended in the air" (11, p. 58)

It was in his neo-impressionist period that Matisse's skill as a colourist became evident, however the breaking up of coloured areas and forms according to Divisionist theories was merely 'a mechanical means of corresponding only to a physical emotion', according to Matisse,

"I didn't stay on this course but started painting in planes, seeking the quality of the picture by an accord of all the flat colours. I tried to replace the "vibrato" by a more expressive and more direct accord, an accord whose simplicity and honesty would have given me quieter surfaces". (4, p. 58).

This "vibrato" effect that Matisse referred to was the juxtaposition of spots of pure colours with their complementary colours to create the illusion of shimmering light.

Matisse was wary of being distracted by the picturesqueness of a foreign exotic environment. He travelled to experience the quality of foreign light and how it differed from European light. He could then return with new ideas on how to create light and space in his paintings.

"In art what is most important is the relationship between things. The attempt to possess the light and space in which I live gave me the desire to see myself with a different light and space which would allow me to grasp more profoundly the space and light in which I do live - if only to become more aware of them (4, p. 60).

In my third year in college, I spent three months on a student exchange in Barcelona. My interest was to study the effects of the intense sunlight. Light is something that influences me very much when I paint.

In Nice, Matisse found that he could concentrate on his painting without disturbance; the relaxed cosmopolitan atmosphere appealed to him. Many English visitors had wintered there since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and later the French adopted the habit. In no previous period did Matisse make so evident the importance of his environment in the appearance of his resulting paintings. What is most obvious about them is the illusion of three dimensional space. Matisse did not renounce his earlier investigations into flat decorative abstraction. The illusionary space in these paintings was created by the careful placement of flat areas of colour rather than modelling

forms. This tension between creating the illusion of weight and form using an essentially flat decorative technique recurred throughout Matisse's career. The compositional unity of the Nice paintings always emphasised the two-dimensionality of the canvas surface. Although more attention was given to the local colour of objects and surfaces depicted, they were all illuminated by a common light source. Every detail served the purpose of contributing to the illusion of naturalism but each element had little importance when isolated from its context in the over-all pictorial composition.

This renewed study of nature could include Matisse's own human nature. These paintings contain not only artistic themes that interested him, for example the female figure and Oriental decoration, but autobiographical themes also. The mood of these paintings is private and domestic. We are made aware of his sensitivity to his immediate environment as furniture and elements of the interior decoration of apartments and hotel rooms are always present in the pictures.

Matisse also depicted subject matter from his memories of Tangiers. He painted odalisques because he had seen them in Morocco, his experience of them was real. However, rather than re-living these experiences, he painted their perma-

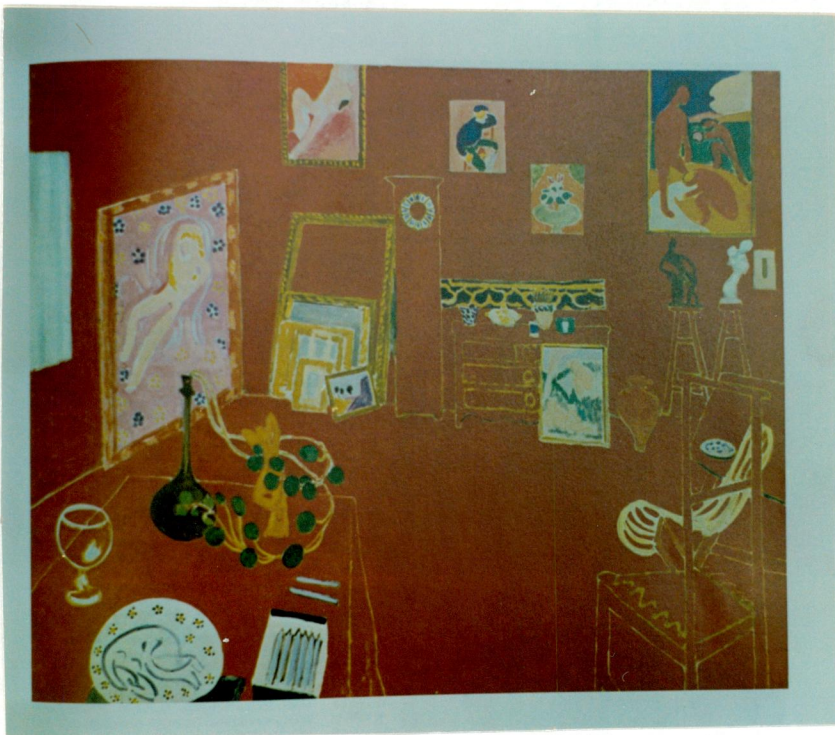
nence that existed in his memory. To do this he drew attention to the decorative way in which they were painted. There is no sense of mystery or foreign exoticism in these pictures as there is in the work of the Orientalists of the nineteenth century. The sensuality of Matisse's paintings has been evoked by the richness of the painted surface. Through the absorption of flat, Oriental decoration into his technique Matisse reinforced the reality of these images from his memories and day dreams. The fact that the scenes in his paintings have been staged is never concealed from us. 'Everything is fake, absurd, delicious' (9, p. 24). The presence of these oriental stage props and costumes support the drama of the highly detailed, richly coloured surfaces. It is important that these paintings are seen as a whole, in a series. The drama is reinforced when they are seen in numbers. We become convinced of their importance to the artist.

Matisse's main problem was the integration of the female figure into his essentially flat decorative paintings. He would often parallel themes of his paintings in studies in sculpture and drawing. It was sometimes through these media that he could solve the problems of using colour to describe form. Matisse would create fresh images through the immediacy of drawing, that he sometimes lost in his paintings.

The Nice period reveals a new tension between Matisse's desire to paint the things he loved and his need to represent them in a decorative, abstracted manner that would not conceal the essentially two-dimensional nature of painting on a flat canvas. It was the light of Nice that facilitated his representation of flat coloured shapes and his withdrawal to this relaxed environment that enabled him to develop further ideas about [↩]through form the representation of nature. The permanent Nice light enabled him to create images that seemed independent of time so that he could concentrate on the relationship between light and forms in space.

Footnotes

1. Loti, 1889, p. 18



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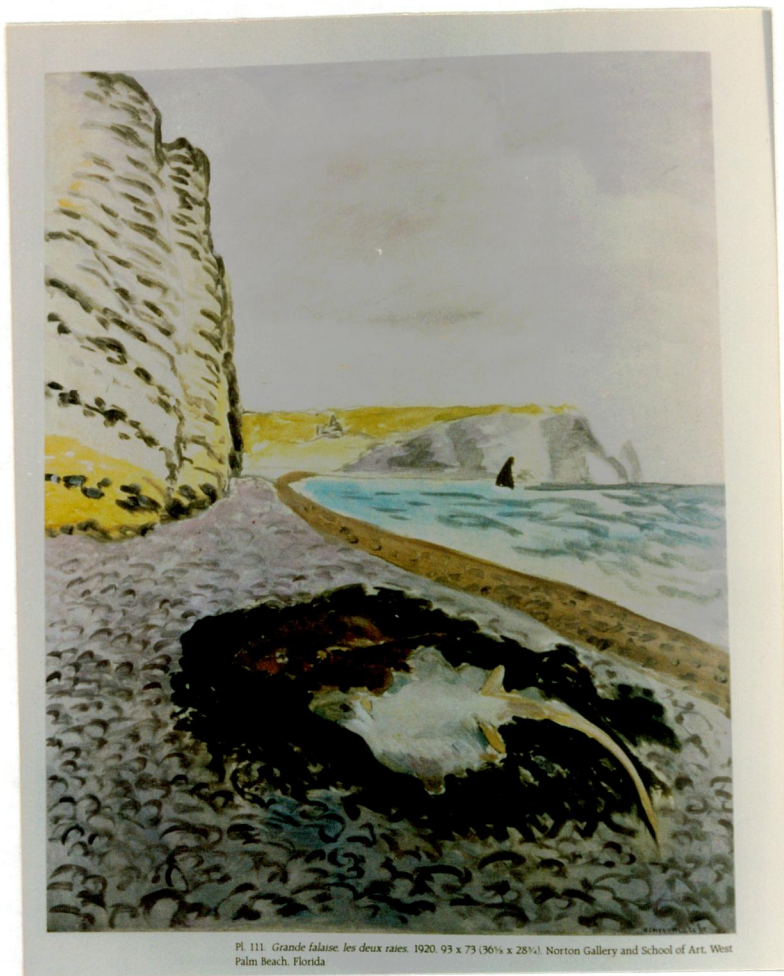
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CHAPTER ONE

Between 1917 and 1921 Matisse spent his winters in Hotel Beau Rivage (1917-18) and the Hotel Mediterranean et de la cote d'Azure (1918-21). These hotels were situated on the coastline facing the Mediterranean. Although the rooms were not luxurious and were small, they were filled with the full intensity of Southern sunlight during the day. This objective light of Nice is immediately apparent in Matisse's paintings. Because the hotel rooms were small, he concentrated on depicting models by windows and on balconies which drew attention to the presence of the exterior sunlight illuminating the room. Room interiors done earlier, since 1910 for example, The Red Studio, 1911 or Interior with Eggplants, 1911 are saturated by a more wilful choice of colour. These colours possibly represented the interior of the artist's mind. Whether they were red, black or ultramarine blue interiors, their colour covered practically the entire surface of each canvas ground and the colour of objects depicted within these compositions would become a variation of the ground colour. This emphasised the two-dimensionality of the paintings. Paintings of the Nice period mark a renewed attention given to the local colour of objects. This contributed to an apparently realistic three-dimensional space, illuminated by the objective Nice light. Windows in these new paintings no longer

resemble flat wall hangings. Care has been taken to render exterior scenes through windows in proper perspective. It is the light from outside the windows that floods the interiors. Light creamy or white grounds replace earlier grounds of pure colour. Thin glazes of soft colours painted over these bright grounds emphasised the luminosity and spaciousness in these paintings. Matisse reminds us of Cezanne whose aim was to construct geometric figures in space by representing them as flat planes, parallel to the canvas surface. These planes were constant reminders of the picture plane. However, according to Matisse, 'The magic of colour still remained to be found after him' (4, p. 114)

Matisse started to paint on smaller canvases which were portable to enable the rapid completion of paintings without losing the freshness of their colours and clarity of light. Matisse interpreted aspects of Impressionism as a means of keeping in contact with nature 'This intimacy with nature helped me to calm my nerves' (8, p. 146). However, unlike the Impressionists, he wished to depict the permanence of light in his art. For Matisse, interpretation of light was a means of constructing a pictorial equivalent to express his emotional response rather than light being the subject matter of his paintings.



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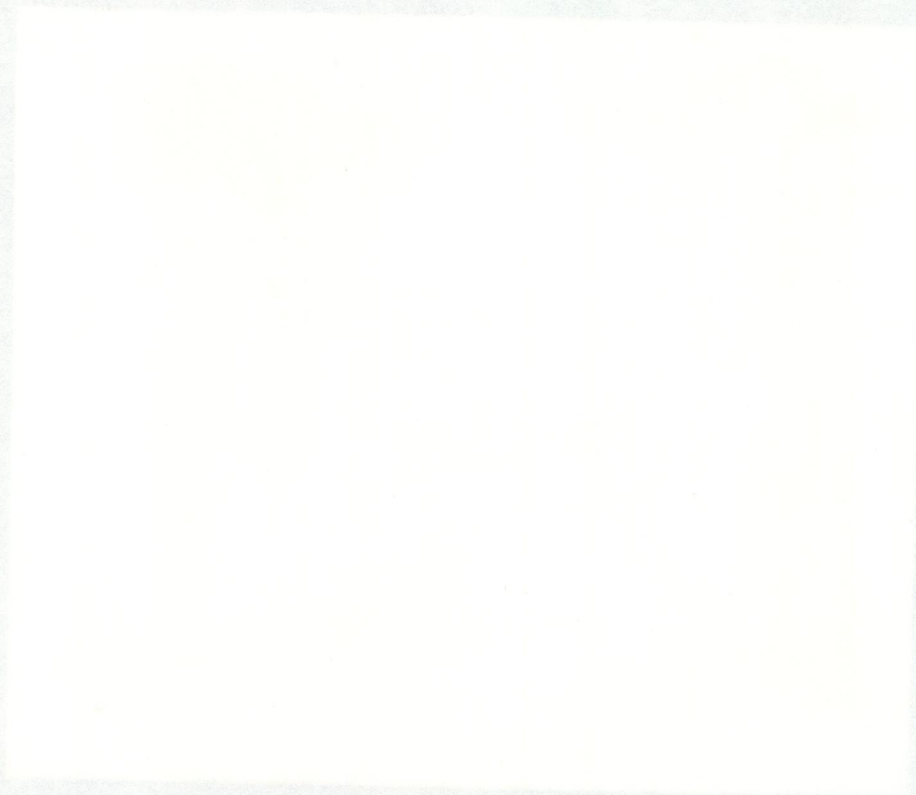
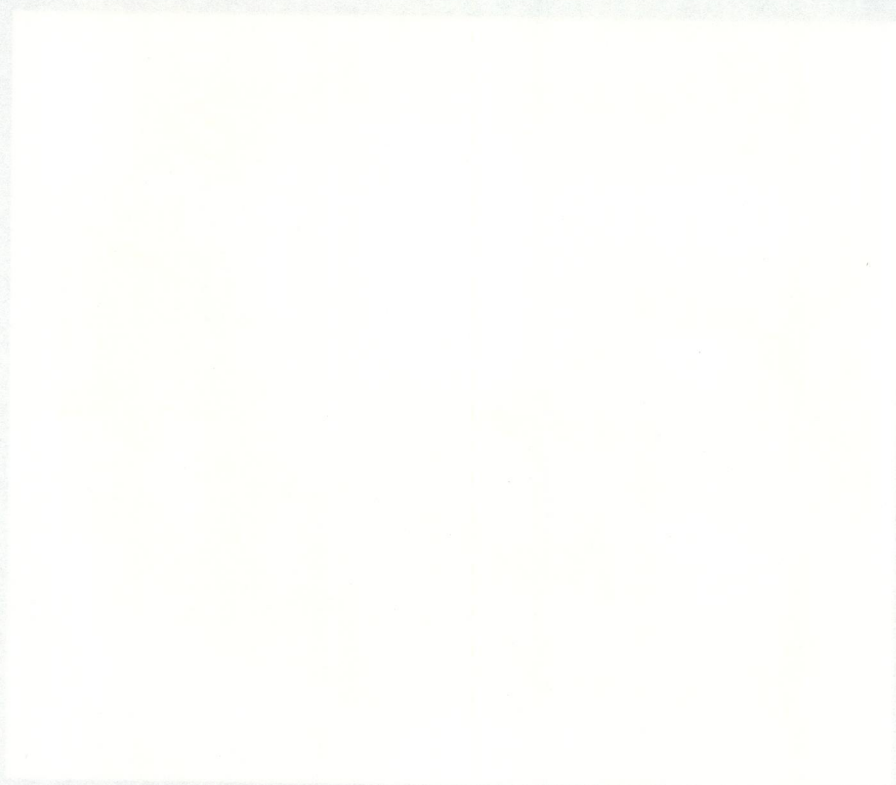
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Matisse was more inclined to study the quality of light in different parts of the world and how one could translate this into painting. The sun's position in the sky and the weather all contribute to one's perception of the environment. When one paints on a two dimensional surface, light is the most important factor. It is light that manifests images and the illusion of space. According to Matisse, the representation of foreign light and space involved modifying his painting technique. 'If I had painted in the North as I did thirty years ago, my painting would have been different. There would have been browns and greys and shadings through perspective' (5, p. 158). Matisse's modification in technique is evident if one compares landscapes done in the North of France, around 1920, with the Nice paintings of the same time. The Two Rays 1920 or The Red Sail 1920 depict landscapes that emanate a different quality of light to those done in Nice. Because there are deeper shadows in the Northern landscape, it's representation involved using shading and drawing to create the illusion of space rather than colour. This drawing is obvious in the Etretat beachscapes. The diagonal brushstroke indicating the shoreline contributes to the illusion of perspective. Cliffs in the distance have been modelled to give them form. Matisse used compositions in the The Flower Festival series of 1921-22. However, the diagonal stripe indicating the shore line and the calligraphic brushstrokes indicating people and palm

trees all have definite colour values, so that they become part of the decorative, two-dimensional surface of the painting. In the Pink Shrimps 1920 (Etretat) the vertically painted table surface and dark outlines of forms replace the representation of forms by using coloured areas.

Personal experience of the Mediterranean light demonstrates that the sun's intensity, probably due to its higher position in the sky, overpowers shadowy areas, leaving soft violet hues in the shade. Further north, shadows are darker, so that there are stronger tonal contrasts in the atmosphere between light and shady areas. It is possible to depict this Mediterranean light using softer colours, for example pale blues and violets in the shade instead of darker French ultramarine blue. Matisse claimed when he visited Tangiers, that the landscape was 'too difficult to render with blue, red, yellow and green' (11, P. 32). Strong tones of these pure colours do not exist in more tropical atmospheric lighting conditions. Graduations from light to shade are usually similar in tonal value because of the sun's intensity.

'A little while ago, I took a nap under an olive tree and the colour harmonies were so touching ... a light so soft and tender despite its brilliance' (5, p. 170) I think that it took Matisse until the Nice period to manifest his under-

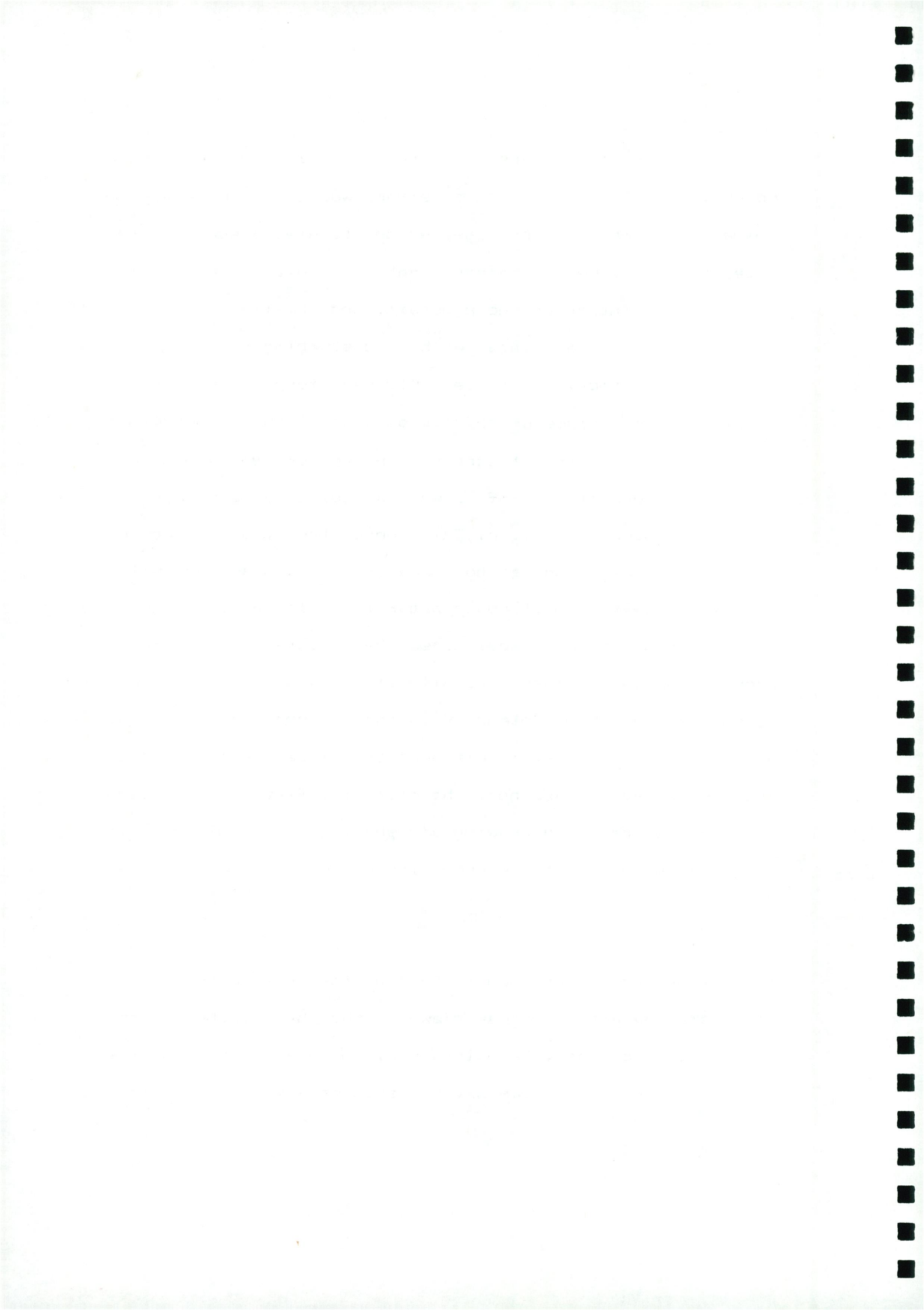
standing of foreign light and the role it played in the development of his art. Paintings done during trips to Morocco still concentrate on Oriental decoration, rather than paying full attention to realistic light. In sunny countries it was easier for Matisse to represent nature in a more abstract, decorative manner, without the necessity of shading. 'The vegetation is lush as in Normandy but what decorativeness' (11, p. 33).

There does not seem to be room for air in the highly detailed decorative Nice Paintings. Harry N. Abrams refers to this depicted world as distant. The artist, rather than communicating to the viewer, withdraws into his 'world in a fishbowl' (9, p. 57). When Matisse travelled before the Nice period, for example during his trip to Collioure in 1904, his use of colour was influenced by the southern sunlight. However, by the Nice period, Matisse had become more eloquent in his depiction of space, resulting from his knowledge of Oriental decoration. The light that emanated from his paintings and cut-outs had to be more objective, so that composition and richness of the paint surface would be transformed into something permanent.

Although atmospheric tones in Nice may have been soft landscapes emanated definite colour values which could be interpreted on Matisse's canvases as flat coloured areas. The

Placement of these areas created the illusion of space. Colours in landscapes and interiors would be rendered in shades that, when pieced together constituted a scene saturated in dreamy Mediterranean light. The Nice light enabled Matisse to introduce more detail, and smaller areas of colour into his paintings, without disturbing the unity of their composition. Matisse could pay more attention to local colour values of objects because of the absence of deep shadows in the atmosphere. Schneider described Matisse's interpretation of flowers as being 'a reservoir of abstract colours' (11, p. 32). Hence the translation of nature into painting was no longer felt as an act of will. 'It is so sweet when it comes naturally' (11, p. 32). More concentrated colours would describe objects in the foreground, however Matisse carefully sized each area of colour according to its intensity so that no one part of the painting would dominate. Although the images depict figures and decorative backgrounds, the pictorial flatness has been preserved by reducing drawing and shading to a minimum. In these paintings Matisse drew with areas of colour rather than with line.

I noticed when I returned to Dublin, that due to the overcast sky, my attention was drawn to the physicality of the city. In contrast, Barcelona's blinding sunlight in the expanse of the clear blue sky rendered it almost impossible



to be perturbed by physical ugliness. There, one could not withdraw from the sunlight. What appeals to me about the Nice paintings is that same presence of light. Figures and objects are more like images of the artist's mind. They are apparitions that have been manifested by the Nice light. The only thing that changes in these pictures are the pictorial compositions. The light remains the same; either golden in the evening or creamy silver during the day.

'Nice, why Nice? In my work I have tried to create a translucent setting for the mind. I have found the necessary limpidity in several places around the world; New York, the South Pacific, and Nice' (5, p. 158).

Matisse wished to represent ideas about colour and form, inspired by his reaction to life, rather than directly representing images from life itself. He was always fully aware of the formal qualities of the painting medium. The secret of the colourist does not lie in his or her depiction of beautiful colours, but in their ability to recognise the use of certain colours that contribute to a harmonious pictorial composition. This is a discipline and does not spring solely from an instinctive love of coloured substances. Colourists are always aware of light. Through his understanding they can respond and create. This is why Matisse claimed that 'a colourist makes his presence known even in a simple charcoal drawing' (4, p. 121).

CHAPTER TWO

Matisse's move to Nice was necessary as it enabled him to escape depressing winters in Northern France during the first World War. It better accommodated his attempts to return to the source of his inspiration, through the experience of nature. As has been said earlier, Matisses sensitivity to the environment and atmosphere resulted in a need for less changeable weather conditions. 'What made me stay were the great coloured reflections of January, the luminosity of daylight' (9, p. 19). Because the war discouraged further expeditions abroad, Matisses' decision to stay in Nice would enable him to relax and work in a foreign city within France. Of the 200,000 inhabitants of the city, 91,710 were foreign. The cosmopolitan atmosphere appealed to Matisse. There he could find a wide variety of attractive models. Decorative hotels and tropical colours were suitable subject matter for his paintings.

'The state of the soul created by the objects which surround me and which react in me: from the horizon to myself, myself included. For very often I put myself in the picture, and I am aware of what exists behind me. I express as naturally the space and objects which are situated there as if I had only the sea and the sky in front of me' (4, p. 59).

Matisse himself is included in this renewed investigation of nature. The mood of these figurative scenes is private and very domestic. Every aspect of the paintings, from subject matter to formal composition has meaning, or is autobio-

graphical. These paintings depict not only Matisse's experience of the immediate environment, but also memories and day dreams of what might have been. His odalisques were a vivid dream of enchanted days and nights in the Moroccan climate' (5, p. 230). Are not fantasies and memories as real for a person as objects in a room? Matisse wished for his art to be 'the expression of a dream which is always inspired by reality' (4, p. 55). This more figurative representation of apparently three-dimensional space draws our attention to the life and feelings of the artist as well as manifestations of ideas about form and colour that dominated earlier paintings. Ellie Fauve wrote in 1920, that Matisse's instinct battled with his intellect (5, p. 230). 'I was carried away by excessive enthusiasm in the happiness of creating those paintings' (5, p. 229). However,

'beneath the sun drenched torpor that bathes things and people, a great tension smoulders, a specifically pictorial tension that arises from the interplay and mutual relations of the various elements' (5, p. 229).

This Nice period marks a conscious decision to bringing together all Matisse had learned about Eastern and European Art. Rather than regressing to a pure-fauve way of representation, Harold Abrams described this change of style as a 'mutation' rather than a return to naturalism (9, p. 48).



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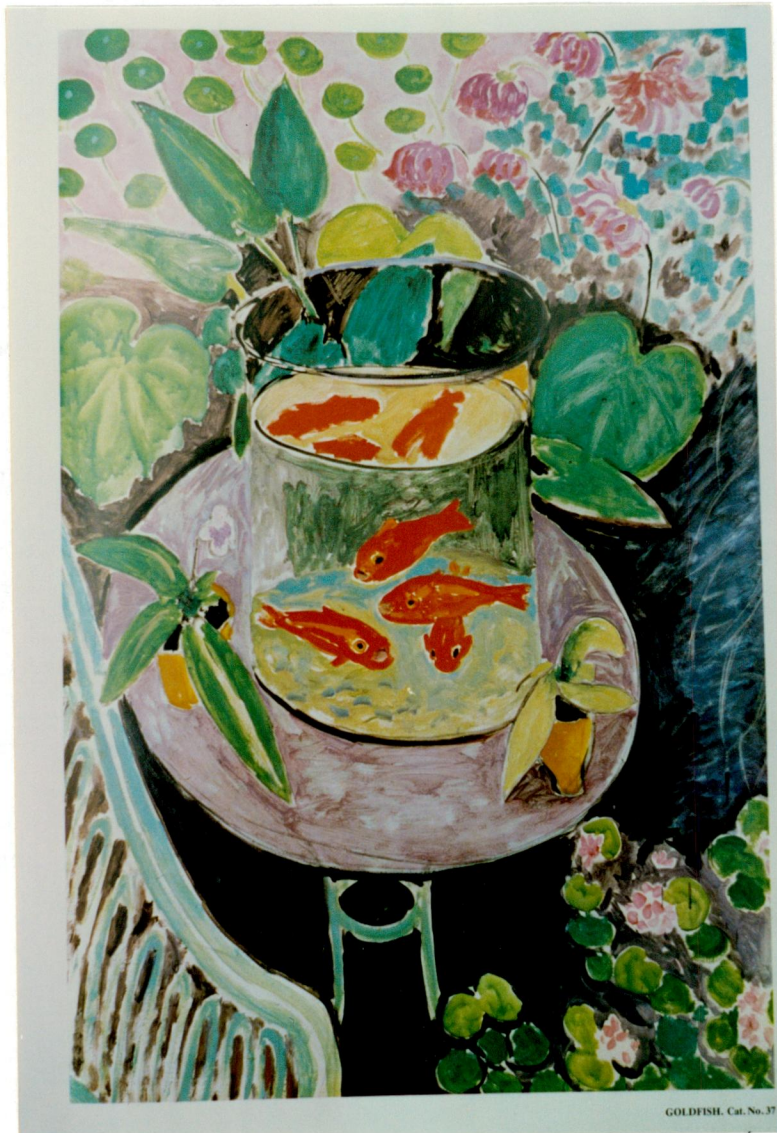


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It seems that subject matter and the way it was formally represented were inseparable. It was, after all the characteristic light of Nice that appropriated his development during the 1920's. The quality of this light could only be manifested in the colours of the things it illuminated. Figures and objects no longer serve a purely decorative purpose, for example in an earlier Moroccan painting, Le Riffian Debout 1912, the green of his clothes which was spotted with colour, could represent the artist's experience of the rich grass that blanketed the Moroccan countryside in springtime. This painting, which formed a trio in the Shchukin collection was grouped with the painting Les Poissons rouges 1912 and Fenêtre Ouverte à Tanger 1912/13.

Abstract decoration has been pushed further into the background. It's role now is to facilitate the illusion of three dimensional space that now surrounds the things depicted. This apparently realistic space makes the objective / Nice light more convincing to the viewer. Attention is drawn to the local colour of objects. It is the placement of these flat coloured planes that contributes to the illusion of depth. In Pianiste et joueurs de dames 1924 diamond shaped tiles point vertically upwards, connecting the foreground with the wall behind. We see in the foreground, two boys playing checkers. The red striped table cloth strikes our eye and aligns with the red rug on the floor, which in



turn leads to with the piano player in the middle ground. The red-brown colour of this piano leads our eye to the red-brown wardrobe and drawers in the background. The terracotta tiles on the floor aid the transition between bright red in the foreground and the red-brown behind. As a result of his understanding of oriental decoration and the soft Nice light with its gentle graduations of tone, Matisse was able to create this three dimensional space without resorting to traditional shading or perspective. Areas of colour of different sizes and intensities were composed render the illusion of an airy interior. To do this, Matisse thinned pigment and glazed it over a bright canvas ground which created luminosity and spaciousness. More concentrated, pure colour would be used to render objects in the foreground for example, vases of flowers, or the brightly coloured clothes that draped the models. Matisse carefully sized the areas of colour according to their intensity in his compositions to preserve unity. Each coloured area of the picture contributed to a balanced pictorial composition where no element dominated. Matisse incorporated black into his palette of colours. Its tonal intensity against a paler ground would strike the viewer's eye and give the illusion of an object advancing. In Pianiste au joueurs de dames 1924, the two boys in the foreground (the artists sons), wear black and white striped shirts. These stripes are echoed in the black piano notes



Beneath the representation lurks the image. But while Matisse had emphasized the latter at

In other words, how to balance and harmonize tonal values and color, realism and

Checker Game and Piano Music
1923. Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Paul

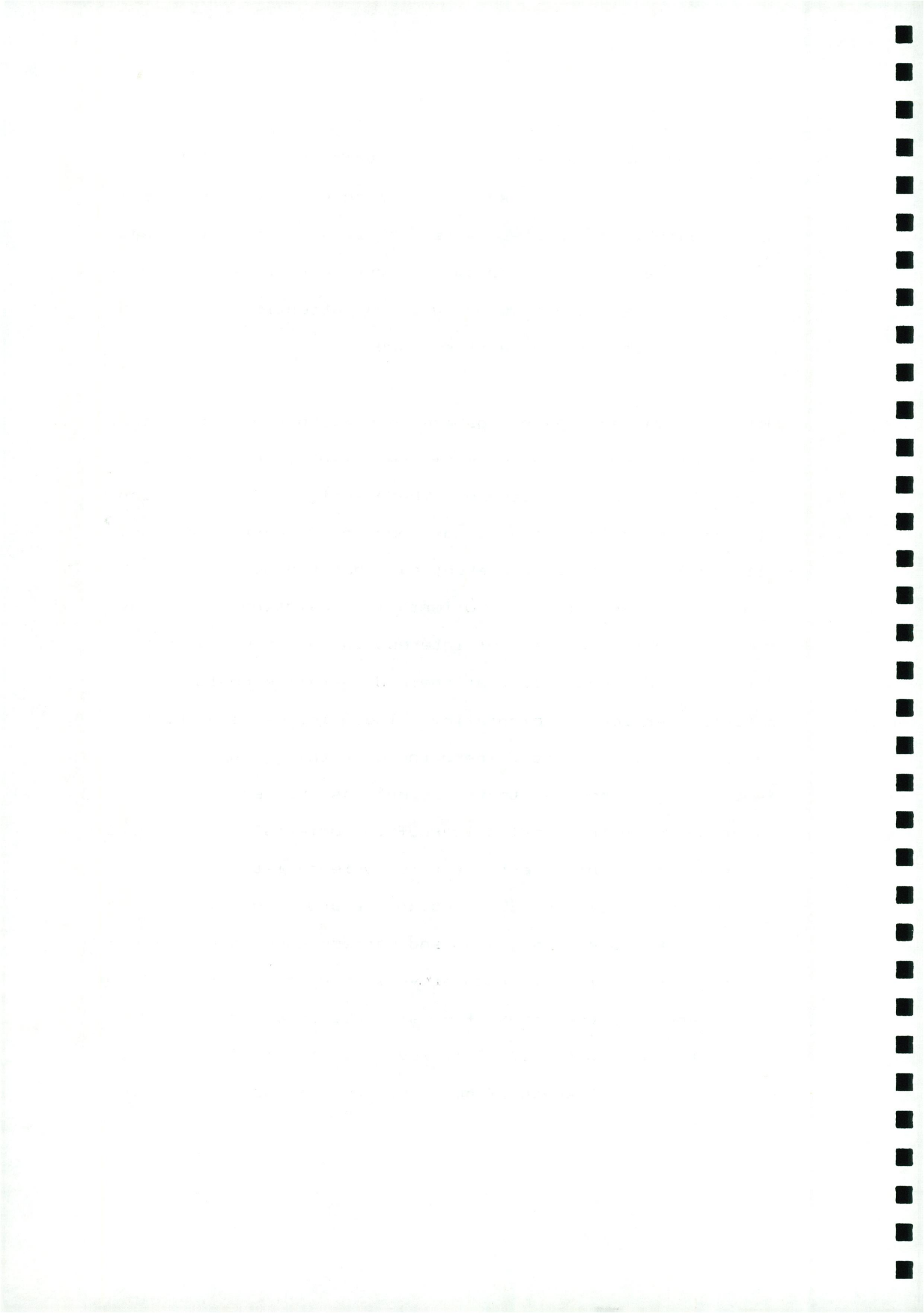
and the decoration on the carpet. These additions are sufficient to hold writhing decorations of the screen and the wallpaper in the background. Similarly, Renoir remarked that the black curtain rail in Matisse's Interior à Nice 1917-18 or La Fenêtre Ouverte 1917 kept the blue of the sea and the sky in its place in the background. Matisse had learned this use for black from Manet and Oriental art.

Another device of Matisse's for creating the illusion of space in a room was to include reflected images of other parts of the room in mirrors, drawing our awareness to all the elements of which he was conscious, even though it was not possible to see them from the same viewpoint. In La séance de peinture, 1917, the mirror on the dressing table between the artist and the model reflects the sea and the light from outside the window. Matisse includes himself also in the picture. In Vases de fleurs sur la coiffeuse-lit reflétée dans le miroir, 1919, the composition would have little depth if it was not for the reflection of another part of the room in the mirror, on the dressing table. Sometimes, in similar still lifes, painted in the same year, mirror images reflect mysterious blackness for example, Anémones au miroir noir, 1919.

From 1921 to 1926/27, Matisse occupied the third-floor apartment in Place Charles Felix. It was an eighteenth century building, east of the Cours Saleya in the Pouchetes district of Nice. It had unparalleled exposure to the Nice atmosphere as it had windows that faced West, over the city and South, towards the Mediterranean. The two principal working rooms in this apartment faced South. There was strangely patterned wallpaper in the larger room and frescoed ceilings. By 1922, because Matisse had taken the two apartments on the third floor, he had more space to concentrate on aspects of the interior. Demountable frames were made to hold back -drops. Matisse was able to collect a greater number of props; not only oriental textiles, but also props from French theatres and film studios. We can witness the quiet drama of everyday bourgeois life, for example people playing the piano or reading progress into more staged, fantastic 'tableaux vivants' (11, p. 47) of odalisques. In the Hotel Mediterranean, Matisse remarked, 'Do you remember the light we had through the shutters? It came from below as if from theatre footlights. Everything was fake absurd amazing delicious' (9, p. 24). Henriette Darricarrère's presence from 1920 to 1927 enhanced the representation of these theatrical scenes. As well as adopting the role of odalisque to enable Matisse to re-live memories and dreams of Morocco, Matisse painted her playing

music, dressed as a ballerina or painting at an easel. These were all interests that she pursued in her own life. As the paintings depicted Matisse's fantasies or day dreams these scenes were made to appear convincing by adding more details. These staged scenes draw our attention also to the plastic reality of the paint surface.

Matisses odalisque paintings are sensual, but do not portray the same foreign exoticism of the oriental painters like Ingres, Delacroix or Gerome. These artists painted 'Constantinople or Cairo exactly as they would Chartres or Paris' (11, p. 25). Matisse was skeptical that the novelty of the subject matter of these Orientalist paintings may have compensated for the lack of interest in the technique Pierre Schreider has suggested that their Orientalism could be the artistic version of colonialism. Their images were picturesque, touristic ones, where the only thing they adopted from their exposure to the orient was to enliven their paintings with the local colour of the oriental rugs. Whereas the early nineteenth century Orientalists wished to portray the (11, p. 25) foreignness and mystery of the Orient. Artists like Gauguin and Matisse succeeded in embracing the Oriental decorative aesthetic by trying to understand how the light of foreign places could influence the art produced there. They would adopt the technique of painting in flat areas of pure colour. Gauguin described



this style as the 'Grand Style'. In Matisse's Nice period he modified his former grand style and incorporated muted colours. He had to do this to avoid chromatic intensity because of the greater number of active elements in these new paintings. He did not, as I have said before resort to the use of demi-tiente (half-tones) in the traditional sense of modelling..

'Outline produces Grand style, though half tones bring you closer to the truth, but less grand. Don't you think that this is a slightly one-sided view of the matter and that you can do outlines in a mere semblance of the grand style? Who had the greater style Gauguin or Corot? I believe that style comes from the notibility and order of the artist's mind, whether the order is acquired and developed or entirely intuitive, which is perhaps a consequence of order. But it results from a particular slant, it yields no more than half tones' (5, p. 169).

Matisse wished to take what he had learned from oriental decoration further. What seemed to be naturalistic scenes made more convincing by the addition of detailed elements are merely different decorative surfaces patched together. Matisse neutralises the power of motifs by rhythmic reiteration. Writhing arabesque and floral patterns are echoed in carpets, coloured screens and floral wallpaper. Repetition scatters focus in the composition, accentuating the decorative surface of painting. Vases of flowers and figures are often reduced to abstract signs. Flowers are often painted in front of wallpaper, for example nature morte, bouquet de dahlias et livre blanc 1923. In Pianiste

et joueurs de dames 1924, the boys' power as individual motifs has been neutralised by the fact that they have been painted in the same outfits and no differentiation of facial features has been made. Most people in these paintings serve the purpose of depicting events in the artist' mind. Their dramatic contribution to the scene is more important than a description of their character as individuals. In Figure décoratif sur fond ornemental, 1925, the fact that the figure is described as decorative implies that it's form has become abstracted. Here, Matisse was interested in structural forms even if natural appearances had to be distorted. Matisse's biggest problem was how to render the female figure on the canvas without disturbing the two dimensionality of these jigsaw like paintings. There is a great pictorial tension between this decorative figure and the ornamental background. The baroque ornament would have overwhelmed other figures, but it has met it's match with this pyramid-like odalisque. In The hindu pose of 1923, the background space has been kept shallow and the figure in this rigid frontal pose with no shadow emphasises the two dimensionality of the canvas surface.

Abrams suggests that the Nice paintings be considered as an 'uninterrupted story' (9, p. 47), Odalisques are a whole, important in number, (5, p. 230) says Matisse to Andre Verdet, 1952. It is only when they are viewed as a body of

work that Matisse's world is revealed. The Paintings differed in quality and some compositions were more resolved than others. Many of Matisse's subjects were explored in series, for example, the bright airy yellow room with the black curtain rail in the Hotel Mediterranee. the Plumed hat series is another example. The pictorial compositions could resemble snap-shots. When Matisse was in Morocco in 1912, Jack Cowart writes that there he also appeared to do drawings in sequence 'the stand of the trees gets larger and one building passes out of the frame to the left as the central building approaches' (11, p. 121). For Matisse it seems that the process and exploration of complicated themes in his work meant that it was necessary to elaborate his ideas in more than one painting. This diffusion of meaning and ideas into a series also contributed to the individual canvases containing less meaning or becoming more abstract. One could recall the series paintings, of the Impressionists that 'patented' (7, p. 90) the passage of time. Rather than describing moments of nature, Matisse described moments of his own experience as he composed his impressions in a decorative, abstract manner.



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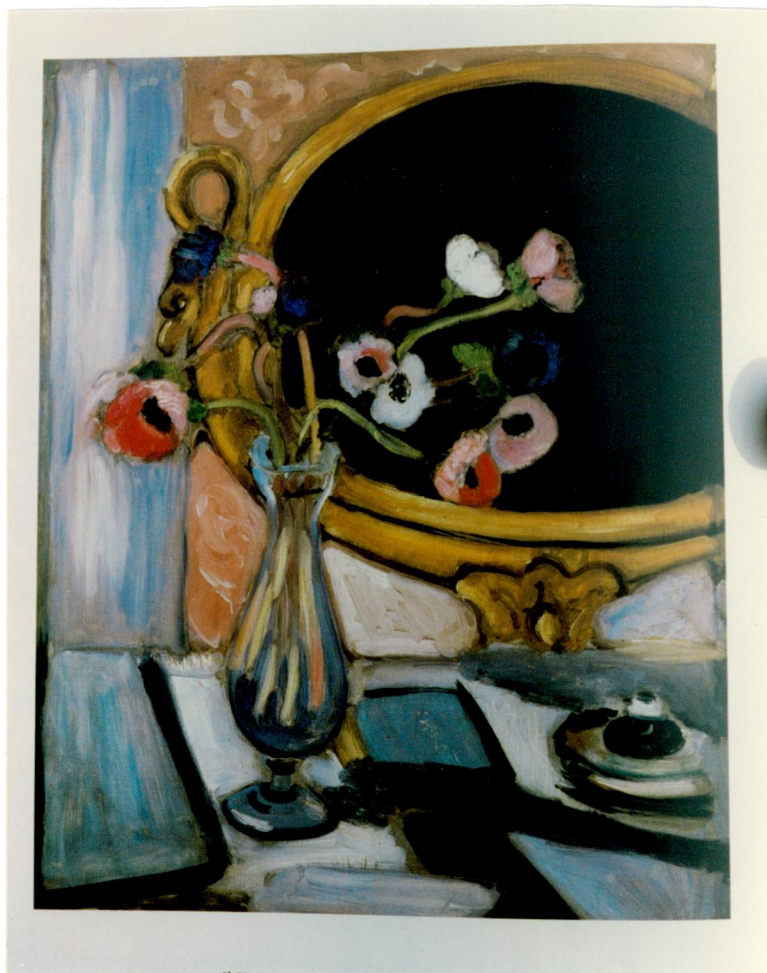


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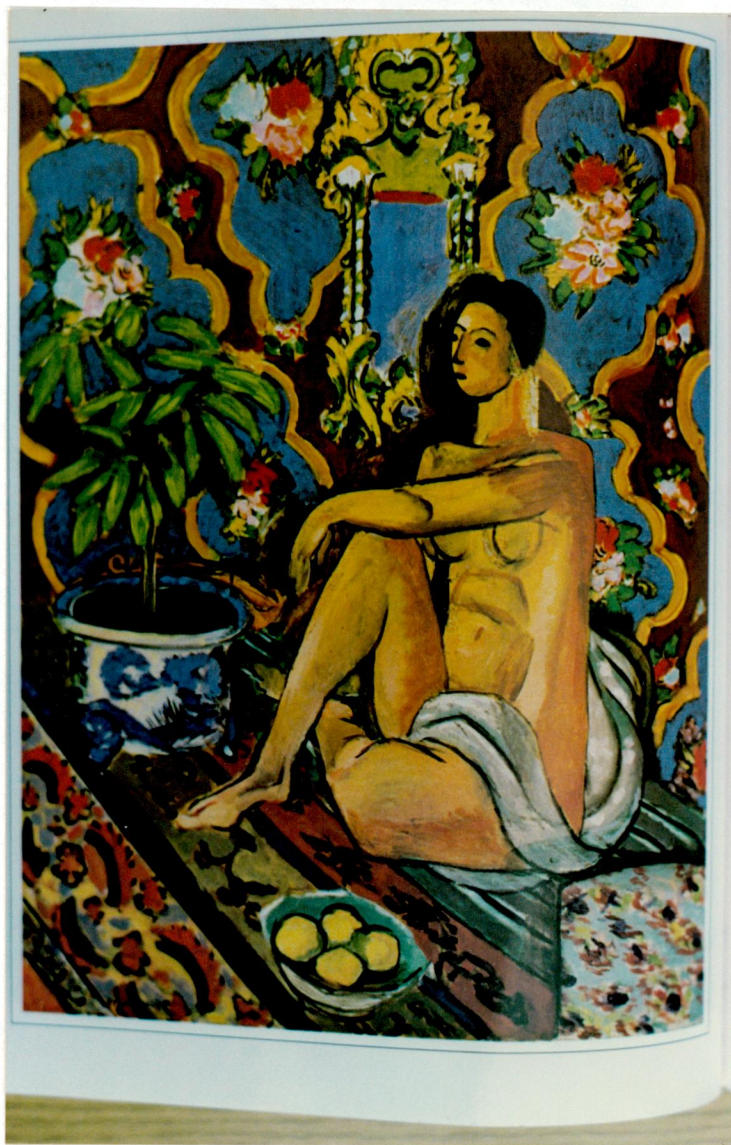


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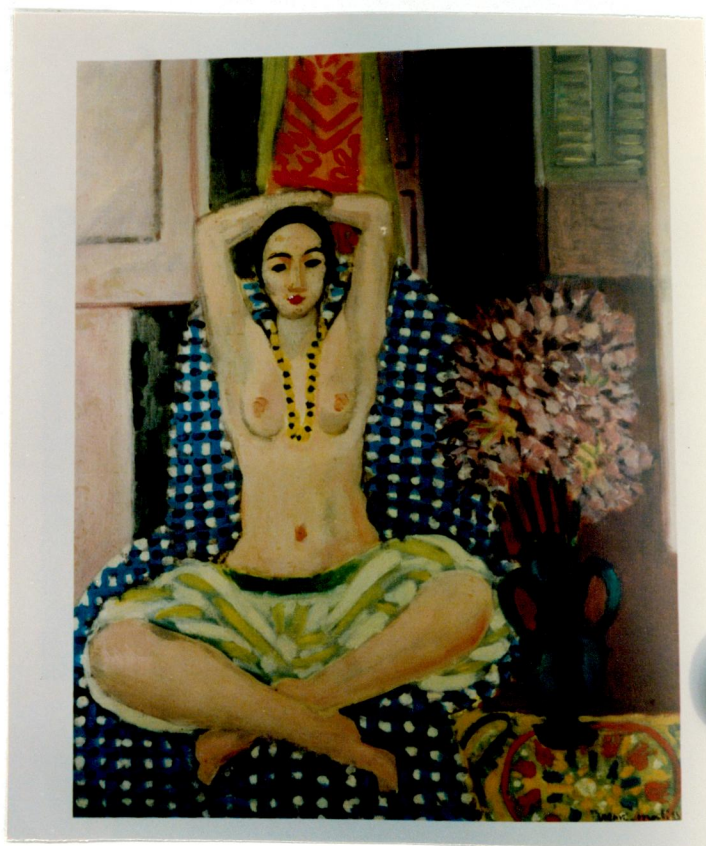


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CHAPTER THREE

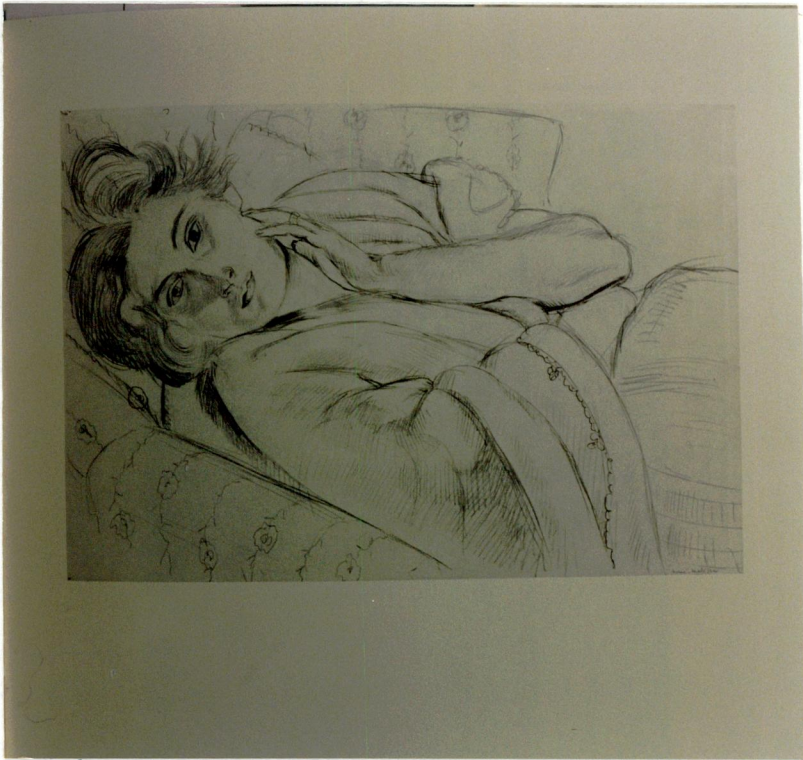
It was not unusual for Matisse to explore the themes of his Nice paintings in other media because in painting he felt restricted to preserving the two-dimensionality of the canvas surface through colour. Rather than direct translation of subject matter into sculpture or drawing, Matisse paralleled his studies of the subjects in these media. Matisse knew that the treatment of composition must be modified when representing the same subject in a different medium. He avoided elaborate or inventive combinations of media which would obscure the lucidity of his thought or cloud the viewer's appreciation of his emotional response to his world and the materials he used. The fact that Matisse composed a picture in pen and ink or a sculpture out of clay is never concealed from the viewer. Because light was Matisse's main interest we must consider his sculptures to be complimentary to his studies in painting. 'If the search is the same, I tire from one medium, then I turn to the other' (7, p. 541). For Matisse, his sculptures were images rather than sculptures in their own right. The negative area surrounding them contributed to the viewer's perception of the images.

In his line drawings Matisse could draw attention to the importance for him, of the creative process of art, by

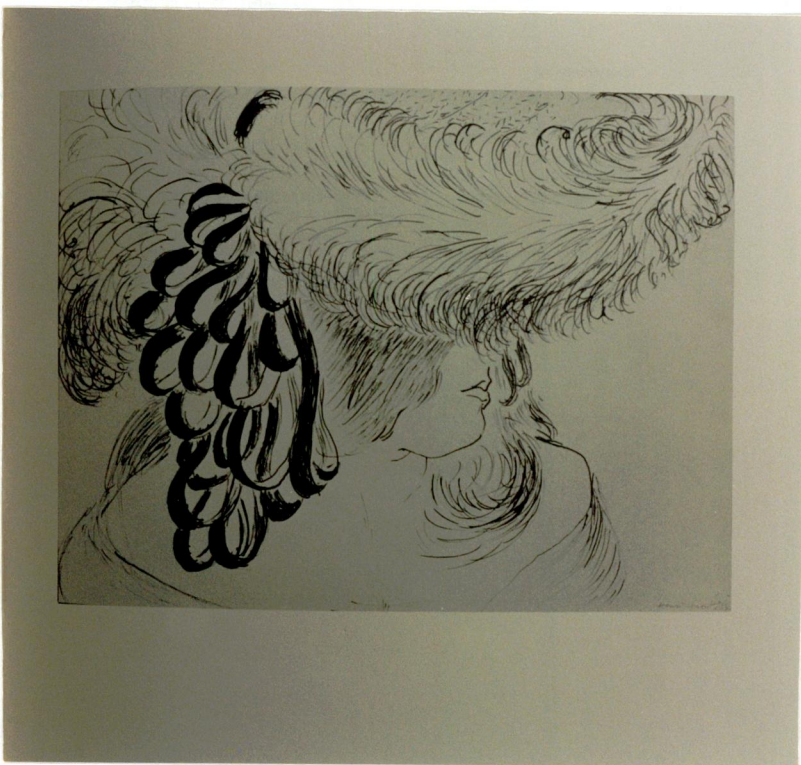
producing numerous series, elaborating on certain themes of his paintings. The period in Tangiers marked the point of departure for Matisse's separation of colour and drawing. After the Nice period this separation widened, and painting and drawing went in two different directions. It was drawing after 1932 that became Matisse's principal medium for creating images. With simple pen and ink, Matisse could depict decorative details without disturbing the balance in the picture. The absence of colour enabled this.

'Then I feel that my emotion is expressed in plastic writing. Once my emotive line has modelled the light of my white paper without destroying it's precious whiteness.... the page is written, no correction is possible. If it is not adequate I begin again' (4, p. 81).

Matisse compared himself to an acrobat and every drawing was an acrobatic feat. 'Just as the acrobat had to do limbering exercise so that every part of his body obeys him' (4, p. 81). Matisse had to produce large numbers of drawings. Matisse claimed that each drawing was complete in itself and must not be confused with sketches. These drawings were complete because rather than copy nature directly, Matisse produced pictorial equivalents. I can neither add nor take anything away (4, p. 81). The Nice drawings often belie Matisse's efforts in painting. He worked in themes and series and discovered diverse solutions for those themes. Matisse's main concern was the effect of light around the



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figure. He would develop observational drawings into simple line drawings. Many subjects or compositions of finished works would be re-thought in black and white tonal exercises. Matisse's lithographs offer another restricted medium to avoid colour while studying forms and atmosphere. The Nice drawings and paintings show an absence of radical stylistic innovations in colour and form. In colour paintings, attention was given to local colour and in drawings of the same period the richness of surface detail of objects is examined. Matisse fused together artful manipulations of pen or pencil with convincing plastic representations of objects and forms. These drawings differed from the austere cubist portrait drawings of the First World War years. From his Cinquante Dessins series of 1918 - 20, the Reclining Model 1919, pencil on ivory paper, has been executed with apparent sureness. Increased detail on the paper surface contrasted visibly difficult resolutions found in earlier cubist drawings.

Matisse constructed the plumed hat that Antoinette wore in the Plumed_hat drawings (1918-19). In these drawings there is a subtle but coherent manipulation of tonal values and flowing lines that suggested the model's youthful freshness. The close-up version of her profile in 1919 depicts detailed decoration on the hat. Although the few lines constituting her profile are abbreviated, they still hold their place in the pictorial composition.

Because of the tangible physicality of three-dimensional sculpture, Matisse could create images in this medium that may not have been as structurally balanced as the compositions in his paintings. The Large Seated Nude 1925, parallels Matisse's desire to give the figures in his paintings more form. The pose of this sculpture is similar to lithograph studies of 1924, for example Nude in an armchair 1924. The effect of the sculpture is completely different because there is no armchair to support the figure's torso. There is a feeling of imbalance about the Large seated Nude and Matisse made no attempt to correct it. The figure's arms remain raised behind her head. Although as a sculpture this figure would be imbalanced, but as a sculptural image, the negative area surrounding it contributes to the viewer's visual experience. One could remark on how the figure shapes the light of the negative area surrounding it. In oriental art a void or negative space indicates fullness. Matisse depicted that which was changeable in his sculptures in contrast to the permanence of his painting compositions. This was because he reduced sculpture to its own specific nature - a ponderous mass of clay. The metamorphic head of Tiara, 1930 is an example of movement and change. The stout Head 1927 marks an absence of Rodinesque modelling. Surfaces are smooth and there is a classical appearance about it. These sculptures do not resemble reality but constitute a pictorial equivalent.

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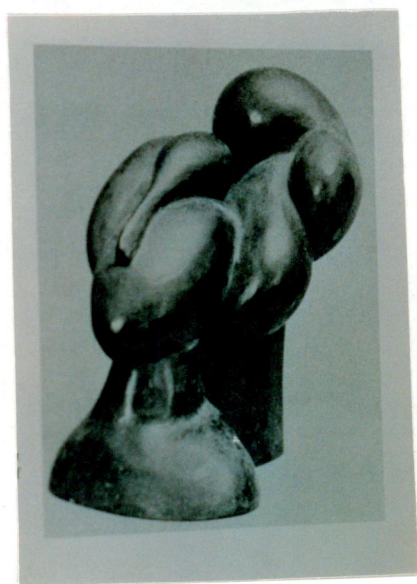


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CONCLUSION

Constant sunlight enabled Matisse to overcome the problem of being tied to the rendition of changing weather conditions. The maintenance of equilibrium in his art was important. The light's stillness and objectivity facilitated Matisse's depiction of themes of his fantasies and highly decorated surfaces. These pictures are not chained to clock or calendar. The equilibrium in these paintings draws attention to their form. They are, I think the most beautiful of Matisse's canvasses as a whole. One cannot avoid the painted surfaces where every coloured brushstroke contributed to the drama of the pictures. The equilibrium in Matisses art connects him with classical art.

'There are two ways of expressing things. One is to show them crudely, the other is to evoke them through art. By removing oneself from the literal representation of movement one attains greater beauty and grandeur. Look at an Egyptian statue: it looks rigid to us, yet we sense in it the image of a body capable of movement which, despite it's rigidity, is animated. The Greeks too are calm: a man hurling a discus will be caught at the moment in which he gathers strength, or at least, if he is shown in the most strained and precarious position implied by his action, the sculptor will have epitomised and condensed it so that equilibrium is re-established, thereby suggesting the idea of duration. Movement is in itself unstable and is not suited to something durable like a statue, unless the artist is aware of the entire action of which he represents only a moment' (4,p. 37).

Years of observational paintings of natural light and objects would enable Matisse to concentrate on drawing in the 1930's. He claimed that once he knew his subject by heart he could describe it with pure outline. This line would not break up the unity of the light in the white pages. I think that the format of the white surface as a means to create light was inspired by Matisse's experience at the crystal-line light in New York. His expansive drawings that struggle to extend the limits of the pages, for example, in Mallarmes etchings 1931 - 32 must have been influenced by the massive skyscrapers that extended into the sky and reflected it in their windows. 'This we can associate the size with that which is already familiar to us and the skyscraper fits into our scheme of palpable objects, with human proportions' (4, p. 62).

Nice was an important stage for Matisse in his progression of the study of light and space from experience and translating them into art. These paintings, although they bear no apparent resemblance to the later works, were necessary studies of nature from observation. Matisses goal was to express his feelings about life as well as his ideas about the formal discipline of painting.

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Schneider, Pierre,
Elderfield, John Matisse in Morocco, Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York, 1990.

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2. The red studio 1911
3. Interior with Eggplants 1911
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7. Pink shrimps 1920
8. Le Rifan^{fi} debout 1912
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Corrections in List
of illustrations:

8, Le Riffian is the correct
spelling.

10 La fenêtre à Tanger 1912-13

12 La fenêtre ouvert, 1917