



HM 53

MATISSE

Gilles Néret

TASCHEN

Matisse, the bard of colour, and Picasso, the breaker of moulds: together, these two giants shaped the world of modern art. They were, as Picasso once said, "North Pole, South Pole."

The work of **Henri Matisse** (1869–1954) is a sensuous hymn to colour, that wild yet subtle colour which he tamed, mastered and managed, and which expressed his feelings towards women and the world. Colour was the tool with which he controlled line, arabesque, volume, light, transparency, reflection and space, and though he did not shrink from pushing his creativity to the verge of abstraction, he never succumbed to it entirely. It was an approach well noted by America's Abstract Expressionists.

This new and carefully conceived freedom marked not only the extraordinary significance of the painter and sculptor Matisse in the history of modern art, but also his influence, which was no less decisive than that of his main rival, Pablo Picasso. In fact, Matisse's stylistic liberation actually goes one step further in the pursuit of his own personal goal: the perfect synthesis of line and colour by which he sought revolutionary approaches to the great tradition of French painting by drawing upon its classical aspects.

For those who wish to know more about this lode-star of modern art and follow the adventurous path of his creative career, this publication is surely the most comprehensive and informative source available. Lavishly illustrated, its authoritative commentaries trace the artist's search for balance, purity and serenity, from the chromatic brilliance of his Fauve period, through his travels, the Orient, geometric synthesis (it was he who introduced Picasso to African art by giving him his first mask), and the odalisques to the final triumph when, at the age of eighty, he invented his gouache cut-outs "drawn directly in the paint" that culminated in his illustrations for Jazz and allowed him to achieve his goal of sculpting in paint just as a sculptor works in stone.

These masterpieces reflect Matisse's "sheer joy in painting the beauty of the universe" and mark the various stages in his quest for an earthly paradise in the midst of the twentieth century. The quality of the reproductions in this publication alone make it an indispensable work of reference. Matisse, after all, is widely acknowledged as an artist whose canvases are extremely difficult to reproduce in print. With this in mind, each work presented here has been painstakingly compared with the respective original, in close collaboration with the artist's grandson, Claude Duthuit. The bard of colour deserves no less.

"Books which trigger the desire to buy."

SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE, LONDON

Gilles Néret, born in 1933, is an art historian, journalist, author and museum correspondent. He has curated numerous retrospectives in Japan. A founder member of the Seibu Museum and the Galerie Wildenstein, Tokyo, he has been successively chief editor and director of *L'Œil* and the *Connaissance des Arts*. He has penned monographs on Manet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir, Cézanne, Klimt, Picasso, Rodin, Lempicka, Botticelli, David, Dalí, Léger and Matisse. He was awarded the Eli Faure Prize in 1981 for his collection "A l'école des grands peintres". He has edited works on *Les Naïfs* (NEF, Paris), *Les Impressionnistes* (Office du Livre, Fribourg), *L'Art des années 20* and *L'Art des années 30* (Seuil, Paris; Rizzoli, New York; Orell Füssli, Zurich), *Avant-garde 1945-1975* (Hirmer, Munich), *30 Ans d'art moderne* (Nathan, Paris) and *Erotic Art* (Taschen, Cologne).

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FRONT COVER:

Spray of Leaves, 1953

La Gerbe

Gouache cut-outs, 294 x 350 cm

Design for a ceramic mural in Los Angeles

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BACK COVER:

The Dance, 1909-1910

La Danse

Oil on canvas, 260 x 391 cm

Hermitage, St. Petersburg

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HENRI MATISSE



Gilles Néret

HENRI MATISSE

TASCHEN

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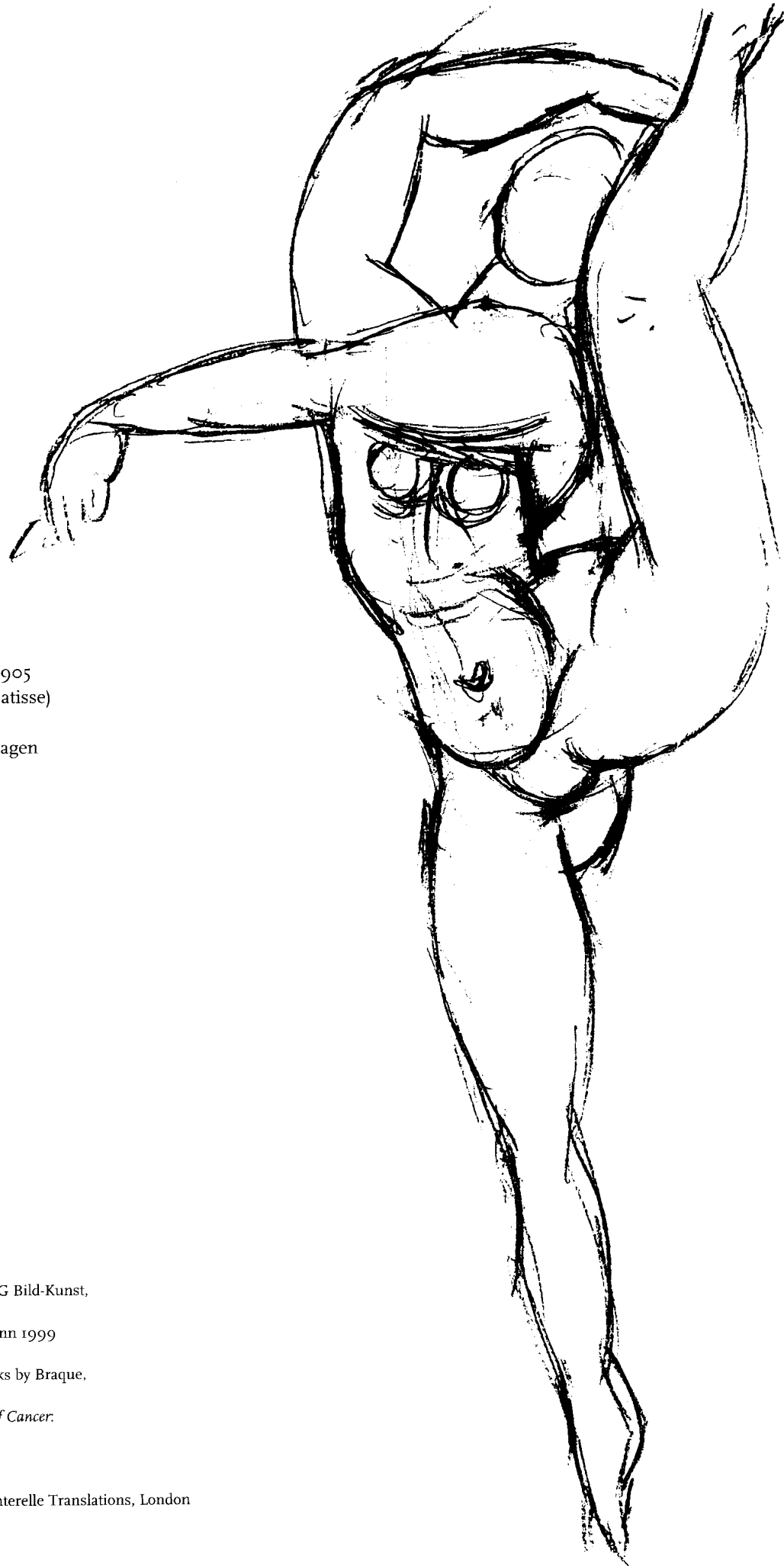


ILLUSTRATION PAGE 2:

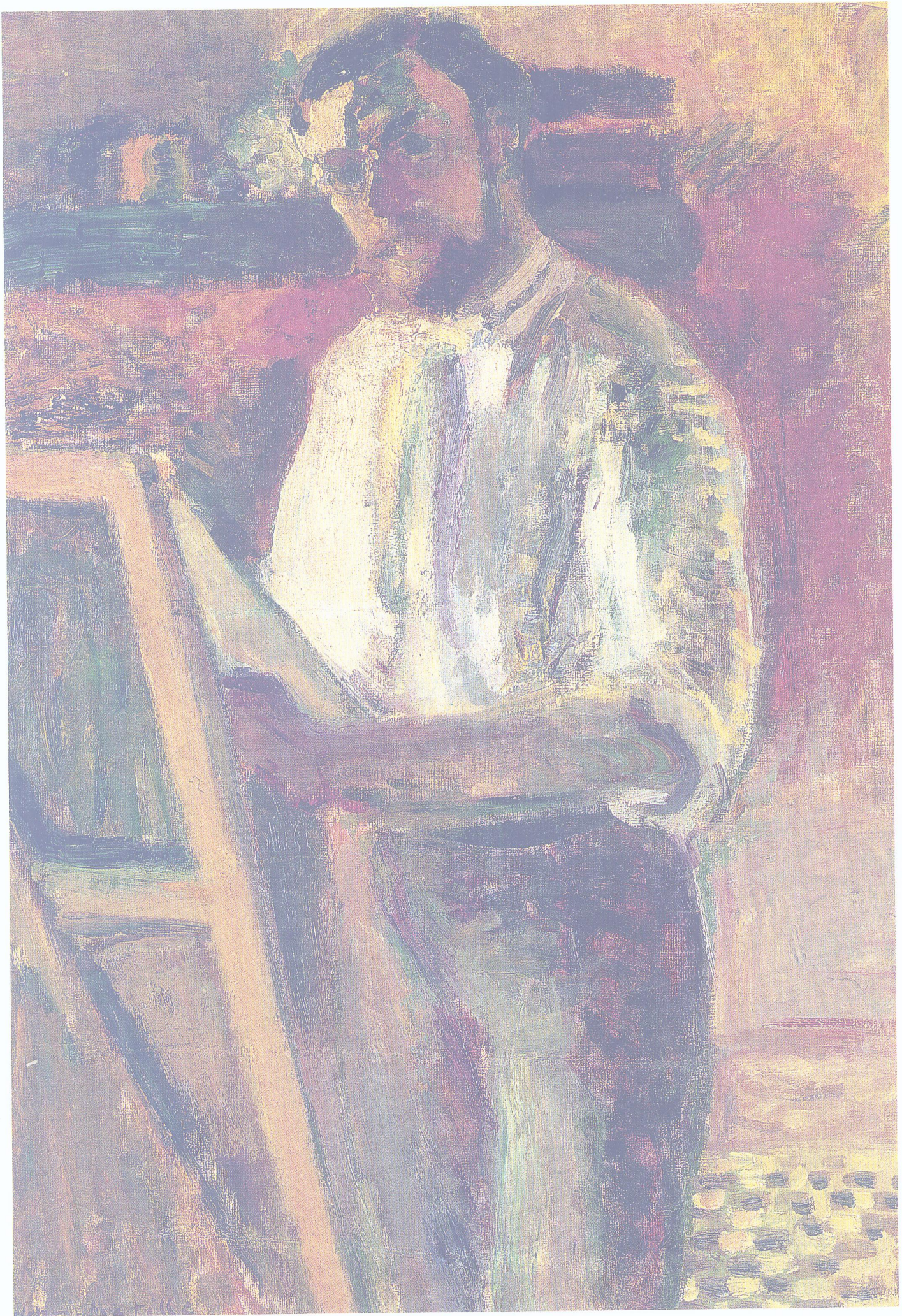
Madame Matisse: *"The Green Line"*, 1905
La raie verte (Portrait de Madame Matisse)
Oil on canvas, 40.5 x 32.5 cm
Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

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Contents

6	Simplifying Painting
22	A Fauve in Paradise
48	Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde
70	The Oriental Carpet
78	The Temptation of Abstraction
98	Nice, Base of Operations
114	The Harem of the Odalisques
142	The Monumental Architecture of The Dance
164	The Wise Old Man and the Young Giantesses
182	The Light of Desire
208	The Testament of Pharaoh
244	Biography
250	Bibliography
252	List of Paintings and Sculptures
256	Acknowledgements



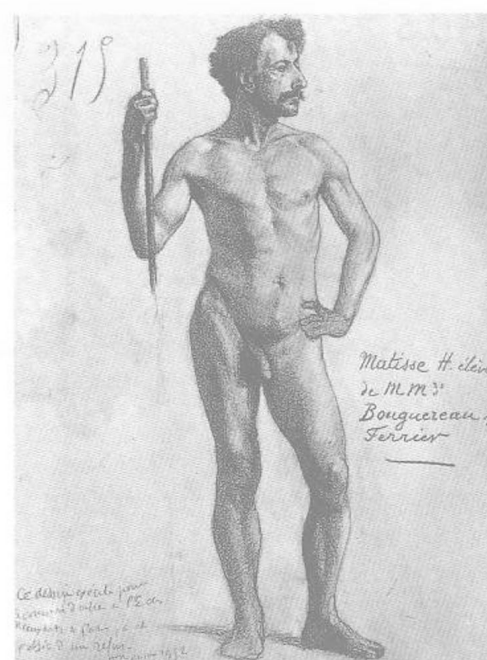
Simplifying Painting...



While Matisse was studying under the painter Gustave Moreau, the latter surveyed Matisse's work and commented, both admiringly and prophetically: "You will simplify painting." Then, after a moment's reflection, he added: "But you won't simplify Nature to that extent, to reduce it to that. If you did, painting would no longer exist..." and finally: "Don't listen to me. What you are doing is more important than anything I am telling you. I am a mere teacher, I understand nothing."

Few people ever possessed such insight into Matisse's work. Few painters have been so misunderstood and treated so unjustly. It began with his initial Fauvist phase, when his paintings caused an uproar and were considered to be "a brightly-coloured daub superimposed on what is, after all, a rather traditional vision – rather like putting up the Christmas decorations in a drawing-room. Once the celebration is over, the room returns to its former drabness... Once you remove the 'fauve', all that remains is the pigeon-fancier." This attitude continued between the Wars, when Matisse became famous, but was still associated with petty bourgeois aesthetics, not quite "fashion illustrator" but almost "interior decorator". "Matisse," commented the critic Pierre Schneider, "is a name that rhymes with Nice. It evokes balconies overlooking the sun-drenched Mediterranean, languishing, lazy odalisques, images of luxury, tranquillity, voluptuousness. In any case, as soon as a painter settles on the Côte d'Azur his work is immediately considered to be some sort of summer holiday picture postcard, a sort of perpetual leisure. Matisse: painter of pleasure, Sultan of the Riviera, an elegant hedonist..."

Matisse himself did much to cultivate this upper-class, even professorial, air (his fellow students even nicknamed him "the doctor"). The nickname stuck, a cross between Socrates and Pasteur, and he even bore a physical resemblance to the latter. When, in 1913, Clara MacChesney expressed surprise that such an "abnormal" work of art had been produced by a man who looked so "ordinary and sane", Matisse replied: "Oh, be sure to tell the Americans that I am a normal person, that I am a devoted father and husband, that I have three beautiful children, that I attend the theatre, ride horses, that I have a comfortable home and a beautiful garden I love, with flowers, etc., just like everyone else." When Joséphin Peladan, who had dubbed himself "SAR" ("Son Altesse Royal – HRH, His Royal Highness") and Grand Master of the Rosicrucians, reproached the Fauves for dressing just like everyone else, so that their presence was no more imposing than that of a floor manager in a department store, Matisse replied: "Does genius depend upon so little? If he is only talking about me, Monsieur Peladan can take comfort. Tomorrow, I'll call myself HRH and dress up like a magician."

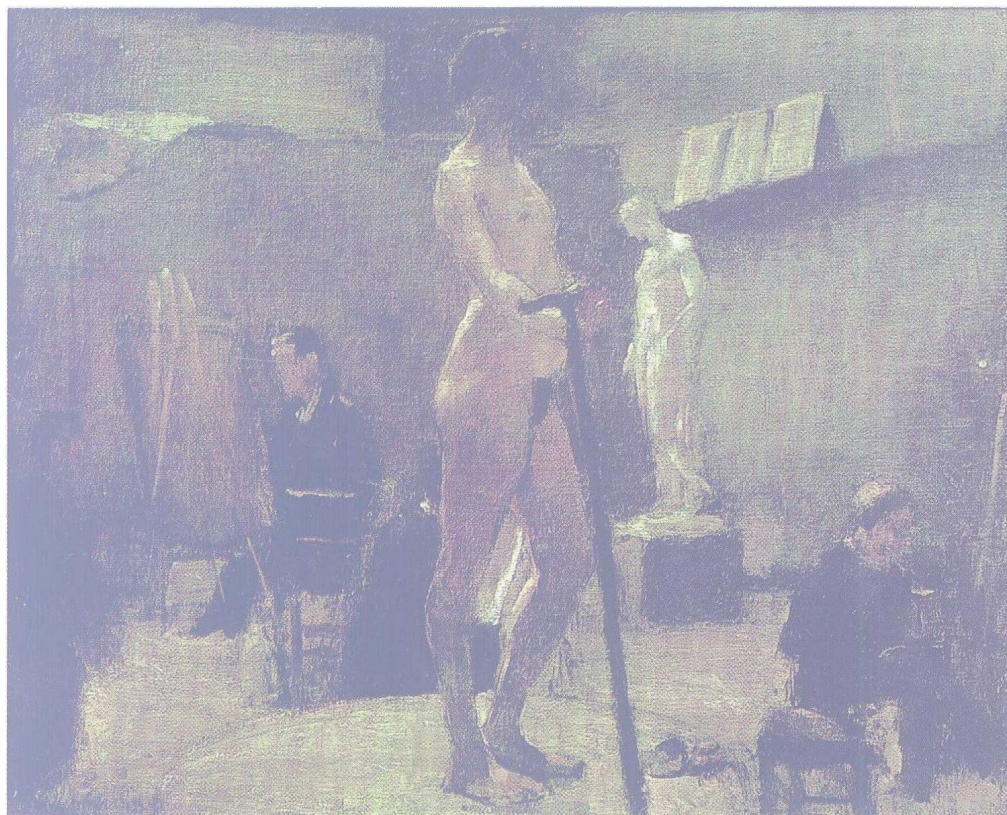


Self-portrait, 1900
Mon portrait
Brush and ink, 23.9 x 8.9 cm
Private collection

Académie d'Homme, 1892
Charcoal, 59.9 x 47.5 cm
Private collection

Matisse studied under the teacher and "pompier" artist, Bouguereau, who told him he "did not know how to draw". He left to become the pupil of Gustave Moreau, a more understanding and enlightened master.

PAGE 6:
Self-portrait in Shirtsleeves, 1900
Autoportrait en bras de chemise
Oil on canvas, 64 x 45 cm
Private collection

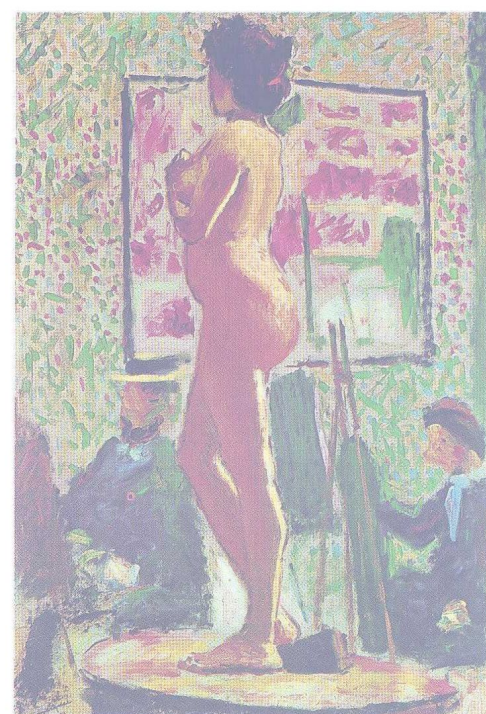


Gustave Moreau's Studio, 1894-1895
L'atelier de Gustave Moreau
Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm
Private collection

Matisse added with further mockery: "In the same article, the excellent author claims that I do not paint honestly, and I would be justifiably angry had he not taken care to add the afterthought, 'By honestly, I mean by respecting the ideal and the rules.' Unfortunately, he does not let us into the secret of exactly where these rules to which he refers are to be found. I am happy for them to exist and indeed if it were possible to learn them, what sublime artists we would be!"

Matisse did indeed dream of an "art of balance, purity, tranquillity, devoid of disturbing or disquieting subject-matter which will be for everyone who works with his brain, a businessman or a man of letters, for example, a balm, a soothing influence on the mind, something akin to a good armchair which provides relief from bodily fatigue," but he did not do so with impunity. The distance between these words and his being treated as a diehard, out-of-touch reactionary was but a mere step and one more misunderstanding. For instance, Matisse hotly disputed René Huyghe's attribution of "an exquisite and refined impassivity". "How can one practise one's art dispassionately?" he replied. "Without passion, there is no art. The artist may exercise self-control, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the case, but it is passion which motivates him. Anguish? This is no greater today that it was for the Romantics. One must control all this. One must be calm. Art should neither disquiet nor trouble – it must be balanced, pure, restful." Matisse confided to Gaston Diehl: "I have chosen to put torments and anxieties behind me, committing myself to the transcription of the beauty of the world and the joy of painting." In 1951, he told old Couturier: "My art is said to come from the intellect. That is not true; everything I have done, I have done through passion."

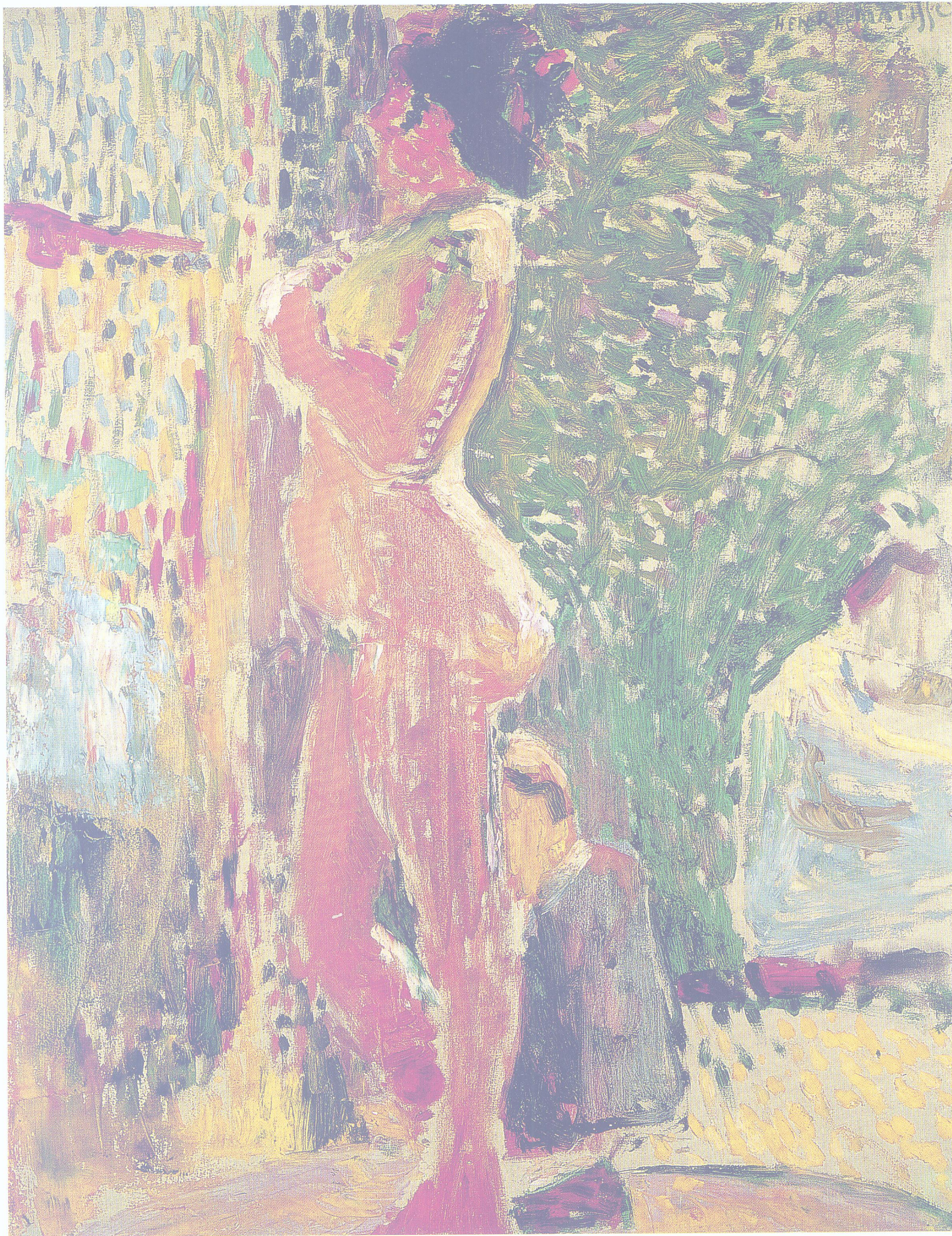
The problem with Matisse is that his painting defies classification, he cannot be slotted neatly into a particular school. Worse still, despite his penchant for discussions of aesthetics and his numerous writings and essays about painting, drawing and colour – on which much of this book is based – he always refused to be a theoretician. He was as wary of his own theories as of the theories of others, and soon distanced himself from the principles or formulas which became the basis for the success of a particular movement or school. Matisse's painting

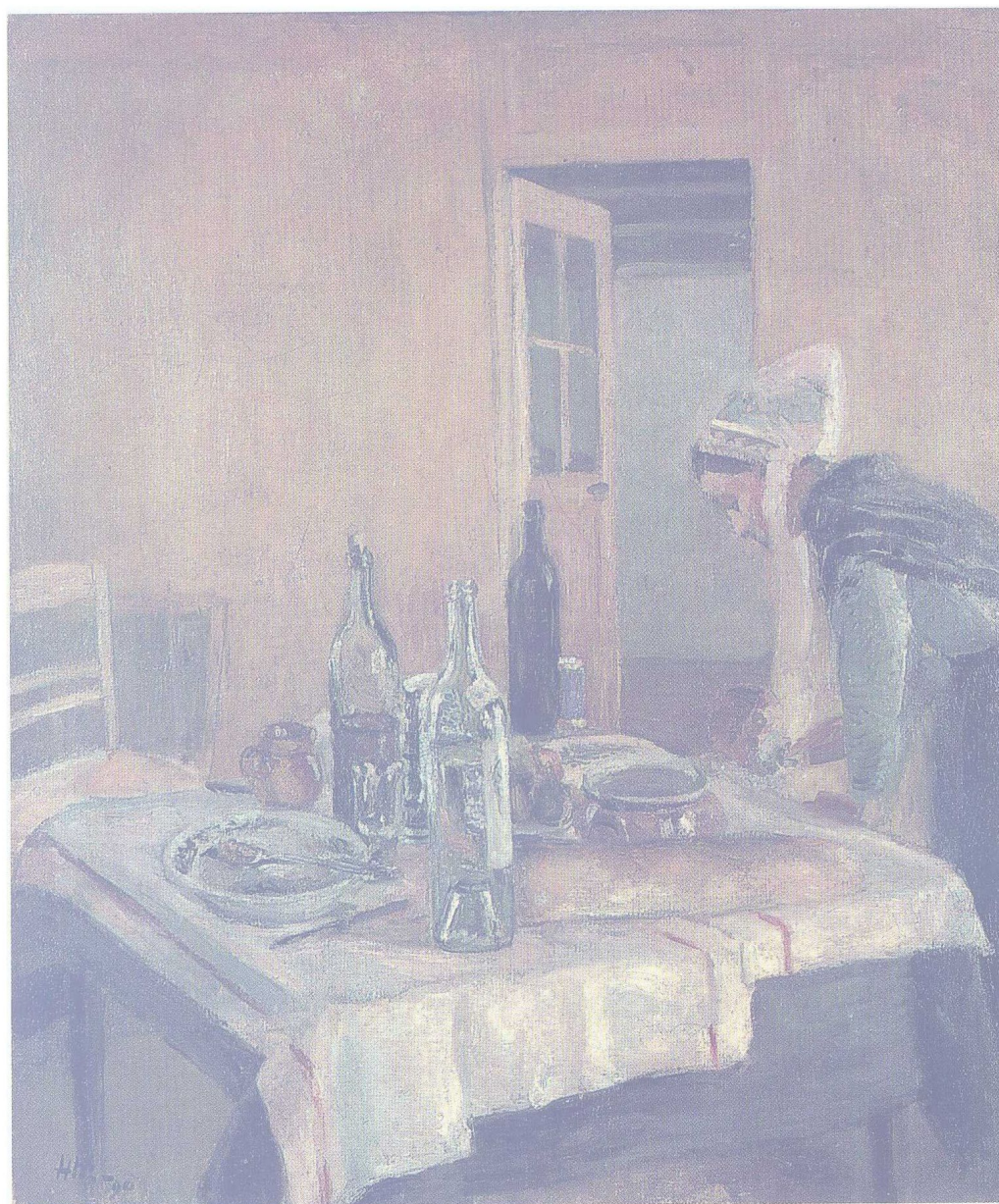


Albert Marquet: *Fauve Nude*, 1898
Nu fauve
Oil on canvas, 73 x 50 cm
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux

PAGE 9:
Nude in the Studio, 1899
Nu dans l'atelier
Oil on canvas, 65.5 x 50 cm
Bridgestone Museum of Art, Tokyo

Six years before the Fauves painters burst onto the scene, creating a scandal, Matisse had anticipated them.

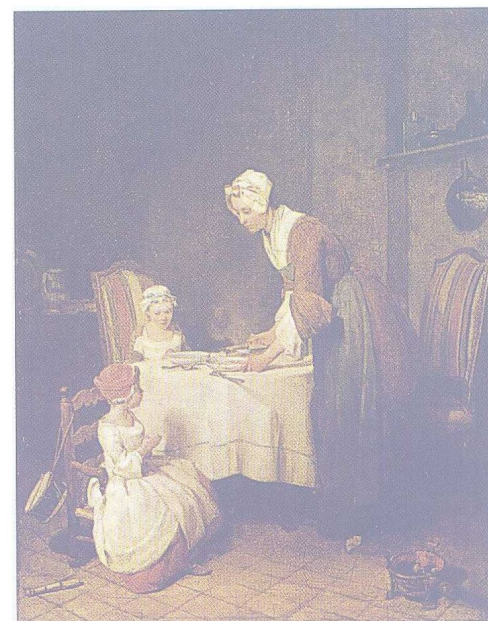




The Breton Serving-girl, 1896
 La serveuse bretonne
 Oil on canvas, 90 x 75 cm
 Private collection

moves quite freely from one style to another, from an almost naturalist, contoured technique, in which the play of light and shade is translated into classic perspective, to a concept in which large flat areas of colour dispense with volume and offer themselves up for audacious ventures into geometric, even abstract, forms. In actual fact, these are variations on a single theme, in each of which Matisse saw advantages and disadvantages. It is thus almost impossible to divide his work into “periods”, that clear segmentation into which a great artist’s work is usually split.

The uniqueness of the art of a great painter lies in the fact that he is never satisfied with discoveries which he would be entitled to claim as his own, and immediately launches into new directions. This diversity, which is merely the continuation of a pattern, a springboard, is often disconcerting. In the case of someone like Matisse, who uses all the forms of expression – painting, drawing, sculpture – simultaneously, this creates total confusion. Matisse considered that any means could be used to embrace the form more tightly, to enhance colour and thus offer revolutionary solutions disguised as classical views in the great French pictorial tradition. It is this revolutionary, though seemingly harmless, aspect of his work which is so difficult to decipher. This art of balance, purity and mastery, this “joy of painting the beauty of the universe” which exploded on a world in which the absurd, the disturbing, the “convulsive” reigned supreme.



Jean-Baptiste Chardin: *Saying Grace*, 1740
 Le bénédicité
 Oil on canvas, 49.5 x 39.5 cm
 Musée du Louvre, Paris

This painting by the great master of the still life was bound to attract the attention of Matisse who appreciated the misty look and very delicate colour scheme used by him. Under his influence, Matisse tempered his palette which he considered to be too bright. He could have adopted the words of Chardin as his motto. “I take my time because I have adopted the habit of never leaving my work until, in my eyes, I see nothing more in it that I want.” There is an important difference, however. *Grace*, as its title indicates, is a painting with a religious connotation, whereas *The Serving-girl* is completely pagan.

"I like to model as much as I like to paint," declared Matisse in 1913. "I have no preference. If the quest is the same, when I am tired of one medium, I return to the other – and 'to nourish myself' I often make a copy in clay of an anatomical figure... I do so in order to express form, I often devote myself to sculpture which makes it possible for me, instead of just confronting a flat surface, to move around the object and thus get to know it better... But I sculpt like a painter. I do not sculpt like a sculptor. What sculpture has to say is not what music has to say. These are all parallel paths but they cannot be confused with one another..."

Perhaps Matisse's mastery, which is evident from his earliest work, can be explained in part by the fact that he is a rare example of a late developer since there was nothing in his youth or his family background to indicate the route he was to take. Matisse was working as a lawyer's clerk in 1890 when, at the age of 21, he was given a paintbox while recovering from appendicitis. This triggered a sudden and unhesitating change of direction. He abandoned the law for the Académie Julian, where he studied under Bouguereau, the high priest of the "pompiers", the banal but highly popular artists of the time who were so despised by the Impressionists. Bouguereau reproached Matisse for "not knowing how to draw". "Tired of faithfully reproducing the contours of plaster casts, I went to study under Gabriel Ferrier who taught using live models. I did my utmost to express the feelings which the sight of a woman's body aroused in me." Matisse

The Dining Table (The Preparations – Still Life),
1896–1897
La desserte (Les préparatifs – nature morte)
Oil on canvas, 100 x 131 cm

Still under Chardin's influence, colour regains the upper hand in this still life. The carafes are very prominent and his teacher, Gustave Moreau, who admired his student, claimed that one could "hang one's hat on the stoppers. That is the main thing."



would find his ideal master in the “charming” Gustave Moreau, a painter whose outlook was broader and who welcomed him into his studio, where he would meet his future companions in the Fauvist venture – Manguin, Camoin, Derain, Marquet and Rouault. “He, at least, was capable of enthusiasm and even of passions.”

In 1894, Matisse married Amélie-Noémie-Alexandre Parayre. Life was so hard for them that she had to open a milliner’s shop to help them survive. This did not stop Matisse from buying some major works of art from the dealer Ambroise Vollard, works which he retained his whole life and which profoundly influenced his own work at the time. These included *Naked Man – the Serf* (p. 14), *Carmelina* (p. 17) or the first sketches for the series of sculptures entitled *Nude, Backview* (pp. 20–21). He hung the following paintings at home so as to be able to admire them at his leisure: Cézanne’s *Three Bathers* (p. 20), a painter he defined as “the father of us all”, a plaster bust of Rochefort by Rodin, *Head of a Boy* by Gauguin, and a drawing by van Gogh. Matisse’s selection says a great deal about his taste in art and what influenced him in his early stages.

André Marchand reported that in 1947, Matisse said about a landscape which he had painted 40 years earlier. “I was very young, you see, I thought that it was no good, poorly executed, not well-constructed, an insignificant daub, but look at it reduced in the photo; everything is there, it is well-balanced with the tree leaning slightly to the right. Look at this other photo, an enlargement. Basically,

First Orange Still Life, 1899
Première nature morte orange
Oil on canvas, 56 x 73 cm
Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges
Pompidou, Paris





Still Life with Oranges (II), 1899
 Nature morte aux oranges (II)
 Oil on canvas, 46.7 x 55.2 cm
 Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis (MO)

all I have done is to develop this idea, you know when one has an idea one is born with it, one develops one's 'idée fixe', one's whole life, one breathes life into it." To other people, he said: "I don't draw any better nowadays, I draw differently." Or: "Not a single attribute of mine is lacking in this picture although they are here in embryonic form."

Matisse's words are applicable to all his early paintings, in which there is really no such thing as the work of a "beginner". From the outset, the composition is in place, colour already emerging in all its splendour. Gustave Moreau, an indulgent, yet excellent critic, commenting on *The Dining Table*, painted in 1897 (p. 11), reveals what is revolutionary in this essay and declares: "Leave it as it is, those carafes are well-balanced on the table and I could hang my hat on the stoppers. That is the main thing." The first *Dining Table* was exhibited by Matisse at the Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts and he was counting on it heavily to make his name. It is an everyday scene of the type he used to paint in his early years, reminiscent of a work by Chardin (p. 10). There is nothing more traditional than a maid leaning over a set table, arranging flowers in a vase. On the white tablecloth, the well-ordered array of dessert dishes, carafes and crystal

