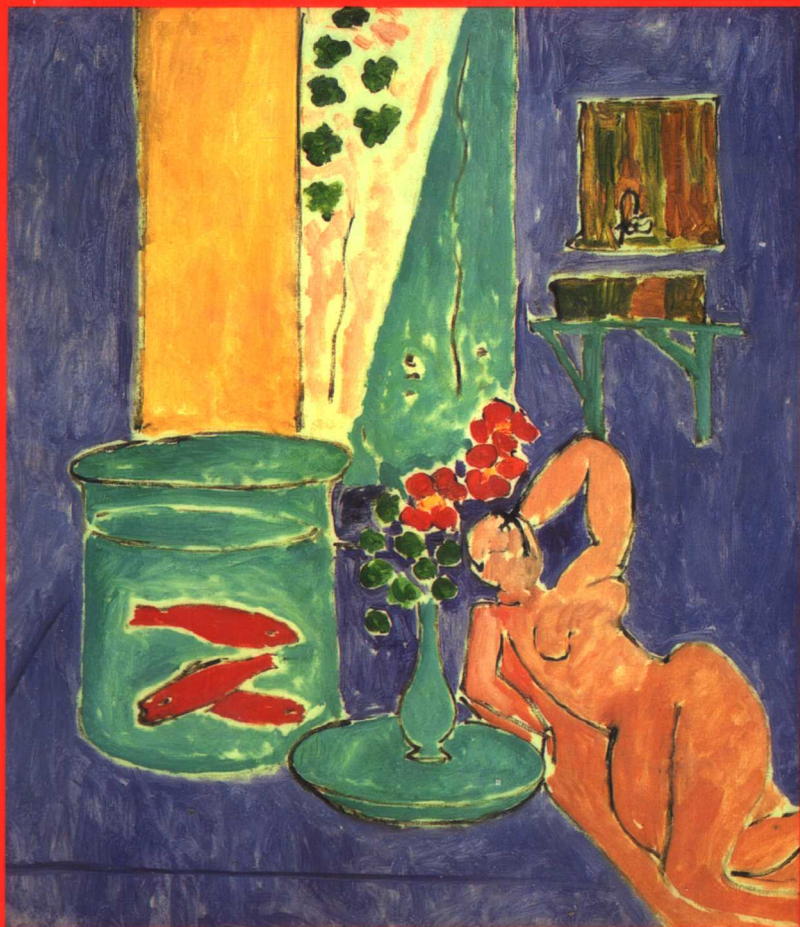


HAYDEN HERRERA

matish

A Portrait



Hayden Herrera

Matish

A PORTRAIT

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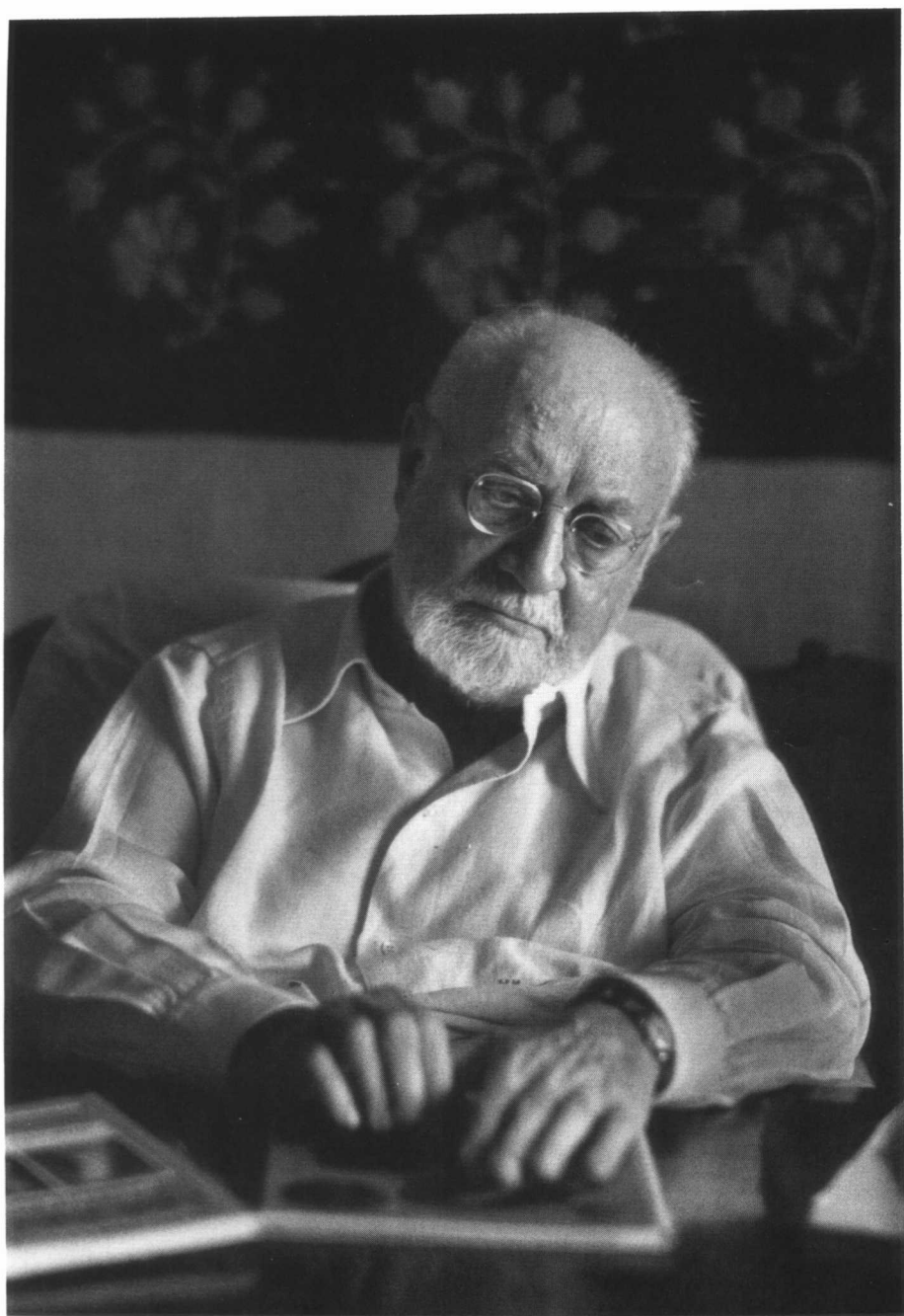
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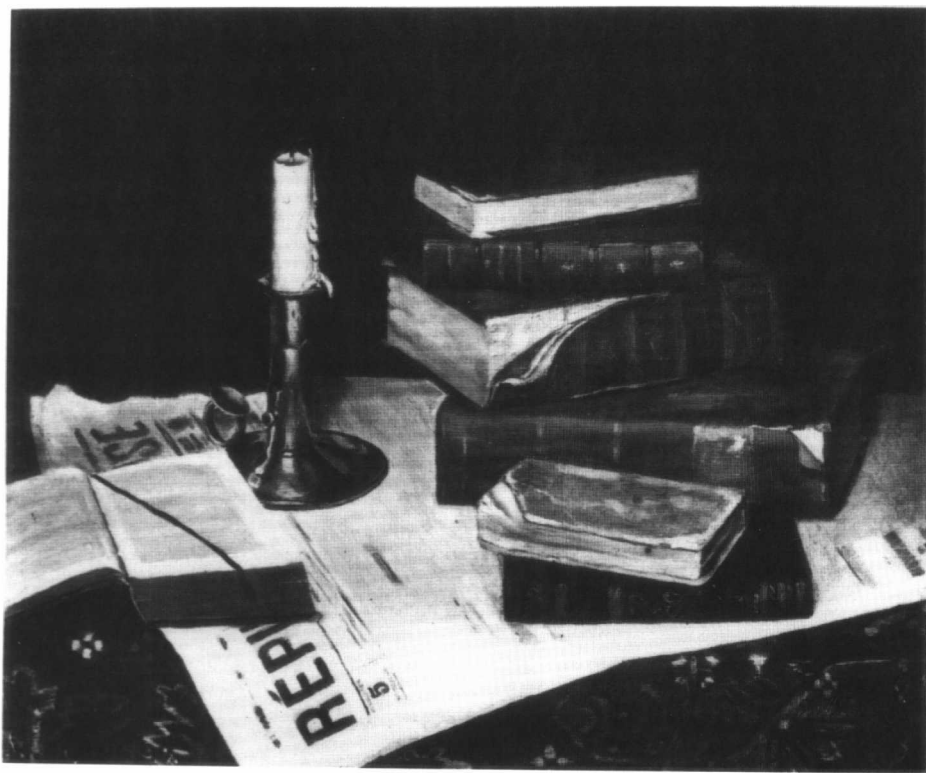
FRIDA KAHLO: THE PAINTINGS

MARY FRANK



HENRI MATISSE, 1950. Photograph by Robert Capa.

TO MY FATHER



STILL LIFE, BOOKS AND CANDLE
(Bohain-en-Vermandois, 1890). Oil on canvas, 15" x 17 1/4".

CHILDHOOD IN PICARDY



enri Matisse is best known for paintings radiant with Mediterranean sunlight, but he was born in the north of France, in Picardy, a dreary landscape of beetroot, flax, and hemp fields lying flat beneath a damp gray sky. His wish was to express serenity and joy, yet he spoke often of being driven by “inner conflict,” and the part of France he came from has a history of strife going back to Roman times. In 1870, the year after Matisse’s birth, German troops invaded during the Franco-Prussian War. During each of the two world wars, Germans occupied Picardy again. Picardy’s people have a reputation for stubborn strength; Matisse, like his father, was endowed with a powerful will; he needed all the strength he had to channel the warring forces within him into “an art of balance, of purity and serenity.”

His mother, Anna Héloïse Gérard, came from a well-established family whose members, since the sixteenth century, had been tanners and glove makers. Late in 1869 she traveled for her lying-in to her parents’ home in the small town of Le Cateau-Cambrésis, not far from the Belgian

border. At eight o'clock on New Year's Eve, she gave birth to the first of her three sons. Before going home to the nearby village of Bohain-en-Vermandois, she had her baby baptized Henri-Émile-Benoît Matisse.

Little is known about Matisse's childhood. His father, Émile-Hippolyte-Henri Matisse, was a hard-working grain merchant who in his youth had left Le Cateau to take a job as a sales assistant in a textile shop in Paris. There he met Matisse's mother, who was working as a milliner. In addition to making hats Anna Héloïse Gérard had a talent for painting china, and later, when her husband ran first a hardware shop and then a grain store in Picardy, she specialized in selling house paints and became so good at recommending colors that her customers, who frequently repainted their brick houses, came to rely on her taste.

Matisse was a well-behaved but sickly child. He suffered from what was thought to be chronic appendicitis, for which there was then no cure. (It is possible that he in fact had ulcerative colitis, an intestinal ailment that is often associated with nervous stress.) A brother, Émile-Auguste, born two years after Matisse, died before turning two. A second brother, Auguste-Émile, born in June 1874, was more robust than Matisse and, unlike his older sibling, would willingly follow in his father's footsteps to become a businessman.

Matisse's mother was especially attentive to her frail elder son. "My mother loved everything I did," he once said. Although he had great respect for his father and learned from him a sharp business sense and the value of hard work, Henri Matisse was attached to his mother and identified himself with her more sensitive and artistic nature.

His love for her is apparent in his account of what he called the "revelation at the post office," which occurred when he was an art student and, he said, taught him to follow his feelings rather than the rules of picture making.

The revelation of the interest to be had in the study of portraits came to me when I was thinking of my mother. In a post office in Picardy, I was waiting for a telephone call. To pass the time I picked up a

telegram form lying on a table, and used the pen to draw on it a woman's head. I drew without thinking of what I was doing, my pen going by itself, and I was surprised to recognize my mother's face with all its subtleties. My mother had a face with generous features, the highly distinctive traits of French Flanders. . . . I was struck by the revelations of my pen, and I saw that the mind which is composing should keep a sort of virginity for certain elements, and reject what is offered by reasoning.

It is from his mother that Matisse is presumed to have learned an appreciation of shapes, textures, and colors. Perhaps the attraction to rich and decorative textiles revealed in Matisse's paintings is connected to his parents' knowledge of quality in fabrics and to the fact that weaving was Picardy's major industry. Many field workers of Bohain-en-Vermandois spent the winter months weaving on looms kept in their cellars. According to Matisse, he and his family participated; perhaps they helped a neighbor. "We used to make Indian shawls," Matisse remembered, ". . . decorated with palmettes and fringed at the edges." Patterned textiles play a dominant role in his still lifes and interiors; his female models are carefully clothed in—or unclothed but surrounded by—colorful fabrics. Matisse seems also to have inherited his mother's taste for millinery: in several of his portraits women wear extravagant hats. On one occasion he concocted an enormous hat with plumes and set it on the head of a young model named Antoinette Arnoux; he drew and painted her wearing it many times.

Like his parents, Matisse was eminently respectable. His life, he said, consisted of "extremely regular work, every day, from morning until evening." Although he recognized that his commitment to art separated him from the bourgeoisie, there was, he said, nothing revolutionary in his nature. He never abandoned the attitude of reserve and the bourgeois propriety that came with his upbringing. As he put it, "Everything I have done stems from my parents, humble, hard-working folk."

Up to the age of thirteen Matisse attended the local school in Bohain. After that he was sent to study in the larger town of Saint-Quentin, about twenty kilometers to the south. At the lycée he received a classical education, which included Greek and Latin as well as French literature. Years



HENRI MATISSE AT AGE NINETEEN WITH HIS MOTHER,
ANNA HÉLOÏSE GÉRARD MATISSE, 1889.

later friends would remark that the precision and logic of French education were evident in Matisse's insistence that each term of a discussion—especially one about art—be carefully defined, and in his conscientious, sometimes laborious, evaluation of A and B before proceeding to C.

A good student with no special aptitudes, Matisse had no ambition to

become an artist. "I was very submissive," he later recalled. "I wanted to do what others wanted me to do." Yet the tall, plump redhead also had a rebellious streak and a dislike of authority. Once, for example, when the drawing teacher was late and hurrying up the stairs for class, Matisse spat on him and sent the students gathered on the landing into an uproar. Years later Matisse remembered with amusement how the drawing teacher, puffing to catch his breath, exclaimed to his assistant, "Look, look, they have—they have dared to spit on my top hat!"

Matisse had, it would seem, an acute case of Picardian resistance, a French attitude of irony and skepticism—what one observer called a *méfi-ance* of everything outside of himself. His stubborn reliance on his own vision is revealed in a story he used to tell about a hypnotist whose demonstration in Bohain's village hall had a group of schoolchildren so convinced that they were standing beside a stream that they stooped to pick flowers and to drink the stream's water. Matisse, too, felt the power of suggestion. But in the midst of a vision of grass and water, he suddenly saw the rug on the floor. "No," he cried, "I can see the carpet!" Even when he became a painter and his imagination invented the streams and flowers of an earthly paradise, Matisse would never lose touch with the concrete substance of things.

After Matisse graduated from school, his father arranged a job for him as a clerk in a lawyer's office. Finding the work tedious, Matisse was pleased when a Parisian lawyer suggested that young Henri should study law in Paris and his father agreed. In October 1887 Matisse registered at law school, where he was soon plagued again with the boredom and restlessness to which he would always be prone. To divert himself, he went to concerts. He had studied the violin and he loved music, something he shared with his father, who, with Matisse's uncle, used to take the train from Bohain to Paris to attend the opera. But as a law student Matisse took no interest in art and never even bothered to visit the Louvre. As in the lycée, he was drawn to mischief. One of his capers again involved an insult to a top hat—that emblem of male prestige and authority. Matisse liked to throw balls of glue out of his sixth-floor window and watch his target's

bafflement when a ball hit his top hat. This game came to an end when a glue ball landed on the bosom of a local seamstress, who complained to Matisse's landlord.

In spite of his indifference to his studies, Matisse passed his law examination in August 1888, with honorable mention, whereupon he returned to Picardy and took a job his father found for him as a clerk for Maître Derieu, whose law office was on Saint-Quentin's market square. Copying and filing transcripts was dull work. Soon Matisse took to filling page after page of legal paper by transcribing the fables of La Fontaine. No one ever read these papers anyway, he said, "and they served no purpose other than to use stamped paper in a quantity proportionate to the importance of the lawsuit."

Illness saved Matisse from this tedium. In 1890, when he was twenty, he had an attack of acute appendicitis, which may have been accompanied by some kind of psychological breakdown, perhaps depression. During his long convalescence at his parents' home in Bohain, he became friendly with a neighbor who ran a textile firm and painted in his spare time. The neighbor was copying a Swiss mountain landscape from a chromo, a type of color reproduction sold in albums and used as models by beginning painters. Hoping to cheer up her son, Anna Matisse bought him a set of brushes and a paint box that came with two such reproductions, one showing a water mill, the other a farm. Matisse copied both pictures and signed his canvases by writing his name in reverse—essitaM. H.—perhaps to emphasize that these replicas were not original to him.

His mother's gift of a paint box was a turning point in his life. For once he was not bored. To learn how to paint, he bought a popular handbook on oil painting, which told him how to make an academic picture, how to learn from the old masters, and how to be loyal to the appearance of nature. In June 1890, Matisse produced his first two original paintings, both highly conventional still lifes of piles of books. In *Still Life, Books and Candle* the candle that would enable him to read what might be his law-books is blown out, and the page-marking ribbon of one of the books is placed across the text, as if to say that Matisse's interest in law was extin-



THE ARTIST'S PARENTS,
ÉMILE-HIPPOLYTE-HENRI MATISSE
AND ANNA HÉLOÏSE GÉRARD
MATISSE, BEFORE OCTOBER 1910.

guished (illustration facing p. 1). "Other people's quarrels interested me much less than painting," Matisse recalled.

Years later he remembered how he felt when he started to paint:

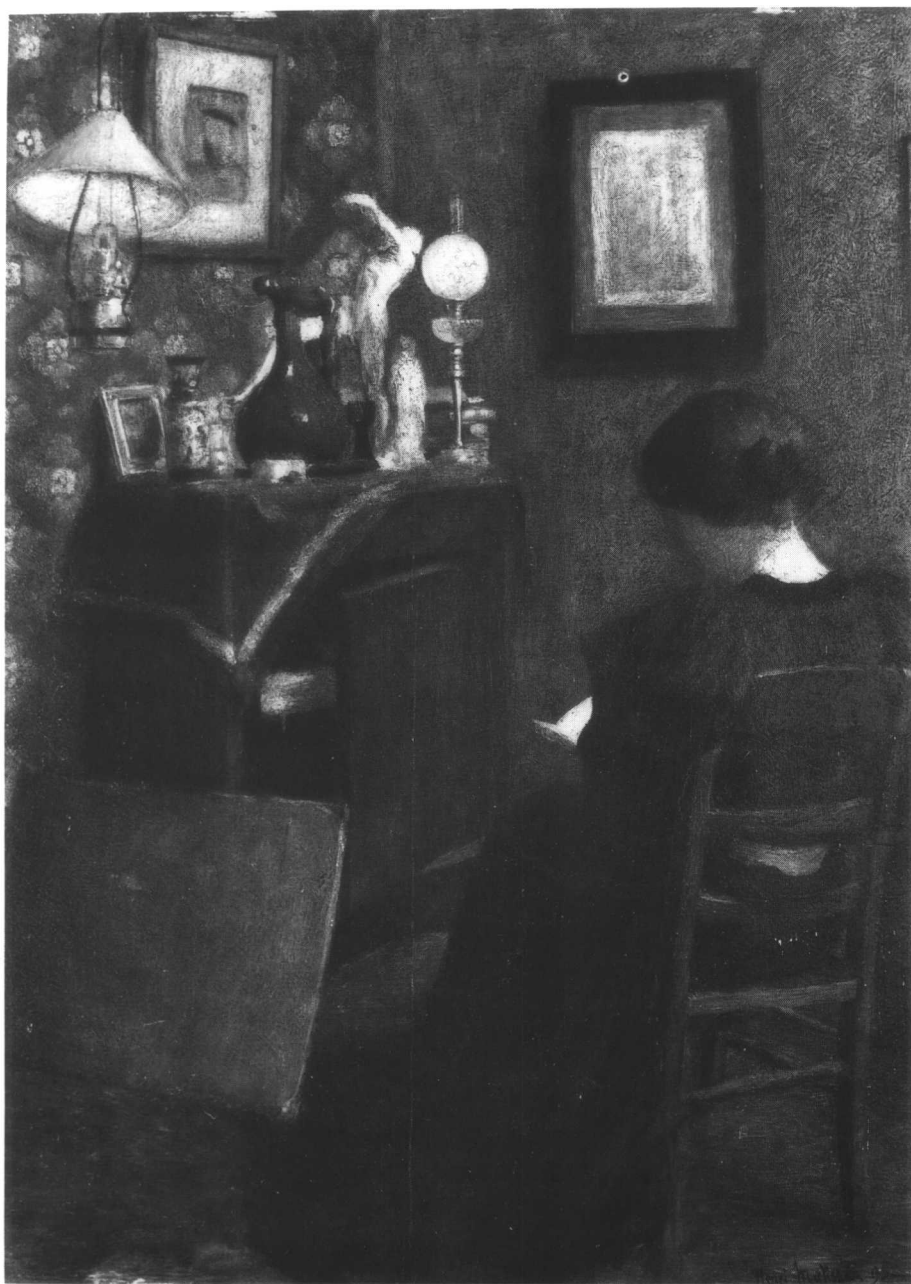
I was filled with indifference to everything that people wanted me to do. But the moment I had this box of colors in my hands, I had the feeling that my life was there. Like an animal that rushes to what he loves, I plunged straight into it, to the understandable despair of my father, who had made me study other things. It was a great allurements, a kind of paradise, in which I was completely free, alone, tranquil, whereas I had always been anxious and bored by the various things I had been made to do. . . . Before, nothing interested me; after that, I had nothing on my mind but painting.

Like most provincial middle-class Frenchmen of that epoch, Matisse's father thought painting was a frivolous pursuit, and when Matisse's health was restored, he did what was expected of him and returned to the law office. In secret, because he knew his father would disapprove, he kept on painting, enrolling in the elementary course at the École Quentin de La Tour, a design school to train tapestry and textile designers. Under the tutelage of Professor Croise, he drew plaster casts for an hour each day before going to work. The classes were held in the attics of the Palace of Fervaques, between seven and eight in the morning. After putting in a morning's work at the law office, Matisse would escape at noon, have a quick lunch and paint for an hour, before returning to the office at two. The adult Matisse recalled, "After office hours, I would rush back to my room (at six in the evening) and paint until nightfall—a good hour's worth of painting. But this was only possible in summer."

Now instead of filling sheets of legal paper with fables, Matisse filled them with drawings. "I'd be grateful," said the exceedingly patient Maître Derieu, "if you could draw a little less during working hours, and be more accurate when you copy my drafts." Although Matisse, like his father, was an orderly and practical person, his legal filing system was in disarray. Seeing that his clerk was unable to locate transcripts, Maître Derieu took to looking for them himself. Nevertheless, when Matisse's father stopped by to inquire how his son was doing, the older lawyer always reported—perhaps out of affection for his employee or loyalty to the father—that the young man's progress was fine.

Matisse was longing to give up his job and devote himself to art, and when his drawing teacher told him he had talent, he gathered his courage and announced his artistic aspirations to his father. Émile-Hippolyte Matisse was furious. A self-made man, he was ambitious for his son. He wanted him to pursue a respectable career as a lawyer or a businessman. But, driven by his will to paint, Matisse was no longer an obedient child. "Once bitten by the demon of painting," he remembered, "I never wanted to give up." He and his father fought. Finally Matisse's mother persuaded her husband to let their son study art in Paris. Matisse's father was some-

what appeared when one of young Henri's teachers gave the aspiring art student a letter of introduction to Adolphe-William Bouguereau, a well-known art teacher who was one of the world's most successful academic painters. If his son could follow in Bouguereau's footsteps, Émile-Hippolyte Matisse may have surmised, he could enjoy a prosperous middle-class life and win an honorable position in society. Nonetheless, legend has it that when Matisse left home to study in Paris in the fall of 1891, his father shook his fist at the departing train and shouted, "You'll die of hunger!"



WOMAN READING (Paris, 1895). Oil on wooden panel, 24 1/4" x 18 3/4".