



HENRI MATISSE, ICARUS 1946, MAQUETTE FOR PLATE VIII OF THE ILLUSTRATED BOOK JAZZ, 1947

All that Jazz

Henri Matisse had as much a way with scissors as he did with a brush, as can be seen from an enthralling new travelling exhibition.

By **Paula Weidger**



Henri Matisse cutting paper in his studio, c.1952. PHOTOGRAPHER: LYDIA DELECTORSKAYA

**Henri Matisse
The Cut-Outs**

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2014

IT IS A BORE to hear about other people's operations but hang on—what follows are not the details of the dangers Matisse faced when he underwent intestinal surgery nor its often painful aftermath. The subject here is the dazzling art that it unleashed.

In 1941, legally separated from his wife of forty years and living in occupied France, Henri Matisse, then seventy years old, was diagnosed with intestinal cancer. He journeyed to Lyon, where he endured a life-threatening operation. It left him debilitated, intermittently unwell and either bedridden or in a wheelchair until he died thirteen years later.

But despite pain and exhaustion, his was not a long, sad decline. It was, he said,



HENRI MATISSE, THE HORSE, THE RIDER, AND THE CLOWN 1943-4

“a liberation”. Forced to stay in bed, he picked up scissors and painted papers and pinned to the walls of his room “a little garden all around me ... There are leaves, fruits, a bird”.

For decades he had been trying to find a way to unite line and colour. The solution came when he picked up a scissors and carved into colour. At his studio in the Hotel Régina, at his small Villa la Rêve in nearby Vence or, occasionally at his Paris apartment, he concentrated increasingly on making cut-outs. By 1948, he stopped painting in oils completely.

“Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs” at Tate Modern in London displays more than 120 works from this fertile, magical period. Some are small; others fill entire walls. (The show will be at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 25 October to 9 February 2015. It is the centrepiece of a film that begins worldwide distribution in November, and will be shown in Australia from 20 September.)

The cut-outs are so full of light and colour, the

shapes and combinations of trees and leaves, algae, parakeets and monkeys, dancers and flowers so lyrical and imaginative that however grumpy you may feel when you arrive, odds are you will feel better about life before you leave. Ignore those who damn the cut-outs with the faint praise that they are merely beautiful decorations. They are beautiful and decorative and they are art.

THE FIRST ROOM is an introduction to Matisse’s use of cut paper. In the decade before his operation he used cut-paper shapes to make models (maquettes) for subsequent paintings. For instance, *Still Life with Shell* (1940) has coloured-paper apples, coffee pot and a large curling shell. Each shape was pinned to a canvas and shifted around until Matisse arrived at the composition he wanted. Then he moved on to a different piece of canvas and painted *Still Life with Shell*, which hangs alongside.

In the next room is *Jazz* (1943-47), the radical, radiant evidence of his liberation. A huge,



HENRI MATISSE, BLUE NUDE (I) 1952



HENRI MATISSE, LARGE COMPOSITION WITH MASKS 1953

high-ceilinged room is filled with works in which cut paper is no longer a means to a future painting but an end in itself. Matisse was now making art with scissors and paper.

In 1940, Tériade (born Stratis Eleftheriades in Greece), a Paris art critic and publisher, proposed that Matisse illustrate a book of French poetry. Three years later the artist started to work on what would become a series of twenty cut-outs. As he worked he made notes to himself which were so evocative and engaging that they, not poems, became the text.

Jazz, a large-format, 100-page book, published in an edition of 250 copies, appeared in 1947. The text was a facsimile of Matisse's handwritten notes; the illustrations were pochoirs (hand-cut stencils). Only this labour-intensive technique could produce the desired near match with Matisse's potent colours.

In this exhibition, *Jazz* is displayed unbound. The gallery walls are lined with vitrines displaying each sheet. Above the glass cases hang the artist's original cut-out illustrations. Some, like "The Fall of Icarus", are inspired by mythology. "The Circus" is the jumping-off place for other pieces, including those of a knife thrower, a prancing horse and clowns. There are cowboys, a toboggan ride and my favourite, "Pierrot's Funeral". Here, against a black background, a pair of white horses pull a white carriage. In the centre of its blue window shines a bright red star, the soul of the sad dead clown shining through.

Colourful, bold, full of élan, *Jazz* is much loved,

the images often reproduced. Small, cheap replicas are available in the museum shop. When the rare complete, original edition comes to market, prices can reach £400,000 (A\$721,500). Individual pochoirs are relatively more accessible. In June, at London's Masterpiece Fair, print dealer Frederick Mulder sold six pochoirs from the book for prices that ranged from £7200 (A\$13,000) to £16,200 (A\$29,200).

He advertised for a "young and pretty girl" to temporarily fill in for his night nurse.



Midway through the show there is a film of Matisse in his wheelchair, big scissors and a large sheet of painted orange paper in hand. Both the snippers and the paper are constantly moving but not always in the same direction. The sinuous, curling paper seems to be writhing like a creature being born. This is nothing like the paper-cutting any of us did as kids.

In 1942, Matisse was in Nice recovering from surgery. He advertised for a "young and pretty girl" to temporarily fill in for his night nurse. Monique

Bourgeois replied and got the job. The two became friends but neither could have foretold what would follow. In 1943, Ms Bourgeois entered a Dominican convent in nearby Vence and took the name Sister Jacques-Marie. That same year Matisse bought his villa in Vence.

ONE DAY in 1947, Sister Jacques came to call. She asked if Matisse might contribute a decoration for the new convent building then being planned. When the Convent of the Rosary was consecrated in 1951, its ceramic walls, stained-glass windows, the altar cloth and priests' vestments—all were designed by Matisse.

Much of what he created for the chapel began as cut paper. A number of his originals are in the show, including the “life-sized” maquettes for the *Black Chasuble*, scattered with white falling fronds and starlit crosses, and *Red Chasuble*, covered with shooting yellow beams. What do the priests feel, celebrating mass enveloped by these glorious cloaks? As for the congregations, for even for the non-religious, it must border on being an ecstatic experience.

The exhibition ends with *Christmas Eve*. In 1952, Time-Life in New York commissioned a stained-glass window for its building. *Christmas Eve* was designed and finished that year. The maquette is displayed on one wall, the window on another. Comparisons are intended and inevitable but also unfair. In the



HENRI MATISSE, CHRISTMAS EVE 1952

absence of natural light it is impossible to appreciate or judge the window's impact. It is the colours, textures and shapes of the maquette that dominate the room. A big yellow star explodes near the top, above it the dark blue sky merges with the long tree trunk. On its sides, white and green waves wriggle on a magenta sea while black and white stars dance around the periphery.

Never mind what the calendar says, it seems to be wishing a Happy Christmas to us all.

THE EXHIBITION travels to New York where it will be at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) from 25 October 2014 until 9 February 2015. Many drawings will be added, which demonstrate that Matisse might make many preparatory sketches before he picked up his scissors and cut.

Visitors will also be treated to *The Swimming Pool*, Matisse's largest cut-out. Made in 1952

(the same year he created the Christmas Tree window), it covered the four walls of his Nice dining room. Not on public view for twenty years and newly restored, a room enveloped by these bands of cavorting blue swimmers form the centrepiece of MoMA's show. ❖



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Henri Matisse, *Jazz*