

**HENRI MATISSE**  
**FRENCH ARTIST**  
**1869 – 1954**

Henri Matisse (AHN REE \* MAH TEES) was born on New Year's Eve of 1869 in an old wool manufacturing town in Northern France. His father was a prosperous grain merchant and his "artistic" mother painted china and made hats. His father chose the law profession for him and Matisse was sent away to complete his studies. He did not discover the world of art until 1890 when he became ill and bed ridden. He started painting by using a "How to Paint" book. He enjoyed it so much that he left the law profession in order to study art. Matisse said, "The moment I had this box of colors in my hands, I had the feeling that my life was there... I felt as if I had been called. Henceforth I did not lead my life. It led me."

Matisse studied art in Paris during an exciting time when many new styles were emerging. He spent years copying the works of the masters and moderns in the museums. The Impressionists had opened the world's eyes to the wonder of bright color and light. Van Gogh and Cezanne were using bright colors in a new way filled with expression, distortion and structure. From Cezanne, in particular, he learned that compositions must be carefully organized. From his favorite teacher, Gustave Moreau, he learned to stress his own personal vision over mere technical competence. Matisse worked with all of these ideas and discovered his own individual style. In 1905, Matisse was one of a group of artists who became known as LES FAUVES (the wild beasts). Their new way of painting with a thick application and flat colors caused quite a sensation in Paris. Unknowingly, these daring artists were paving the way for the modern art movements of the twentieth century. Matisse soon decided that what he was most interested in was using SHAPE and COLOR to express emotion in his art. Matisse always used ORGANIC SHAPES from nature (human forms, plants, flowers, and animals). He liked to use PATTERN and REPETITION to create his compositions and the movement within them.

Matisse enjoyed traveling and became inspired by various cultures and architecture in such places as Algeria, Spain, Italy and Morocco. He was fascinated by the continuity between the interior and exterior spaces that were created by windows open to enclosed gardens. The gardens had inspired

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the floral motifs in the architecture. This harmony of nature and art is what Matisse strove to achieve in his paintings. Some of his favorite themes are represented by STILL LIFE compositions, flowers, PORTRAITS of women, and landscapes.

Matisse explained that he wanted his works to be DECORATIVE as well as expressive of his emotional reactions to the subjects he painted. He wanted to create an atmosphere of calm despite the very busy decorative patterns. He did not want anyone to see the hard work and planning that he had to do to achieve this effect. Matisse's teacher, Gustave Moreau, said he was "born to simplify painting" and that he would one day influence all Western art. Matisse worked and reworked his paintings sometimes over decades until he felt he had captured the essence of his subjects and reduced them to the simplest of terms.

In 1941, Matisse became seriously ill with intestinal cancer and almost died as a result of complications following surgery. His abdominal muscles were greatly weakened and he was increasingly unable to keep up with the strenuous demands necessary for oil painting. He was confined to his bed or wheelchair for the rest of his life. But, his remarkable spirit remained and he decorated his room like a garden with flowers, vines, birds, and women's heads. He brought the outside in, just as he had done in his paintings. Matisse created a new art form that we call "CUT-OUTS". He hired assistants to paint huge sheets of paper with the colors he loved. Using large scissors, he cut shapes out of the brightly colored paper--dancers, acrobats, clowns, birds, animals, plant forms, fish, and flowers! He felt he was "drawing with scissors". His assistants pinned the cut papers to the wall, shifting them around until Matisse was satisfied with his compositions. Colors were all-important to Matisse and he believed that color had healing properties.

Matisse's first extended use of the cut-out technique was for a book of 20 picture poems with a hand-written text that he entitled "Jazz". Most of the collages for Jazz relate to a circus or theater theme. Matisse used his cut-outs as design MAQUETTES (plans) for a wide variety of projects including mural paintings, stage designs, ballet costumes, book, magazine, and catalogue covers, illustrations, posters, scarves, wall hangings, liturgical vestments, roof tiles, and stained glass windows.

Matisse used art to show his response to the world. His lines, shapes, and colors dance across his pictures. He wanted to create pictures that would provide "a soothing, calming influence on the mind,

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like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue." He is known as one of the greatest and most influential painters of the 20th century. Every painter today who uses color simply and directly is somewhat in his debt.

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RESOURCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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**Websites**

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[www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/fauve/index.html](http://www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/fauve/index.html) - The Fauves

**Museum**

Washington, DC  
The National Gallery of Art  
Phillips Collection

Maryland  
Baltimore Museum of Art

Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia Museum of Art

New York  
Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Museum of Modern Art