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Louise Rogers Lalaurie, *Matisse: The Books*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020. 319 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-226-75054-5.

Review by John Klein, Washington University in St. Louis.

The 1988 publication of the catalogue raisonné of Henri Matisse's artwork in the general realm of illustration, by the artist's grandson, Claude Duthuit, would seem to have been definitive.[1] The Matisse family's reliable record-keeping informed this comprehensive accounting of the artist's graphic contributions to a variety of printed materials. The book is beautifully illustrated and produced. Jean Guichard-Meili, a venerable French poet and art critic, contributed a substantial introduction, if heavier on appreciation than analysis. For the first time, this neglected element of Matisse's prolific output could be comprehended in full. But instead of closing the book on this dimension of his art, the massive Duthuit volume, as any catalogue raisonné should do, had a stimulating effect on scholarship.

Against this backdrop, and on this foundation, three serious studies of Matisse's illustrated books have appeared in recent years. John Bidwell's *Graphic Passion: Matisse and the Book Arts* (2015) documented an exhibition of Matisse's illustrated books from a private collection that had been donated to the Morgan Library and Museum in New York.[2] Kathryn Brown's *Matisse's Poets* (2017), slightly mistitled because the author includes a prose work, is a penetrating study of Matisse's work in illustration through the theoretical lenses of historical literary studies and feminism.[3]

Louise Rogers Lalaurie's *Matisse: The Books*, under review here, is the latest in-depth entry in this burst of scholarship and appreciation. Lavishly illustrated, with a perceptive text enhanced by the author's expertise in translation from French, this book about books zeroes in on the most important examples within Matisse's unparalleled contribution to the genre of the *livre d'artiste*, the artist's book.[4] This form of artistic production had roots in the nineteenth century, in (among other examples) suites of illustrations to Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven* by Édouard Manet (1875) and Odilon Redon's images to accompany Gustave Flaubert's *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1896). The form was advanced significantly in the early twentieth century by the art dealer and publisher Ambroise Vollard and was further refined by the German art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the young Swiss bookseller Albert Skira, and the mononymic Greek entrepreneur Tériade. All outsiders in a certain sense (Vollard was from Réunion), these four figures essentially defined the *livre d'artiste* as a quintessentially French form. Although Vollard was one of his first dealers, Matisse did not work with him on books, but he collaborated with Skira and especially Tériade, with whom he had a particularly fruitful relationship, meaning that

Matisse's endeavors in illustration mapped closely on the development of the elite artist's book in the twentieth century.

Dating from the time of Gutenberg's invention of movable-type letterpress, books are at one level democratic objects. Efficient production enabled wide distribution of affordable products at a time when literacy was increasingly valued and promoted as necessary to a wide range of practices that were on their way to becoming professions. The pace of literacy accelerated in the nineteenth century owing to, among other factors, public educational reform, the rise of the novel and recreational reading, and the decreasing cost of book production, including the introduction of the paperback. As never before, reading could be called a popular activity.

As with any widespread popularization of an object or a practice, the counter-impulse emerged to create luxury versions, carefully produced expressions of craft skill and creativity, marketed to collectors who craved distinction, not an experience in common with others. This is the realm of the *livre d'artiste*. Publishers saw an opportunity to add value to both new and canonical literature by recruiting visual artists to provide complements to a text. For established artists such as Pierre Bonnard, Pablo Picasso, and Matisse, illustrating books offered new aesthetic, technical, and thematic challenges, as well as new markets for their work in an artform that could be offered in a lower price range than a painting or even a drawing. Nevertheless, such books were not products for mass consumption because their cost put them out of the reach of mere readers. As artists' books they are at one pole whose opposite is the "democratic multiple," the book designed and perhaps produced directly and informally by artists who wish to put their work into the hands either of a wide general audience (at low cost) or of a small circle of initiates (often free). This, too, was an important strain throughout the twentieth century, with roots in Futurist Italy and pre-Revolutionary Russia, as well as the Soviet Union. Its productions were intended to reconceive the very idea of the book.[5]

Such metaphysical ideas of reform were not behind Matisse's engagement with the book form. His motivations were more personal. He had no interest in supplementing someone else's text with "imitative illustration." He felt he had to respond emotionally to a work of literature before he could engage it to create a parallel expression, a "plastic equivalent" to words on a page.[6] Although perhaps idealistically, perhaps naively, he wished at least some of his books to be available to ordinary readers (he imagined that his *Dessins: Thèmes et variations* [1943] would be offered at a price "so that it may be available to students"), his production overall puts him firmly on the side of the deluxe object that would be cherished by its owner, who might lovingly turn its pages, appreciating the fine paper and crisp letterset typography along with the evocative visual program, before carefully putting it away.[7] But the collaborative culture of publishing and the economics of production and distribution were unfamiliar territories largely beyond Matisse's control. Relinquishing control was an important feature of bookwork that he was slow to learn. In general, accepting the trials and compromises of collaboration was a powerful undercurrent of his late career, in the realm of book illustration and well beyond.[8]

From 1930 through the late 1940s, the artist undertook eight to ten significant book projects, depending on who is counting. In some of these efforts he was called on to create illustrations for texts chosen by someone else. Typically he was deeply involved in the design as well as the illustration of a book. He sometimes had a hand in the choice of typeface, preferring such classics as Garamond, Baskerville, and Caslon, printed on handmade wove papers. He was hyper-concerned with the idea of balance in juxtaposing his illustrations with the text, usually on facing

pages. What began as a step into unknown territory evolved into near obsession with detail and fidelity to his creative vision.

When Skira asked Matisse to create illustrations for what would eventually become a selection of the poems of the modernist darling Stéphane Mallarmé, the opportunity arrived at a time when Matisse had serious doubts about his path as a painter, the foundation of his identity as an artist. Blocked at the easel, in the late 1920s he had become preoccupied with making small, related etchings in series; then he took a break from it all to voyage to distant Tahiti. In the meantime, he received two consequential commissions: that from Skira and the opportunity from the American collector Albert Barnes to paint an architectural decoration that would be Matisse's largest artwork. Working then simultaneously on table-top and mural scale, the artist found the new challenges frustrating but fruitful, and mutually reinforcing about the importance--and the constraints--of making work to suit someone else's desires and frame, whether a text or a building. In most of the subsequent book projects, as with the Mallarmé, Matisse was commissioned to provide illustrations to prominent works in the French literary canon from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, plus a few contemporary French authors, mainly friends of the artist who asked for his creative input and thus, not incidentally, his imprimatur.

Lalaurie's book, divided into eight chapters (each devoted to a single book), is extremely thorough and engaging on the immediate context for each project--on the origins, the main actors, the materials, the printing processes, and on Matisse's exacting methods leading to eventual disappointment or triumph. Accounts of production are extensive while stopping short of bibliophilic detail. Lalaurie is concerned to foreground the human side of the conception and realization of these projects. She quotes extensively and insightfully from Matisse's correspondence with friends and collaborators. She gives the publishers' and printers' voices a prominent place. Her descriptions and analyses of the texts themselves are especially sensitive and are often entertaining. This is not to say that she ignores matters of broader importance. She rightly points to the twin contexts of Matisse's recovery from serious intestinal surgery and the cloud of war as the stage for the great proliferation of the artist's work on book illustration in the mid- to late 1940s, when he was in his late seventies. He felt that time might be running short as he juggled several projects at once, which, coupled with inevitable production delays owing to the war, complicated the timeline between inception and publication for each.

Lalaurie makes the important observation that Matisse's wartime obsession with book illustration should be understood as an alliance with the acts of resistance represented by the texts he chose. This identification is especially prominent in the artist's deep engagement with the poems of Charles d'Orléans, who wrote them while he was a hostage of England during the Hundred Years' War, a clear parallel to Matisse's impressive work ethic while living in occupied France. Matisse identified so thoroughly with Charles that he took over the poems and made them his own, transcribing them in his hand, each verse surrounded by fanciful cartouches of his devising. Lalaurie's intricate account of the work's progress is one of the most insightful parts of her book. She also makes persuasive arguments for Matisse's choice of, and illustrations for, the poems of Pierre de Ronsard, "known to every school pupil" in France, as forms of "creative resistance" to the abridgement of freedoms under the Occupation (pp. 16-18, 107-8).

Three of Matisse's books stand out as exceptions to the French all-star lineup of authors he chose to illustrate. *Dessins: Thèmes et variations* (1943) was also one of his projects during the burst of wartime activity. It is a beautiful album, reproducing pre-existing artworks that represent a high

point in Matisse's distillation of the drawing process, but it is not a collaboration with an author's text in the same sense as his responsiveness to Mallarmé, Ronsard, Charles d'Orléans, or Baudelaire (though its long preface, by the Communist Louis Aragon, offers a ringing defense of Matisse's art as itself a form of wartime resistance).

The artist's illustrations to an American edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1935) were commissioned by the Limited Editions Club in New York for a middle-class market. The project was fraught with difficulties, and Matisse cut corners in that he never read the book he was meant to illustrate, opting instead for six pictorial responses to episodes in the novel's ancient source material, Homer's *Odyssey* (this indirection had Joyce's approval). Matisse's decision has prompted some derision, even very recently, in an extended critical meditation on Joyce's novel in which Matisse's illustrations are dismissed as "comically irrelevant."<sup>[9]</sup> It's true that the book's plates, done in soft-ground etching, are less suave than the spare and telling line drawings of the Mallarmé book from a few years earlier. Lalaurie excludes a consideration of the New York project based on Matisse's apparent belief that he did not consider *Ulysses* to be one of "his" books (p. 7). Matisse's implicit disavowal of the *Ulysses* project has a potential anti-American undercurrent. The large edition of 1,500 smacked of commercialism much more than the strictly limited numbers of his other books. *Ulysses* was also the only one of Matisse's books to be produced outside France, and this too had been against the artist's desire.

I think Lalaurie's omission was a mistake, for a couple of reasons. Matisse's pointed silence about this book came only after his much more thorough engagement with the cluster of projects in the 1940s, when he was intimately involved in all aspects of design and production, doubtless coloring his retrospection of the Joyce project, in which he was a distant participant. Matisse's *Ulysses* is also a fascinating example of his instinctive approach to his task, resulting in a suite of illustrations that highlights the intertextuality of Joyce's novel, in that both modernists responded in their own ways to the same source. Kathryn Brown makes a compelling case for an extended consideration of *Ulysses* in these terms. While this edition challenges the conventional understanding of the *livre d'artiste*, it may also be understood as a deeper and more subtle engagement with Joyce's novel in light of its then-turbulent reception.<sup>[10]</sup>

Then there is *Jazz*, sui generis and rightly celebrated. It was Matisse's most beautiful and consequential collaboration with the publisher Tériade. In *Jazz* Matisse undertook something unprecedented in his work on books—he wrote a kind of stream-of-consciousness text to accompany a suite of lively and, yes, jazzy plates—a reflexive ekphrasis, if you will—designed using the cut-paper technique that would become a hallmark of his extraordinary late career. Matisse's cursive rendition of his text, in looping, indulgent flourishes, is a perfect counterpart to the colorblock innovation of his playful pictures. The themes of these pictures—among them circus and sideshow, the mythic figure of Icarus, a clown's funeral, and finally the calm of a Tahitian lagoon—do not seem to have anything to do with the musical form of jazz, which was then wildly popular in France, practically a wartime soundtrack. But here jazz could signify resistance, and once again we are introduced to an unexpected intermediality in Matisse's book illustration, engaging senses beyond sight. Visually jaunty, but also "lively and violent" (Matisse's words), the artist's illustrations, in their jagged forms and themes of peril, also invoke the horrors of the war being prosecuted all around.<sup>[11]</sup> Significantly if enigmatically, Matisse likened jazz to the end-of-days imagery of his Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, in southern France, on which he was working at this time, declaring that "L'Apocalypse, mais c'est du jazz!" ("The Revelation of St. John, that's jazz!").<sup>[12]</sup> And in a remarkably contemporary and ominous

reference, Matisse initially considered the title “My Atomic Bomb” for *Jazz*.<sup>[13]</sup> Violent indeed. But *Jazz* then concludes with the thrice-repeated lagoon imagery, a promise of paradise, and a text that extols love, “the artist’s true foundation” (p. 277). In the end, as so often in Matisse’s thinking, art offers redemption from trials great and small, from the global scale to the domestic.

Finally, a few words about the illustrations in Lalaurie’s book. They are of uniformly high quality, and the pages from Matisse’s books are reproduced with an illusionistic hint of shadow at the bottom and right edges of each sheet (where a reader would turn the pages), a design trick that, however artificial, does enhance the sense of the books as physical objects. It serves as a reminder that, however thorough the descriptions, however probing the analysis—and Lalaurie is certainly thorough and probing—there is no substitute for a direct communion with these works of frequently constrained creativity and painstaking execution. With very few exceptions, the illustration program is restricted to sheets from Matisse’s books. The occasional inclusion of related paintings would have been welcome, reinforcing Lalaurie’s acknowledgement of the ways in which Matisse’s thematic preoccupations in his books were often integrated with his art as a whole.

We give the last word to Matisse’s old friend André Rouveyre who, after visiting the inaugural exhibition of *Jazz* in Paris, took a copy of the huge volume home with him, writing later to the artist of his intimate private experience of the book: “I studied it and read it with care. I compared my impressions as a visitor to Berès’s gallery and a private connoisseur of fine prints. I savoured it with relish” (p. 266).<sup>[14]</sup>

## NOTES

[1] Claude Duthuit, with the collaboration of Françoise Garnaud, *Henri Matisse: Catalogue raisonné des ouvrages illustrés* (Paris: Claude Duthuit, 1988).

[2] John Bidwell, et al., *Graphic Passion: Matisse and the Book Arts* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015).

[3] Kathryn Brown, *Matisse’s Poets: Critical Performance in the Artist’s Book* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

[4] In an entirely justified restriction, Lalaurie does not treat the many incidental illustrations—frontispieces, author portraits, cover illustrations—Matisse contributed to a variety of publications.

[5] See Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995), chapters three and four.

[6] Both phrases are from Matisse’s “Note à l’adresse de Raymond Escholier,” in Henri Matisse, *Écrits et propos sur l’art*, ed. Dominique Fourcade (Paris: Hermann, 2005), pp. 214–15, quoted in Brown, *Matisse’s Poets*, p. 4.

[7] Letter from Matisse to Marguerite Duthuit, the artist’s daughter, April 1942, quoted in Duthuit, *Henri Matisse: Catalogue raisonné*, p. 437.

[8] For an extended study of Matisse's initial resistance to, and eventual embrace of, the challenges of collaboration in expanding the range of his art, see John Klein, *Matisse and Decoration* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), especially chapters three to seven.

[9] Merve Emre, "Getting to Yes: The Making of *Ulysses*," *The New Yorker*, February 14 & 21, 2022, 70.

[10] Brown, *Matisse's Poets*, chapter three, "Disowning *Ulysses*."

[11] Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Matisse: His Art and His Public* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951), p. 275.

[12] Henri Matisse, M.-A. Couturier, and L.-B. Rayssiguier, *The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation*, ed. Marcel Billot, trans. Michael Taylor (Houston: Menil Foundation and Milan: Skira, 1999), p. 73.

[13] "Matisse in Philadelphia," *Newsweek* 31, no. 15 (12 April 1948), p. 84. This reference and the previous one are cited in Klein, *Matisse and Decoration*, p. 97.

[14] I have added the first sentence to the passage Lalaurie cites.

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