
H-France Review Vol. 22 (May 2022), No. 94

John Klein, *Matisse and Decoration*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. 271 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780300135640.

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“The word ‘decorative,’” T. J. Clark points out, “was on everyone’s lips in 1891.”[1] And there it remained, as every historian of modern art knows, until slightly beyond the first decade of the twentieth century as an entire generation of vanguard artists, the young Henri Matisse foremost among them, placed a premium not just on the theory and practice of decoration, but its social promise. Which strikes us now as decidedly odd; were the word “decoration” to be on anyone’s lips these days—let alone those of a serious, cutting-edge artist—it would almost certainly carry a strong hint of condescension if not outright derision. As a result, we tend to forget the extent to which the term captivated artists on either side of the Fin-de-Siècle / Belle Époque divide. Decoration, as Clark describes this moment, was “called on to do the (magic) work, which modernism still believed was possible, of soldering together the aesthetic and the social.”[2] Such magic, Clark claims, played a leading role in the heady optimism of the Belle Époque *not despite* but precisely because of the very surface qualities that we now look down our collective noses at: “On the one hand,” Clark writes, “the term decorative had (and has) a pejorative undertone to it, even (I should say especially) when it is presented as a demystifying alternative to higher values. Decorative means *merely* decorative—meaning overt in its simplifications, ostentatious in its repeated patternings, and unashamed in its offer of visual delight. It mocks the idea of beauty distinct from prettiness, or glitter, or blinding coloristic shock.”[3] At the same time, however—and this is the crucial point—“these are the qualities that allow Art to speak to the public realm. These are the qualities that prepare it...for the work of persuasion and chastening to come.”[4]

Given this dramatic reversal of fortune, from the vaguely *engagé* optimism of “soldering together the aesthetic and the social” to what Clark elsewhere calls “the bad dream of modernism,”[5] it’s surprising that no one has thought to chart this precipitous downfall as it pertains to its most influential, dedicated, and unrepentant practitioner—the very artist whose work has become all but synonymous with modernist decoration—Henri Matisse. But as John Klein’s superlative *Matisse and Modernism* makes clear, the artist himself would be the last to accept the preceding premise of rise and fall. For not only did Matisse never give up on decoration, he unabashedly embraced a wide range of decorative art practices and commissions long after others had abandoned the cause. Matisse’s unwavering commitment to decoration appears, for example, in a June 1946 letter to his dealer, Paul Rosenberg—written at a point when decoration’s cultural stock was at a historic low—in which the artist declares his intent not to renew his contract

because he planned to “let painting go for decorative works such as tapestries, frescos, etc. I will be painting pictures only occasionally for a long time.”[6] If, to put it mildly, decoration had fallen out of favor in the aftermath of the Second World War, Matisse quite adamantly *s’en fous*. By marked contrast, as Klein notes, in the same year Picasso famously sneered: “No, painting is not made to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of offense and defense in war against the enemy.”[7] An all-too obvious swipe at Matisse, Picasso’s jab also targets the bourgeois client—“the enemy”—who views painting as home furnishing. The enemy for Picasso, in other words, sounds a lot like the businessman Matisse famously invited to ease into the “armchair” comfort of his paintings, escaping from the stresses of the corner office.[8]

And yet, as Klein makes clear, to understand modernism’s relation to decoration through the fixed binary of *pro* (Matisse) and *contra* (Picasso) is to distort a more complex story. For when Matisse first described his “dream of an art of balance, of purity, and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter”—an art, this is, of the decorative—he was imagining a kind of painting that was specifically aimed at “the businessman as well as the man of letters” (Matisse’s gendered language is noteworthy) who would experience “a soothing, calming influence...something like a good armchair that provides relaxation from fatigue.”[9] But as Klein emphasizes, when the artist wrote these words in 1908, “At some level Matisse associated decoration and decorative painting with an idealized vision of art’s role to oppose the ills of a business- and production-oriented society” (p. 32). The exact mechanics of this distinction—comfort the businessman’s mind, condemn the business-minded—are left tantalizingly unclear, but what is clear, as Klein lays out in his first two chapters, is just how pervasive the discourse of decoration was in the early stages of Matisse’s career.

If Clark singles out 1891 as the moment in which decoration was “on everyone’s lips,” it just so happens that this was the precise year that Matisse abandoned his fledgling legal career for painting, first briefly entering the Académie Julian (where he stifled under the academic tutelage of William-Adolphe Bouguereau) before enrolling in the École nationale des beaux arts as a student of Gustave Moreau.[10] Klein does an excellent job in his first chapter of laying out the cultural backdrop to Matisse’s formative years, describing the rich, fertile soil of his life-long engagement with decoration. Striking all the familiar notes—the influence of Puvis de Chavannes’ large-scale public murals of 1880s and ‘90s, Maurice Denis’ landmark essay “Definition of Neotraditionalism” (1890), the decorative projects of the Nabis, and perhaps most importantly, Paul Signac’s *D’Eugène Delacroix au néo-impresionnisme* (1898)—Klein fleshes out the essentials to a wide-ranging story that in lesser hands could easily have lapsed into an introductory survey.

In his second chapter, Klein turns his attention more directly to Matisse’s early work, starting with his early mentorship and eventual break with Signac, emblemized by *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* (1904-05), purchased by Signac to hang in his Saint-Tropez dining room, and *Le Bonheur de vivre* (1905-06), savaged by Signac as “disgusting.” Again, this is well-trod ground that Klein breathes new life into, above all through his discussion of the less-well know *Port of Abaill, Collioure* (1905). As Klein notes, the composition of *Port of Abaill, Collioure* was “thoroughly planned and systematic” (p. 40), as evidenced by the surviving cartoon used to transfer his design to the canvas (a potential source of embarrassment, Klein suggests, given its academic associations). As such it appears “stately even static” (p. 40) a far cry from his hastily painted, alla prima Fauvist works such as his 1905, *Woman with a Hat* (“the nastiest smear of paint I have ever seen,” bemoaned Leo Stein before he bought it).[11] Moreover, the painting is unusual for Matisse in its combination of large scale (60 x 148cm) and contemporary-life scene, suggesting for Klein that, unlike “the

idyllic aims of Signac” (p. 41) the artist was already in the early stages of a forceful repudiation of the older Neo-Impressionist. All of which takes the discussion of Matisse’s formative years in a fresh direction. Further light is shed in the remainder of the chapter, which concentrates on a variety of seldom discussed early decorative art projects: a tin-glazed earthenware pot, a decorated plate, decorative tiles, a design for an unrealized stained-glass window, and set designs and costumes for a ballet (Igor Stavinisky’s *Le Chant du rossignol*).

Klein’s third chapter centers on Matisse’s ramped up engagement with various decorative arts projects during the 1920s and 1930s, several of which Klein sees as productive failures. A period of transition for the artist, the 1920s saw Matisse’s reputation solidify with his first sale to the state in 1922, while weaken at the same time, as critics began to lament a decline in quality and loss of direction. As Klein points out, Matisse’s groping efforts to find new footing is on full display in his *The Abduction of Europa* (1927-1929), a large painting that he “did not, or could not, finish” (p. 64). Matisse hits his stride afresh, however, with his remarkable *Dance* (1932-1933), a site-specific oil on canvas mural for the Barnes Foundation, which Klein describes in fascinating detail including his innovative use of cut paper during the planning and design process. Pushing beyond the artistic turmoil of the 1920s, Matisse undertook a wide range of decorative art projects in the 1930s, providing fresh wind for the artist’s sails. These included a silk and wool tapestry (1936), a limited edition glass vase manufactured by Steuben Glass (1938), a fireplace mantelpiece for Nelson Rockefeller’s New York city apartment (1938), and the costumes, set designs, and front curtain for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo’s production of *Rouge et noir* (1938).

The remainder of the book—four additional chapters, for a total of seven plus an epilogue—chart Matisse’s on-going engagement with a wide array of decorative arts projects, spanning nearly every imaginable media, until his death in 1954 at eighty-four (and indeed slightly beyond in the case of several posthumously realized designs detailed in the book’s epilogue). These include silk-screened on linen wall hangings, silk scarves, tapestries, a woven accent rug, stained glass windows, decorative tiles, and most famously his work on the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France, for which he designed the stained glass windows, a carved confessional door, a range of decorative tiles, and the fabric appliqué patterns of the priests’ robes. For a reader such as myself who is relatively familiar—or so I believed—with Matisse’s oeuvre, the artist’s long-standing, often single-minded commitment to these wide-ranging decorative arts projects was a revelation. Above all I had little-to-no sense of the various commercial projects described by Klein, let alone the precise working details of his contractual arrangements, the myriad collaborative difficulties in working with the skilled craftsmen, or the problems Matisse encountered as he transposed his designs from one media (painting, drawing, cut paper) into another (ceramic tiles, woven tapestries, glass, silkscreen on silk, etc.).

Providing grounds for a significant revision of current scholarship, *Matisse and Decoration* presents us with a new and exhaustive account of Matisse’s work as *designer*. As mundane as this may sound, it directly contradicts Yve-Alain Bois’ massively influential claim that “nothing could be more alien to Matisse’s thought” than “the concept of ‘design.’”[12] As Bois describes it: “[T]he concept of design presupposes a kind of plastic grammar transcending all genres, all media, a kind of *esperanto* allowing for a flattening out of all differences, and an escape from the dictates of materiality: for a ‘designer,’ scale does not count; he sketches a cigarette lighter as if he were dealing with a scale model of a skyscraper, or plans a skyscraper on the basis of a mock-up the size of a lighter.”[13] The designer—a term tinged with derision for Bois—cares not a whit

for shifts in scale or how an image in one medium (the design) translates into another (the product). “[F]or the designer,” Bois claims, “the formal idea is prior to the actual substance.”[14] And yet, as Klein’s book shows in exacting detail, not only is Bois’ claim that “all of Matisse’s art” stands “violently opposed” to the “entirely projective practice [of design]” massively overstated, his career-long engagement with decorative art, as Klein points out, “required him to think projectively, and consequently to separate conception [i.e. design] from realization.... The design would be his, but the result was usually predestined for an array of ‘others’; other materials; other places; other people (clients); other times (the future); other purposes (perhaps non-artistic)” (pp. 16).[15] Even shifts in scale—the central taboo in Matisse’s practice according to Bois—were necessitated on occasion, as Klein describes in the case of a 1949 Gobelin workshop tapestry based on Matisse’s 1943 painting *The Lute*.

Doubtless there will be certain readers who complain that Klein’s engagement with other scholars is skimpy at best: the long discussion of the *décoratif* in Alastair Wright’s 2004 book, *Matisse and the Subject of Modernism*, for instance, appears nowhere (beyond the bibliography) in Klein’s book, nor Romy Golan’s 2009 *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957*, nor Roger Benjamin’s important “The Decorative Landscape, Fauvism and the Arabesque of Observation,” to name but a few.[16] But given the daunting task of tracing the entirety of Matisse’s decorative arts production, one can sympathize with Klein’s decision to keep his engagement with the massive body of secondary literature to a minimum. Likewise, others may criticize the relative sparsity of social-historical-political context in which Klein situates his research, but again do so would be to bemoan that Klein did not write another book altogether: “It is an easy job,” Ford Madox Ford reminds us, “to say that an elephant, however good, is not a good warthog; for most criticism comes to that.”[17] Taken on its merits, which are excellent indeed, *Matisse and Decoration* fills in what was, until now, a significant hole in our understanding of one of the giants of twentieth-century European modernism. And for this remarkable achievement alone, we should be incredibly grateful.

NOTES

[1] T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes in a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 130.

[2] Clark, p. 130.

[3] Clark, pp. 130-131.

[4] Clark, p. 131.

[5] T. J. Clark, “Jackson Pollock’s Abstraction,” in Serge Guilbaut, ed., *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1990), p. 179. Clark uses this phrase to describe the use of Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings as a decorative backdrop for models fashioning the “The New Soft Look” in series of photographs by Cecil Beaton in the March 1, 1951 issue of *Vogue*.

[6] Letter from Henri Matisse to Paul Rosenberg, 2 June 1946, in Claude Duthuit et al, *Matisse: “La Révélation m’est venue de l’Orient,”* (Rome, 1997-98), p. 246. Exhibition catalog, Musei Capitolini; cited in Klein, p. 119.

[7] Pablo Picasso, quoted in Alfred H. Barr, Jr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), p. 248; quoted in Klein, p. 88.

[8] Henri Matisse, “Notes of a Painter” (1908), in Jack Flam, ed., *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 41; cited in Klein, p. 53.

[9] Matisse, “Notes of a Painter” (1908), p. 41; cited in Klein, p. 53.

[10] Moreau was by far the most decorative and idiosyncratic painter of 1860s. Incomprehensibly so, as Peter Cooke writes: “In later years, decoration and pictorial richness were to become an essential part of Moreau’s aesthetic, but in the 1860s this symbolic-*cum*-decorative excess was such a heterodox style that Moreau necessarily incurred the displeasure, and incomprehension, of his audience.” Peter Cooke, “Gustave Moreau and the Reinvention of History Painting,” *The Art Bulletin*, 90, no. 3 (2008): 404.

[11] Leo Stein, *Appreciation: Painting, Poetry, and Prose* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 158.

[12] Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 3.

[13] Bois, p. 3.

[14] Bois, p. 3.

[15] Bois, p. 3.

[16] Alastair Wright, *Matisse and the Subject of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004); Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); and Roger Benjamin, “The Decorative Landscape, Fauvism and the Arabesque of Observation,” *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 25, no. 2 (June 1993): 295-316.

[17] Quoted in Julian Barnes, “Flaubert at Two Hundred” *London Review of Books*, vol. 43, no. 24 (December 16, 2021): 8, no source given.

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ISSN 1553-9172