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Matthew Affron, Cécile Debray, and Claudine Grammont, eds., *Matisse in the 1930s*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Philadelphia Museum of Art; Paris: Musée de l'Orangerie; RMN-Grand Palais; New Haven: in association with Yale University Press, 2022. 256 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0876332993.

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

*Matisse in the 1930s* is the important book-length publication accompanying the eponymous exhibition of Henri Matisse's artwork held in the United States at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2022, followed by turns at two French museums, in Paris and Nice. The catalogue represents a collaboration among the three curators of the show, each representing one of the museums involved. It begins with an introduction co-written by the curators, followed by a principal essay by each of them, plus three essays by other experts in France and the United States. A section reproducing period covers and texts from the French journal *Cahiers d'art* emphasizes the importance of that estimable publication to Matisse's reputation in the decade. This is followed by many short studies of individual Matisse artworks or specific issues pertinent to his work, written by a wide variety of figures ranging from museum personnel to publishing professionals and academic art historians. The book closes with a dense chronology, "The Artist at Work, 1926-40," whose date range indicates that the exhibition and publication really concern what could be called "the long 1930s," a sensible expansion given the general effort to explain what was special or particular about Matisse's art in the fourth decade of the twentieth century—in other words, what justified the project in the first place.

About the title: couldn't the curators have come up with something less vague and flat-footed? It is barely possible to imagine a publication called *Matisse in the 1900s*, or *Picasso in the 1910s*, for example. Fauvism and Cubism, respectively, could act as admittedly imperfect shorthand for those artists' revelations in those decades. What would be an appropriate shorthand for Matisse in the 1930s? The answer lies, I think, not in a single, defining tendency, as in the fanciful examples above, but in the significant number of initiatives the artist took in the course of the decade, forays into new artistic territories whose further exploration would dominate his late career and cement his status as one of the great polymaths in the visual arts of his time.

How about: *Matisse in the 1930s: Decade of Innovation?* Here we have a sub-structure to work with. In the next five paragraphs, let's consider five momentous personal events and artistic developments in that decade that radically altered the practice of an artist trained in the beaux-art traditions of painting and sculpture.

In 1930 Matisse took a transformative sea voyage. In his work the previous year on a specific canvas (the object of one of the book's informative shorter notices), he had become frustrated with his progress. Feeling the need for a radical change of scene, he journeyed first to the U.S., then to Tahiti, where he reveled in the light of the tropics and the balming effect of shallow, warm lagoons. Alix Agret offers a brief account of Matisse's stay in Tahiti ("Matisse's World Tour") while barely hinting at its transformative effects on his later art. The impact of these experiences would not reach full strength for nearly fifteen years, in a project for the London fabric converter Zika Ascher for compositions large and small that feature Polynesian motifs of sea and sky, rendered in arrangements of colored paper scissored into shapes of fish, algae, jellyfish, and birds. His Tahitian sojourn informed some of his most significant late-career decorative projects, in stained glass, ceramic tile, and tapestry and other fabrics, all media in which he had no previous training, extending his creative reach into unfamiliar realms through difficult episodes of self-education.

This generative technique, of composing artworks from pieces of cut paper instead of pencil or crayon lines and brushstrokes of oil paint, was an innovation in the service of another momentous development in the early 1930s: the commission Matisse received from the ambitious Philadelphia collector Albert Barnes for his newly christened Barnes Foundation, an art school with an all-star collection of modern European art. Barnes already owned a quantity of significant paintings by Matisse when he proposed that the artist paint a mural to decorate the spaces above three windows in his Foundation building: this would be *Dance*. To design the immense composition—at nearly forty-five feet in length, it would be Matisse's largest artwork—he ingeniously adopted the expedient of cutting shapes from sheets of paper colored by assistants in blue, pink, gray, and black. His habitual easel-painting process of composition, erasure, rethinking, then attacking anew was expedited at that expanded scale by the ease of cutting new pieces of paper for the six figures and their colored backgrounds, much preferable to the arduous prospect of repeated repainting on a canvas surface. In the publication under review, Matthew Affron does a creditable job of summarizing Matisse's impulse to synthesize visual data into decorative form and gives brief accounts of the artist's various commissions for decorative painting and tapestries in the course of the decade, adding to the available knowledge about these projects some previously unpublished evidence of Matisse's strategies and frustrations. Affron also situates Matisse effectively within the political context of muralism in the 1930s. But inexplicably, he omits to mention the artist's pique at not receiving a commission for a mural painting for the 1937 Exposition Internationale in Paris. Among the hundreds of murals at that exhibition, Matisse's would have occupied a minority position, but one crucial to his thinking, as a firmly aesthetic effort in the face of an overwhelming general sentiment that murals should engage contemporary issues in politics, technology, and society.

Also in early 1930, the artist was commissioned by the Swiss publisher Albert Skira to illustrate a selection of poems by the French modernist Stéphane Mallarmé, Matisse's choice over the classic French text *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon*, Jean de la Fontaine's 1669 retelling of stories from classical mythology, which had been Skira's original idea. This would be Matisse's first illustrated book. Over fifty of Mallarmé's poems are accompanied by Matisse's severely and elegantly linear etchings. Matisse was highly sensitive to Mallarmé's poems, but he was not attempting an ekphrasis. He ended up taking over the design of the volume, including choosing the typeface and balancing his pure lines and the resulting abundance of white space against the facing blocks of heavy black italic text. From choice of text to page layout, his attentions to the total effect of text and illustration established a degree of involvement in the entire endeavor that

would characterize his many later book projects, in a dense cluster in the following decade, including the landmark *Jazz* (1941-47), for which he not only designed the boldly colorful plates, but also contributed a highly personal text, rendered in a looping cursive hand. Matisse's Mallarmé illustrations and their preparatory studies were well represented in the exhibition in Philadelphia but were barely mentioned in the book under review.

Matisse designed the *Jazz* plates using the same technique he had developed for the Barnes *Dance*. Colored paper, cut and pasted, would become his preferred method of designing tapestries, wall hangings in other fabric, and stained-glass windows. Commissions and personal projects in these and other media were a defining feature of his late career, with the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, in southern France, as the centerpiece of his design work. Moreover, he used the cut-paper technique to make many independent artworks, the often very large paper cutouts that are some of his most loved achievements. Juliet Bellow's valuable short essay on the ballet *Rouge et noir* (1938-39), for which Matisse designed the costumes, set, and front curtain, largely using his cut-paper maquette technique, contributes to our understanding of the potential political response to the ballet without acknowledging the implications for Matisse's design endeavors for the next fifteen years.

In 1936 Matisse was commissioned by the textile entrepreneur Marie Cuttoli to make a tapestry. The project connected the Mallarmé illustrations to this new design work, as the subject for the Cuttoli tapestry was derived directly from one of the plates from the Mallarmé book. This first venture into textile design was unsuccessful. The artist disliked the result (unfortunately, this completed tapestry was not in the exhibition in Philadelphia, and it is not reproduced in the book), which he felt did not accurately translate the subtleties of his painted design. A second painted version was never sent to the looms. A difficult learning curve concluded in frustration. But this effort led ultimately to further opportunities for fabric design, including official state commissions for tapestries as part of a general revival of this classic French luxury art after the Second World War. Beginning with the Cuttoli project and contributing to successes in the commissions for the great variety of decorative projects he engaged in the 1940s and 1950s, Matisse was learning that if he wanted to move beyond the arena of painting, he had to accept and anticipate that processes of translation into ultimate materials must affect how he designed for them.

If the exhibition had been held ten years ago, this publication might have looked very different. Typically, the curators would have contributed essays exploring the broad themes of the show, and they possibly would have enlisted a small number of outside scholars to write in related areas. But *Matisse in the 1930s* follows a more recent trend in publishing for museum exhibitions. Many authors are recruited to contribute bite-sized analyses of sometimes highly specific topics. In one way this proliferation is a welcome development, bringing in authors with disparate voices and views. A case in point is "Matisse and International Black Modernity," by Denise Murrell, whose pioneering research on Black models' contributions to European modernist art has enjoyed great, and appropriate, prominence. Her analysis here of two unfinished Matisse paintings is, however, speculative and inconclusive. If both canvases show Black models, why, one might ask, did he not complete them?

A few further points to note: Éric de Chassey's eye-opening comparative study of four important retrospective exhibitions held in 1930-31, in Berlin, Paris, Basel, and New York, to celebrate Matisse's sixtieth birthday ("A Crisis and Four Exhibitions"), emphasizes their strategic

importance to the artist “at a time when the aura and mystique surrounding Matisse had faded” (p. 32). In “Lydia Delectorskaya and the Making of Matisse,” Ellen McBreen makes a strong case that the “multiple, sometimes conflicting identities she negotiated” (p. 58) over the twenty-two years she worked for and with the artist transformed his art as surely as his art transformed her, stressing how essential each was to the other’s success.

*Matisse in the 1930s* was a beautiful exhibition with a substantial publication that contributes a great deal to our knowledge of the artist but also atomizes some of the more consequential developments in his art. The book’s collective analysis of Matisse’s achievements in this decade missed an opportunity to assert the 1930s as one of the most generative and innovative periods of Matisse’s art, which led to an impressive expansion of his creative ambitions into unfamiliar and sometimes difficult territory.

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Timothy Rub, “Foreword”

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Chara Kolokytha, “Matisse, Zervos, and *Cahiers D’Art*”

Éric de Chasse, “A Crisis and Four Exhibitions”

Cécile Debray, “Matisse/Picasso: The Duo’s revival in the *Cahiers D’Art*”

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Claudine Grammont, “Matisse’s Studio in the Making of his Work”

“*Cahiers D’Art*: Extracts 1926-39”

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Laurence Schlosser, “*Henriette I, II, III*”

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Claudine Grammont, “*Nymph in the Forest (Verdure)*”

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Juliet Bellow, “*Rouge et noir: A Museum of Synthesis?*”

Matthew Affron, “*Themes and Variations*”

Anne Théry, “The Artist at Work 1926-40”

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