

Cult Rooms

Matisse's cutouts were dismissed by contemporaries as a childish indulgence. Today, many consider them his masterpiece.



Old, ill and bedridden in Nice, Matisse staged a surprise final act.

Henri Matisse chose his final residence well. The Palais Regina in Nice had been built for Queen Victoria in 1897. It featured electronic elevators, central heating and croquet lawns—plus sea views from the 80 rooms needed to accommodate the entourage of the planet's most powerful woman.

Nice receives 300 glorious days of sun per year and as the sun flooded Matisse's bedroom, the northerner could shove open his louvered shutters to reveal a living canvas: azure seas, bronzed limbs, green palms that swish-swished like an enlivened brush against a burnished yellow sun. Simple colors, simple life.

The resulting work was far removed from the nutty fauvism of his formative years. Now he was like a child let loose with tubs of primary colors. Monochrome blue nudes and color-blocked fronds climbed his bedroom walls.

Picasso would call in to needle his older rival; the fiery Catalan poked the bourgeois Frenchman toward greater creativity. The two embodied the interwar spirit by collaborating on stage sets for the Ballets Russes in Monte Carlo. (This being the French Riviera, Coco Chanel stitched the ballet costumes, while Jean Cocteau designed the posters.) Matisse contributed bold cutouts of colored paper that he pinned directly onto the prima ballerina.

But change was coming. While Matisse was visiting Paris in the spring of 1940, Nazi hordes fell upon the city. He fled back to Nice, only to be diagnosed with abdominal cancer. The wartime surgery left him bound to either his bed or a wheelchair.

Yet slowly, strangely, avant-garde stardust sprang from his aged hands. He could still grasp a long cane, with a paintbrush tacked on the end, which he used to swoosh linear shapes on his remaining bare walls. "Work cures everything," he once claimed. Like a wheelchair general, he chivvied on teams of assistants who gouached reams of paper. Cutting was easier than painting, and so the shapes were snipped, arranged and colla-

ged. They formed a circus of animated figures for a limited edition art tome named *Jazz*. At age 74 he had the confidence to embark on an unexpected final act—a "second life" as he gratefully called it. In 1943, Allied bombs rained down on Nice's rail depot near the Palais Regina. Matisse fled once more, this time to the hilltop town of Vence. A young nurse, Monique Bourgeois, tended to him by night and posed by day. She later entered the local convent and told him of plans by Dominican monks to construct a new chapel in Vence. She asked Matisse to help. He not only offered to design the entire structure but to pay for it as well.

Matisse's atheism horrified the Catholic clergy, and Picasso purportedly recommended that he decorate a brothel instead. Yet, in a piece of cosmic alignment, the dimensions of his apartment back in Nice followed the chapel's floor plan. This allowed him to design what he would later attest was his "masterpiece" from the comfort of his bed, or as he wheeled across the Palais Regina's parquet.

Using a lump of charcoal attached to a bamboo pole he sketched the chapel's Passion of Christ mural. Ever the perfectionist, he designed the holy water bowls and priests' garments too. The final effect is light-filled and expansive, like the view from his apartment windows in Nice.

Still more works came from his Palais Regina years. His vast cutout gouaches, "drawing with scissors" as he called it, included *Blue Nude IV* in 1952. As his body hibernated, the spirit reverted to youth. His last piece was a portrait of his final muse, Lydia Delectorskaya, drawn on plain paper with a ballpoint pen. The artist passed away at 84, his bedroom walls overtaken by a technicolor jungle of figures and leaves. Matisse was interred in the cemetery of the Monastère Notre Dame de Cimiez, near both the Palais Regina and Musée Matisse. Schoolchildren have peppered his grave with their own drawings. As Matisse would have wanted, it marks a naive return to a playful youth.