

# Presentation of the exhibition

***A biographer of Matisse: Gaston Diehl***  
**November 20, 2015 –February 29, 2016**

It was in 1947 that the historian, journalist and film maker Gaston Diehl decided to write a biography of Henri Matisse. The book was published in 1954 by the Editions Tisné in Paris, making Gaston Diehl one of the French authors to have helped contribute to building awareness of Matisse's works within a global, contemporary context, as the book hit the shelves a few weeks before the painter's death.

This exhibition explores the ties between Matisse and his biographer, as well as the historic and artistic relationship between Gaston Diehl and Nice via the Mediterranean Union for Modern Art and his friendship with the latter's secretary, Jean Cassarini.

Based on Gaston Diehl's biography entitled *Henri Matisse*, the museum has put together a panoramic overview that recreates the historical landscape and context of the publication.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the inclusion of the photography collection of Frédéric Altmann, a historian of the École de Nice and photographer, and without the support of the photographer and publisher Jean-Paul Fouques. The photos are displayed alongside documents and letters that were exchanged between Matisse and Gaston Diehl, taken from the Henri Matisse Archives in Issy-les-Moulineaux with the blessings of the art historian's family.

## Visitor route

### **Un biographe de Matisse : Gaston Diehl**

Gaston Diehl was born in Paris in 1912. Licencié ès lettres, diplômé de l'Institut d'art et d'archéologie ainsi que de l'École du Louvre, il débute dans la critique d'art par la création, en octobre 1935, du groupe artistique et poétique nommé Regain.

Born in Paris in 1912 and a Bachelor of Arts graduate of l'Institut d'art et d'archéologie as well as l'École du Louvre, Gaston Diehl began his career in art criticism in October 1935 when he founded a group for art and poetry called Regain.

In 1942, he met Henri Matisse at the Régina in Nice.

In 1945, Diehl participated in the creation of the Comité consultatif des arts plastiques de la ville de Nice (Advisory Board of Plastic Arts of the City of Nice). The next year he approached the Union méditerranéenne pour l'art moderne (UMAM), which was founded by Matisse and Bonnard in order to promote contemporary Mediterranean creation.

Dès 1947, he began his researchs and the redaction of a biography on Matisse, that was published in 1954 by Tisné edition.

### **Gaston Diehl and Henri Matisse first meet**

At the end of 1942, Gaston Diehl was asked by mutual friend and director of the cultural review *Comoedia* René Delange to interview the painter. As a result, Gaston Diehl<sup>1</sup> first met Henri Matisse at the Régina, on the Cimiez hill.

There in the artist's sweeping apartment and studio, Gaston Diehl took a handful of pictures, displayed here in the exhibition. The art historian soaked up the painter's artistic world, and questioned him on his perception of pictorial creation.

The friendship took on a professional edge when Gaston Diehl, upon the painter's request, played a hand in the publishing of André Rouveyre's *Apollinaire*<sup>2</sup>. In 1944, Matisse was inspired by an identity photograph of Apollinaire to illustrate this book, creating, at Mourlot Frères, printer in Paris<sup>3</sup>, a series of portraits comprised of six lithographic variations. He asked Gaston Diehl to ensure they were properly laid out.

This book is a tribute to the friendship between Apollinaire and Rouveyre and was published in 1952 by « Raisons d'Être » in Paris.

As part of the Consulting Committee of Fine Arts of the City of Nice founded in 1945 and the Mediterranean Union of Modern Art, of which both Matisse and Bonnard accepted honorary presidency, Henri Matisse and Gaston Diehl remained in touch with a view to promoting contemporary Mediterranean art.

In light of Gaston Diehl's ardent interest in his work, Matisse in turn agreed to support him for the Salon de Mai in Paris in 1950, lending him one of his latest cut-out gouache paintings, *Zulma*<sup>4</sup> (1950).

Thus began a long tradition of written correspondence between the two.

### **Gaston Diehl, author of Matisse, biography, published in 1954 by editions Tisné, in Paris**

Wishing to be involved in Matisse's legacy and artistic production, Gaston Diehl evoked for the first time, in a letter he wrote to Matisse in 1947, he had the ambition to write a biography on the artist.

Their continued prolific correspondence allowed Matisse to assist in this endeavor and make corrections.

In 1950 the writing of the biography of Matisse began. Mixing anecdotes of life and aesthetic considerations, this book puts in parallel the story of the career of the painter and his most emblematic works. It will be completed in 1954, on these words:

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<sup>1</sup> Gaston Diehl, *La peinture française dans les années noires 1935 - 1945 [French painting in occupied France 1935 - 1945]*, Nice, Z'éditions, 1999, p.51.

<sup>2</sup> André Rouveyre, *Apollinaire*, Paris, Éditions « Raison d'Être », 1952.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Henri Matisse to Gaston Diehl, Vence, 30 April 30, 1944, in: *Des lettres et des peintres [Of Letters and painters]*, Museum of Letters and Manuscripts, Paris, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Diehl, *La peinture française dans les années noires 1935 - 1945*, op. cit., p.52.

“He succeeded with a rare happiness to combine the spatial experience of light and color, to make them give the maximum possibilities, to prepare them for such grace and to combine so harmoniously, as they appear in the history of painting as a revelation that we could never forget<sup>5</sup>.”

Among the works reproduced in the book, some of them belong to the musée Matisse of Nice open in 1963: *Village en Bretagne*, 1895, *Nature morte à l’harmonium*, 1899-1900.

### **The works and objects of Matisse seen by Gaston Diehl**

In 1942, during his meeting with Matisse at the Régina, Gaston Diehl takes photos<sup>6</sup> of the painter and the room of the apartment and studio where he is received.

These are an interesting testimony to the Musée Matisse in Nice. Among the thirteen works hung on the walls, we can see the painting *Nu dans un fauteuil, plante verte* (*Nude in a armchair, green plant*), realized in 1937, belonging to the collection of the Museum since its creation in 1963, as well as a number of furniture and objects: the “Moorish” wooden painted octagonal gueridon, the vase in glazed terracotta, named “Etruscan vase”, the striped armchair-chaise longue Louis XV, the green glazed stoneware octagonal pot.

The presence of Monstera philodendrons recalls Aragon’s words during his visit at the villa Le Rêve where Matisse lived from 1943 to late 1948: “a room entirely overrun by green plants [...]: the very sunlight is filtered through the leaves as though the mysterious patterning of the latticed blinds (moucharaby) [...] were repeated in front of these windows<sup>7</sup>”.

### **Other biographies dedicated to Henri Matisse**

Besides the works that Gaston Diehl devoted to him, Henri Matisse was the subject of numerous biographies, whose authors are quoted.

Some exhaustively recount the events that punctuated the painter's life, and some fixate on the conceptual evolution of his work; some are based on amicable experiences between the artist and the biographer, and some are written without having had direct contact with the painter. Each biography about Matisse attempts, through various approaches, to seize and transcribe the painter’s reasons of his creation.

### **1920 - Marcel SEMBAT, *Matisse***

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<sup>5</sup> Gaston Diehl, *Henri Matisse*, Paris, éditions Tisné, 1954.

<sup>6</sup> Frédéric Altmann Collection, formerly collection Jean Cassarini.

<sup>7</sup> Louis Aragon, *Henri Matisse, roman*, tome 1, [Paris], Éditions Gallimard, 1971, p. 230 ; rééd. Quarto Gallimard, 1998, p. 284.

In this short biography, Marcel Sembat, politician and journalist, gives an approach to the painter's life in terms of his artistic sensibility at the service of the conquest of his expression.

**1937 - Raymond ESCHOLIER, *Henri Matisse***

Choosing to focus on the work Henri Matisse established himself throughout his life, Raymond Escholier, curator and novelist, recounts the constancy of "creative inspiration"<sup>8</sup> of the painter.

**1942 - Pierre COURTHION, *Le visage de Matisse***

In this text, without particular chronological order, the biography progresses at the mercy of anecdotes about Matisse's life, as told by Pierre Courthion, art critic and poet. Thanks to his multiple visits to Régina, the art critic and poet knew Matisse well and was thus able to capture the artist more intimately in this book. In order to better highlight the specificities of the Matisse's art, he also follows a parallel narrative of the evolution of Picasso.

**1945 - George BESSON, *Matisse***

Penetrating the painter's life with some acuity, this short book attempts to trace "the self-discovery of Matisse"<sup>9</sup>, intending to describe, in a nutshell, the most emblematic stages of his pictorial evolution. The story by this biographer, collector and art critic, evokes the painter's "expression of pure [...] emotion"<sup>10</sup>.

**1951 - Alfred BARR, *Matisse, His art and his public***

In his book, Alfred Barr, art historian, relies on the chronological frame of Matisse's life to analyze the progression of his work and discuss its impact in the art world.

**1952- André VERDET, *Prestiges de Matisse***

The author, poet and painter admirer of Matisse's works, seeks to capture to grasp the complexity of Matisse's artistic sensitivity and its simplified transcription in his paintings.

**1971 - Louis ARAGON, *Henri Matisse, roman (Henri Matisse: a novel)***

Considering art as a concept that surpasses word's ability to express, Aragon, art critic and poet, affirms that his book is a novel, "that is to say, a language invented to explain [...] the unusual activity which engages a painter or a sculptor"<sup>11</sup>.

Combining encounters story and description of Matisse's places of life, this novel, become the work of an author, is marked by the creative friendship between the poet to the painter.

**1984 - Pierre SCHNEIDER, *Matisse***

This impressive literary undertaking by Pierre Schneider, art historian, accounts precisely the artist's career. Punctuating the story of Matisse's life by relevant analyses of his works, the author delivers a true reference book, balancing between art book and biography.

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<sup>8</sup> Raymond Escholier, *Henri Matisse*, Paris, Librairie Floury, 1937, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Georges Besson, *Matisse*, Paris, Éditions Braun & Cie, 1945, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Aragon, *Henri Matisse, roman*, tome 1, [Paris], Éditions Gallimard, 1971, p. 15 ; rééd. Quarto Gallimard, 1998, p. 31-32.