MUSÉE MATISSE

GUIDE TO THE MUSEUM AND EXHIBITION

OCTOBER 2022 > FEBRUARY 2023
The Matisse museum in Nice

In December 1917, Matisse discovered Nice for the first time. He produced most of his work in this city where he lived until his death in November 1954.

After the Second World War, the City of Nice created strong links with Henri Matisse and the local public discovered his work thanks to two exhibitions, first in 1946 at the Palais de la Méditerranée and then in 1950 at the Galerie des Ponchettes, which was inaugurated for the occasion.

After the artist’s death, his family, in agreement with the city, chose to set up the museum in the Villa des Arènes, close to where he had lived in the Régina. After several years of work, the Musée Matisse opened its doors on 5 January 1963.

Located on top of a hill, the Musée Matisse is part of the vast heritage complex of Cimiez, the former Roman city of Cemenelum which became the central feature of Nice’s development into a winter resort town in the 19th and 20th centuries. The city is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The museum consists of the Villa des Arènes, a 17th century Genoese dwelling, which was revamped and extended with a new wing by the architect Jean-François Bodin between 1987 and 1993.

The collection of the Musée Matisse brings together 31 paintings, 454 drawings and engravings, 38 cut-outs, 57 sculptures and more than 130 objects from Matisse’s personal collection which he and his heirs donated to the City of Nice. Most of these works and objects were directly brought from the artist’s studio, giving the visitor access to the intimacy of his creative process.

The museum has a policy of regularly rotating its exceptional permanent collection, curating small themed displays and large temporary exhibitions to constantly bring fresh perspective to Matisse’s work. Rotations help us turn each of your visits into a new experience!
In this exhibition, Agnès Thurnauer wishes to explore the link which Henri Matisse never stopped working on between illustration and painting, the book and the canvas. Writing every day, Agnès Thurnauer is a great reader, and her paintings often proceed from books. This attachment resonates with Matisse’s work and his conception of the book as an architectural space that challenges the hierarchies and compartmentalisation of artistic genres.

The fifty letters the artist wrote to Matisse between April 2021 and January 2022, after her first visit to the museum, form the common thread running through the exhibition. In this correspondence, Agnès Thurnauer discusses notions which are key to her, examining more particularly the question raised by Matisse’s decision to have the different « states » of his paintings photographed to document their evolution as he painted them. Echoing these letters, a long line of Prédelles (predella) for each of which the artist has used different colours, pencils, syllables and splits in the painted words, acts as a sort of repetition or echolalia of painting. As if the pages of Agnès Thurnauer’s letters to Matisse had been hung on picture rails. In Agnès Thurnauer’s work, the relationship between writing and painting, language and forms, often leads to a dialogue between the horizontal plane and the vertical plane as illustrated by her Matrices/Assises. Displayed in front of Matisse’s monumental cut-out Fleurs et fruits, these sculptures are based on moulds used to create three-dimensional letters of the alphabet. It sometimes seem as if they had exited the artist’s paintings to invite us to take a pictorial stroll in space.
The next section of the exhibition sparks a dialogue between a selection of works by Agnès Thurnauer and the permanent collection, showing how they fit in the Matisssian world.

- In the room dedicated to the Danses, Agnès Thurnauer’s work is displayed next to a series of etchings after the Paris version and the final version of the Barnes Foundation mural, La Danse. One of the biggest challenges of this massive project was that Matisse had to work to scale (the mural was to fill an area more than 13 metres long) and retain both the performative impulse of the drawing of the figures integrated within the architecture and the coloured balance of the composition. The questions raised by the change of scale and Matisse’s ability to switch from a size to an other, from the small to the large or vice versa, without losing plastic strength, fascinates Agnès Thurnauer. When she creates her Dessins préparatoires, both in small (55 cm) and large (190 cm) formats, she falls into a kind of trance as she keeps drawing large arabesques with watercolour pencils until the surface of the medium dries, making it impossible to draw on it anymore. At this point, she writes the word maintenant or its English translation, now, bringing an end to her « dance ».

- In an other series of works, the words she traces and dedicates to Matisse: Rose, Language, Danse, Amour – « spin round » in the space of the painting. Their presence points to the importance of what can be defined as the « walkability » of painting, the way the body can feel and « walk » around the pictorial space. Agnès Thurnauer’s work is nourished by this concept which Daniel Arasse theorised as he analysed Italian Annunciations.

- In the room on the Vence Chapel, some Prédelles play with the word Painting which goes up and down the surface, its movement echoing Matisse’s study for the 13th station of the cross, Jesus is taken down from the cross.
Matisse and the Book Arts

A special emphasis is placed on Matisse’s illustrated books, which we wish to highlight on the occasion of the exhibition « Agnès Thurnauer ».

Henri Matisse established himself as one of the major « painter-illustrators » of the 20th century even if he started working on book illustration projects quite late in his career. He first received a commission to illustrate Mallarmé’s *Poésies* in 1930 and then James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 1935, before fully dedicating himself to this activity after his 1941 surgery. He made 11 books between 1942 and 1952. Matisse was a great reader, well acquainted with literary circles since his early days in Paris. He was also a book lover as shown by his large library at the Régina which included a few beautiful editions he bought from art dealers in Paris and in Nice.

Most of Matisse’s illustrated books are (or have become) luxury books, aimed at art collectors, bibliophiles and museums. He designed them in their entirety, choosing the appropriate medium (linocut, lithography, photolithography), typography and typeface for each publication. The repeated reading of the texts he selected himself, triggering free association, also helped him to find the right visual framework and decoration. He adapted his approach to each new book, constantly reinventing himself as he tried to find a plastic equivalent of the text with which he was working. The ancient and Mediterranean atmosphere of Montherlant’s *Pasiphae* (1943) is, for instance, reflected in the dark tone of his linocut illustrations. The sensuality of the love sonnets in *Floriège des Amours de Ronsard* (1948) matches the delightful lines of the lithographs of faces, embraces and floral ornamentation which adorn the pages. In the *Lettres portugaises* (1946), the richness of the decorative motif inspired by nature beautifully translates the nun’s love.

Both its themes – the circus and the lagoon – and the duality of its layout distinguishes *Jazz* (1947) from the rest of Matisse’s illustrated books. Its architecture is characterised by the harmonious opposition between the calligraphy of the black ink, handwritten text and the colour plates made up of cut-outs which all have a specific colour scheme. Matisse achieved the same architectural balance when he designed the Vence Chapel where the black and white ceramic murals contrast with the stained glass windows, the two elements being in permanent dialogue with one another.

Each of Matisse’s books creates its own space, light and atmosphere and moves us as powerfully as his paintings and large paper cut-out compositions. He himself said: « I make no difference between the construction of a book and that of a painting. » (« How I made my books », 1946)
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MUSEUM OPEN EVERY DAY EXCEPT ON TUESDAYS
Open from 10 am to 5 pm from November 1st to April 30th
Open from 10 am to 6 pm from May 2nd to October 31st
Closed on January 1st, Easter Sunday, May 1st and December 25th

ACTIVITIES
Guided tours of the museum and the exhibitions
Interactive tours for families and workshops for children and adults (only in French)
Information: musee-matisse-nice.org

CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION
Cher Henri, correspondances avec Henri Matisse
Agnès Thurnauer’s letters to Henri Matisse written between April 2021 and January 2022
Foreword by Claudine Grammont
Paris, éditions Bernard Chauveau
Bilingual French/English edition
144 pages
25€

AROUND THE MUSEUM
Henri Matisse’s grave (in the monastery cemetery)
Nice-Cimiez Archaeology Museum
« Jardin des Arènes » (a garden planted with centuries-old olive trees next to the Roman arena)
Cimiez Monastery and its garden

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