

# *Henri Matisse*

---

early life

early paintings

iconic works

time in Paris

final years



# early life



**M**atisse was born in Le Cateau-Cambrésis, in the Nord department in Northern France, the oldest son of a wealthy grain merchant. He grew up in Bohain-en-Vermandois, Picardie, France. In 1887, he went to Paris to study law, working as a court administrator in Le Cateau-Cambrésis after gaining his qualification. He first started to paint in 1889, after his mother brought him art supplies during a period of convalescence following an attack of appendicitis. He discovered “a kind of paradise” as he later described it, and decided to become an artist, deeply disappointing his father.

In 1891, he returned to Paris to study art at the Académie Julian and became a student of William-Adolphe Bouguereau and Gustave Moreau. Initially he painted still lifes and landscapes in a traditional style, at which he achieved reasonable proficiency. Matisse was influenced by the works of

earlier masters such as Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Nicolas Poussin, and Antoine Watteau, as well as by modern artists, such as Édouard Manet, and by Japanese art. Chardin was one of the painters Matisse most admired; as an art student he made copies of four of Chardin’s paintings in the Louvre.

In 1896, Matisse, an unknown art student at the time, visited the Australian painter John Russell on the island Belle Île off the coast of Brittany. Russell introduced him to Impressionism and to the work of Vincent van Gogh—who had been a friend of Russell—and gave him a Van Gogh drawing. Matisse’s style changed completely; abandoning his earth-coloured palette for bright colours. He later said “Russell was my teacher, and Russell explained colour theory to me.” The same year, Matisse exhibited five paintings in the salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, two of which were purchased by the state.



# early paintings



*Crockery on a Table*  
1900  
Hermitage Museum  
St. Petersburg,  
Russia



*Study of a Nude*  
1899  
Bridgestone  
Museum of Art,  
Tokyo



*Fruit and Coffepot*  
1898  
Hermitage Museum,  
St. Petersburg,  
Russia

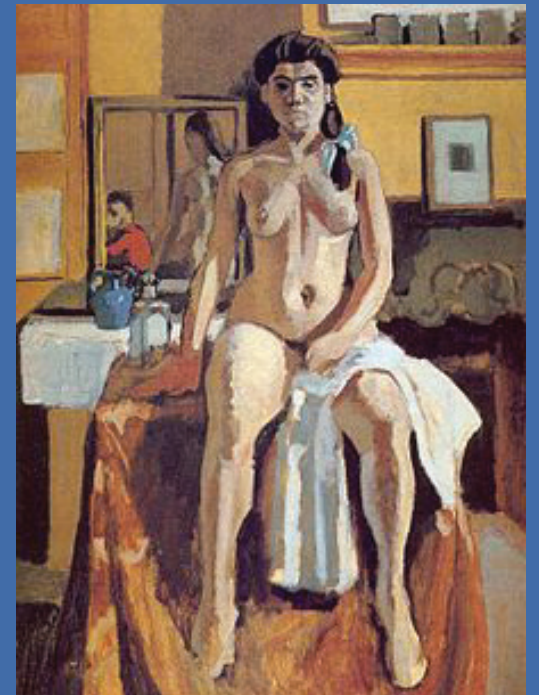


*Still Life with Compote, Apples and Oranges*  
1899  
The Cone Collection,  
Baltimore Museum of Art

# iconic works



*L'Atelier Rouge*  
1911  
The Museum of  
Modern Art,  
New York City



*Nu (Carmelita)*  
1904  
Museum of Fine  
Arts, Boston



*The Dance*  
 1910  
 Hermitage Museum,  
 St. Petersburg,  
 Russia



*Bathers with a  
 Turtle*  
 1908  
 Saint Louis Art  
 Museum,  
 St. Louis



# time in Paris



Around April 1906, he met Pablo Picasso, who was 11 years younger than Matisse. The two became lifelong friends as well as rivals and are often compared. One key difference between them is that Matisse drew and painted from nature, while Picasso was more inclined to work from imagination. The subjects painted most frequently by both artists were women and still lifes, with Matisse more likely to place his figures in fully realised interiors. Matisse and Picasso were first brought together at the Paris salon of Gertrude Stein with her companion Alice B. Toklas. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the Americans in Paris—Gertrude Stein, her brothers Leo Stein, Michael Stein, and Michael's wife Sarah—were important collectors and supporters of Matisse's paintings. In addition, Gertrude Stein's two American friends from Baltimore, the Cone sisters Claribel and Etta, became major patrons of Matisse and Picasso, collecting hundreds

of their paintings and drawings. The Cone collection is now exhibited in the Baltimore Museum of Art.

While numerous artists visited the Stein salon, many of these artists were not represented among the paintings on the walls at 27 rue de Fleurus. Where the works of Renoir, Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso dominated Leo and Gertrude Stein's collection, Sarah Stein's collection particularly emphasised Matisse.

Contemporaries of Leo and Gertrude Stein, Matisse and Picasso became part of their social circle and routinely joined the gatherings that took place on Saturday evenings at 27 rue de Fleurus. Gertrude attributed the beginnings of the Saturday evening salons to Matisse, remarking:

“More and more frequently, people began visiting to see the Matisse paintings—and

the Cézannes: Matisse brought people, everybody brought somebody, and they came at any time and it began to be a nuisance, and it was in this way that Saturday evenings began.”

Among Pablo Picasso's acquaintances who also frequented the Saturday evenings were Fernande Olivier (Picasso's mistress), Georges Braque, André Derain, the poets Max Jacob and Guillaume Apollinaire, Marie Laurencin (Apollinaire's mistress and an artist in her own right), and Henri Rousseau.

His friends organized and financed the Académie Matisse in Paris, a private and non-commercial school in which Matisse instructed young artists. It operated from 1907 until 1911. The initiative for the academy came from the Steins and the Dômiers, with the involvement of Hans Purrmann, Patrick Henry Bruce, and Sarah Stein.

# final years



**D**iagnosed with abdominal cancer in 1941, Matisse underwent surgery that left him chair- and bedbound. Painting and sculpture had become physical challenges, so he turned to a new type of medium. With the help of his assistants, he began creating cut paper collages, or decoupage. He would cut sheets of paper, pre-painted with gouache by his assistants, into shapes of varying colours and sizes, and arrange them to form lively compositions. Initially, these pieces were modest in size, but eventually transformed into murals or room-sized works. The result was a distinct and dimensional complexity—an art form that was not quite painting, but not quite sculpture.

Although the paper cut-out was Matisse's major medium in the final decade of his life, his first recorded use of the technique was in 1919 during the design of decor for the *Le chant du rossignol*, an opera com-

posed by Igor Stravinsky. Albert C. Barnes arranged for cardboard templates to be made of the unusual dimensions of the walls onto which Matisse, in his studio in Nice, fixed the composition of painted paper shapes. Another group of cut-outs were made between 1937 and 1938, while Matisse was working on the stage sets and costumes for Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*. However, it was only after his operation that, bedridden, Matisse began to develop the cut-out technique as its own form, rather than its prior utilitarian origin.

He moved to the hilltop of Vence, France in 1943, where he produced his first major cut-out project for his artist's book titled *Jazz*. However, these cut-outs were conceived as designs for stencil prints to be looked at in the book, rather than as independent pictorial works. At this point, Matisse still thought of the cut-outs as separate from his principal art form. His new understand-

ing of this medium unfolds with the 1946 introduction for *Jazz*. After summarizing his career, Matisse refers to the possibilities the cut-out technique offers, insisting "An artist must never be a prisoner of himself, prisoner of a style, prisoner of a reputation, prisoner of success..."

The number of independently conceived cut-outs steadily increased following *Jazz*, and eventually led to the creation of mural-size works, such as *Oceania the Sky* and *Oceania the Sea* of 1946. Under Matisse's direction, Lydia Delectorskaya, his studio assistant, loosely pinned the silhouettes of birds, fish, and marine vegetation directly onto the walls of the room. The two *Oceania* pieces, his first cut-outs of this scale, evoked a trip to Tahiti he made years before.