

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Matisse in the Studio—The Object as Muse

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Henri Matisse once told an art critic that during the early hardship years of his career he “detested collections and collectors.” The son of seed-shop owners, Matisse (1869-1954) grew up in modest circumstances in a small town in northern France. He carried a disdain for the accouterments of affluence with him all his life. Yet, in 1942, when he was in his mid-70s, he wrote to a friend, Louis Aragon, about a painted chair that captivated him:

“I have at last found the object for which I’ve been longing for a whole year,” he revealed to the French surrealist poet. “It’s a Venetian baroque chair, silver gilt with tinted varnish, like a piece of enamel. You’ve probably seen something like it. When I found it in an antique shop, a few weeks ago, I was bowled over. It’s splendid. I’m obsessed with it.”

This chair and drawings depicting it are part of *Matisse in the Studio*, an exhibition of artworks by Matisse that are paired with the original props that inspired him. It is the first examination of the roles that objects from the artist’s personal collection played in his art. On view at the Museum

“Calling them props is just a starting point.”

of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA) through July 9, it then travels to the Royal Academy of Arts in London, where it will run from August 5 through November 12. The show is a delight and a rare opportunity to examine a great artist’s creative process.

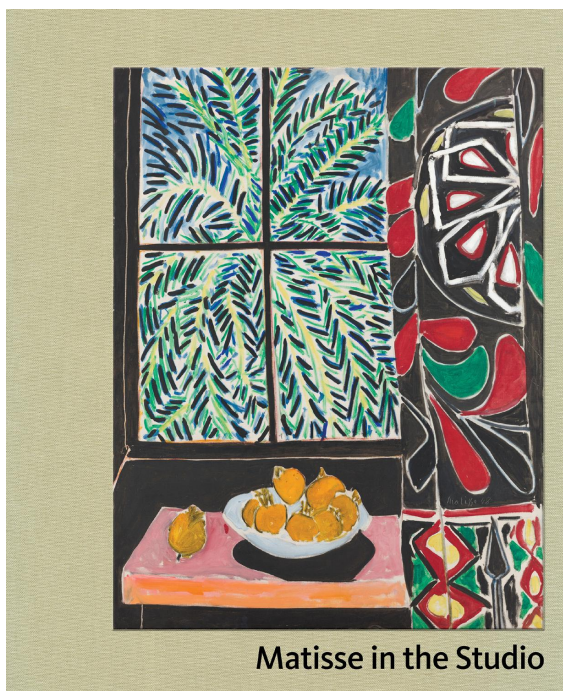
On view, 34 paintings, 26 drawings, 11 bronzes, seven cutouts, three prints, and one illustrated book span the artist’s entire career. The approximately 40 props, many of them lent by the Musée Matisse in Nice, include, besides the chair, such ordinary objects as a pewter jug, two chocolate pots, and a green glass vase as well as more exotic pieces, such as Islamic textiles, African masks and sculptures, and an Egyptian charcoal burner. Matisse did not spend large sums on these items. He found them in local junk shops, flea markets, and antiques shops, and while traveling. But he treated them as treasures.

Matisse rarely left these treasures behind when he changed studios or residences. He moved certain ones from room to room so he could see them as he lived and worked. A 1946 photograph of some of his favorites has this inscription written on its back: “Objects which have been of use to me nearly all my life.” They include a green glass vase, which he bought new on a 1910-11 trip to Spain. The vase is on display alongside two paintings that feature it—*Vase of Flowers* (1924), from the MFA’s collection, and *Safrano Roses at the Window* (1925), on loan from a private source.

Despite his obviously conflicted feelings about the acquisition of things, he had a long-term attachment to his own indispensable, almost talismanic collection. And make no mistake. It is a collection. “Calling them props is just a starting point,” said one of the show’s co-curators, Helen Burnham, the MFA’s Pamela and Peter Voss Curator of Prints and Drawings. Indeed, what the exhibition successfully argues is that Matisse’s art making and his object seeking were “mutually reinforcing activities.” To put it another way, Matisse used these objects in much the way that the best of our fiction writers use their actual experiences, even their quotidian ones. Once they have put them through their fiction-writing process, they have transformed them, sometimes unrecognizably, into timeless art.

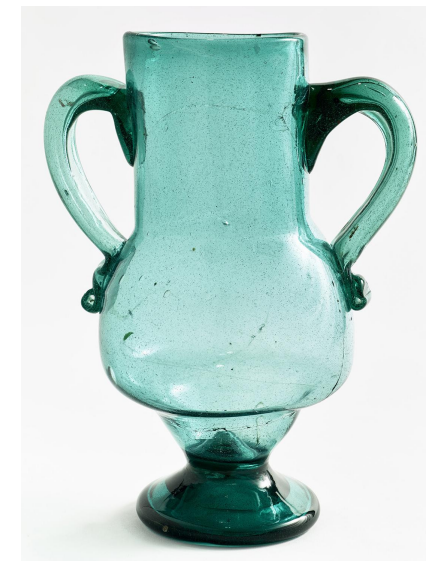
Burnham and her two co-curators, Ann Dumas of the Royal Academy and Matisse scholar Ellen McBreen, an associate professor of art history at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, organized the multiple galleries devoted to it at the MFA into thematic sections. In sections called “The Nude” and “The Face” there are several works influenced by Matisse’s collection of African art and artifacts. He bought his first one in 1906 on his way to dinner at Gertrude Stein’s place in Paris; he found others while traveling in Algeria and Morocco. While only rarely do masks and sculptures actually appear in the artworks themselves, it is a revelation to see how the familiar Matisse-like postures of the models and their mask-like faces so clearly emulate their inspirations’ forms.

In “The Object Is an Actor,” one of the labels quotes Matisse referring to the collection in theatrical terms. “A good actor can have a part in ten different plays,” he once said, and “an object can play a different role in ten different pictures.” In “Studio as Theater,” the theatrical theme is even more overt. This is also the section that most completely



Matisse in the Studio

The show’s sumptuous catalog, *Matisse in the Studio*, was beautifully written and edited by co-curators Ellen McBreen and Helen Burnham, with contributions by others. Its 216 pages with 180 color illustrations, many of them full-page, reinforce the show’s themes in myriad ways. The black-and-white photographs of Matisse and his family are a bonus. A deeply absorbing volume, it is almost as rewarding as a visit to the show itself. Hardbound, \$55; softbound, \$30. To order, see the website (www.mfa.org/collections/publications/matisse-in-the-studio).



Early 20th-century vase, Andalusia, Spain, and *Vase of Flowers*, oil on canvas, 1924.

transforms the MFA gallery space. By implementing only suggestions of architectural details—e.g., faux arched windows—the designer ingeniously evokes an interior straight out of the Islamic world. It’s the ideal setting for examples of Matisse’s paintings of densely layered and richly patterned Orientalist interiors and his famous reclining odalisques. The artist owned half a dozen *hailis*, i.e., the pierced and appliquéd and colored cotton textiles of North African origin that serve as window screens. Some of them are on view nearby paintings, such as *Odalisque with Green Sash* (1926) and *Odalisque, Blue Harmony* (1937).

The co-curators selected a late masterpiece, *Interior with Egyptian Curtain* (1948), for the show’s catalog cover. From the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., the painting depicts the actual Egyptian *khayamiya* (tent curtain) that inspired it. The curtain, bought by Matisse in Cairo, and the canvas hang side by side in the exhibition, the one by “Artist Unknown” and the other by someone very much the opposite. For those who think they already know Matisse’s work, however, this exhibition will be an eye-opener. For those less familiar with this giant of 20th-century art, it will be an unequalled education.

For more information, see the MFA website (www.mfa.org/exhibitions/matisse-in-the-studio).

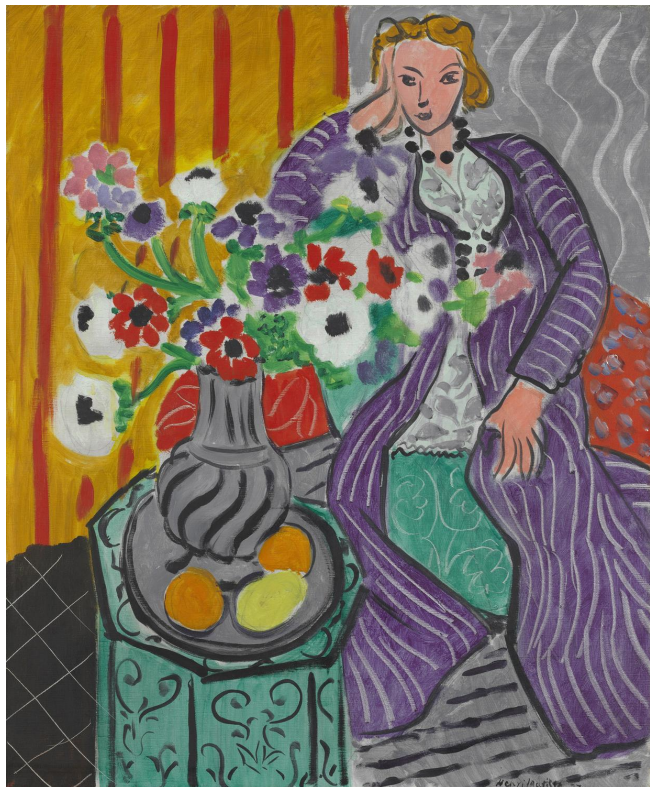


Matisse owned this *guéridon* (small pedestal table) that was made in Algeria in the early 20th century. It’s in the show along with *Odalisque, Blue Harmony*, 1937, oil on canvas. Schinto photo.



Matisse may have bought this *bwom* (helmet mask) in Paris at a 1937 auction of objects formerly owned by his fellow painter Maurice de Vlaminck. It was made by a member of the Kuba kingdom in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the late 19th or early 20th century out of wood, textiles, shells, pearls, seeds, copper, and mixed media. The show doesn’t directly acknowledge the colonial past of Matisse’s home country. As the co-curators acknowledge, he knew little about the histories, users, or original contexts of the masks in his collection. But their influences on the artist were keen and, as viewers of this exhibition will realize, unmistakable. Schinto photo.





Matisse's engraved pewter jug, made in late 18th-century northern France, and his *Purple Robe and Anemones*, oil on canvas, 1937, in which the jug is shown being used as a vase.



The calligraphic panel on the wall above the press previewers was made in China of lacquered wood with gilding in the 19th century. Matisse received it as a gift from his wife for his 60th birthday in 1929. A well-known 1951 photograph by Philippe Halsman shows the artist in bed, making cutouts in his bedroom-studio in Nice. This panel is seen hanging on the wall above him. Beneath it are pinned four simplified drawings of a standing model, one under each of the panel's Chinese characters. The co-curators believe the calligraphy served as a model for his late works on paper. Schinto photo.



Henri Cartier-Bresson's photograph depicts Matisse with items from his collection in his studio in Villa le Rêve, Vence, France, 1944. Matisse moved to Nice in 1917, living in hotels, then established himself there permanently in 1921. Vence, in the countryside outside Nice, is the place where Matisse moved temporarily to avoid the bombardments of World War II.

Marguerite, oil on canvas, 1906-07, is a portrait of Matisse's daughter at 13. The abstracted, mask-like face was strongly influenced by the artist's collection of masks from the Kuba, Punu, and Yoruba people of Africa. Schinto photo.



Reclining Odalisque, 1926, oil on canvas. Note both the *haiti* and the *brasero*. Schinto photo.



The larger of the two silver chocolate pots was given to Matisse on the occasion of his marriage to Amélie Parayre in 1898. He included chocolate pots in numerous still lifes. One of them, the 1902 oil on canvas *Bouquet of Flowers in a Chocolate Pot*, is in the show. Bought by Picasso in 1939, it is on loan from the Musée Picasso. Matisse acquired the smaller pot in the 1940s in a difficult time for him, just after his separation from Amélie and the invasion of Paris by the Germans. One can imagine it as a stand-in for the absent wife and the lost stability of his home life. Schinto photo.



This Ottoman *brasero* (charcoal heater) was made in 19th-century Turkey or Syria of patinated copper, brass, and wood. The *brasero* appears in two paintings in the exhibition. Schinto photo.



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Interior with Egyptian Curtain, oil on canvas, 1948, and the artist's Egyptian tent curtain (*khayamiya*), made in the late 19th or early 20th century.



This is the "Venetian" chair of Matisse's obsession. It was made of painted pine wood, varnished silver plating, and gilding in 19th-century Germany or Italy. Schinto photo.



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