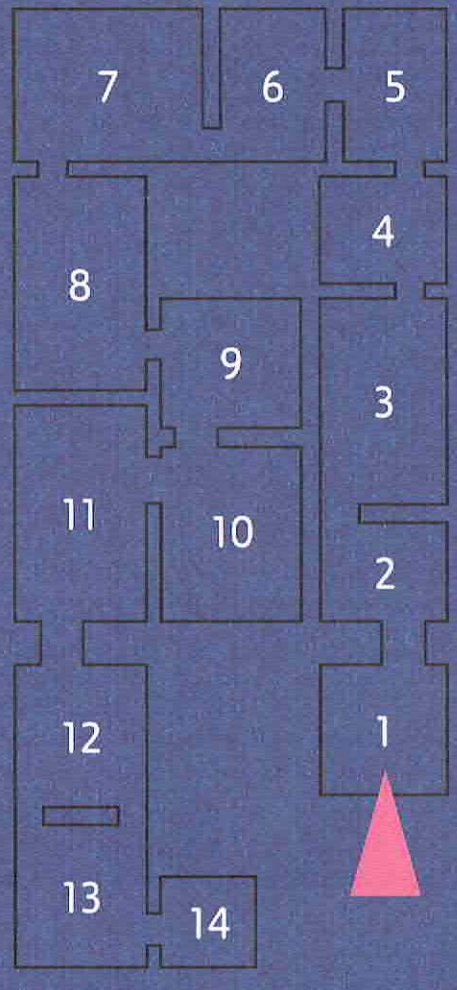



TATE MODERN

# HENRI MATISSE

## THE CUT-OUTS

# INTRODUCTION

Henri Matisse (1869–1954) was one of the most innovative painters of the twentieth century but for the last seventeen years of his life turned to an entirely new approach to making work, cutting shapes from painted paper. Health problems in the early 1940s limited his mobility, but as his strength declined, the ambition and scale of his new cut-out method increased. This exhibition explores the development of the cut-outs.

'It is no longer the brush that slips and slides over the canvas, it is the scissors that cut into the paper and into the colour. The conditions of the journey are 100 per cent different. The contour of the figure springs from the discovery of the scissors that give it the movement of circulating life. This tool doesn't modulate, it doesn't brush *on*, but it incises *in*, underline this well, because the criteria of observation will be different.' – Matisse

**Cover:** Lydia Delectorskaya, Matisse at Hôtel Régina, Nice, c.1952,
Courtesy Henri Matisse Archives


# ROOM 1 – MAKING THE CUT-OUTS

Matisse first used cut paper shapes to work out the arrangement of objects in his paintings. While working on a painting, he often made sketches exploring alternative points of view or versions of the composition. Making cut paper shapes and using a canvas as a pin board meant he could rearrange the various elements more easily.

The two works in this room are both titled *Still Life with Shell.* Matisse made the cut paper version to try to rethink the painting, to play with how the jug, Tahitian shell, apples, cup and coffee pot could be combined differently. The edge of the table is outlined with pieces of string which can also be moved and re-angled.

The cut-out lets the viewer imagine how it might be reshuffled, just as Matisse did. Movement is important for Matisse's cut-outs, both through the sense of potential shifting of the shapes themselves and the trace of his moving scissors. The dynamism of Matisse's technique can be seen in Adrien Maeght's film of the artist wielding his scissors, also shown in this room.

## ROOM 2 – DANCERS

Matisse was fascinated by dance throughout his career. In 1937 he began to design the scenery and costumes for a ballet choreographed by Léonide Massine to Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony #1*. Matisse translated Shostakovich's music into five colours and Massine in turn gave these symbolic meanings: white for man and woman, yellow for wickedness, blue for nature, red for materialism and black for violence.

The ballet scenery developed from an earlier mural project, commissioned by American collector Albert Barnes. Matisse described Massine's reaction to his cut paper mural studies: '...he was captivated by the great dancing movement, the grand rhythm of my composition: "That's the kind of dance I hope to see one day! Wouldn't you care to help me by redoing it as a ballet set?"'

For Matisse, cut paper was a way of experimenting. Looking closely you can see how Matisse layered pieces of the same colour to create the shape he wanted, sometimes using tacks to attach them to the paper. But this was still a means to an end and he made efforts to keep the technique a secret.

## ROOM 3 – JAZZ

Matisse's designs for an artist's book show the development of the cut paper technique, with more intricate shapes and complicated layering. The original idea was for Matisse to illustrate poems, but the flowing hand-written notes he made as he worked on the cut-outs were eventually chosen as the accompanying text instead. Here you can compare the original cut-out models ('maquettes') and the finished book, printed using a stencil method. The publisher, Tériade, came up with the title *Jazz*. It is unrelated to the subject matter of the individual images, which are mainly scenes from the circus or theatre, but Matisse liked the link with the improvisational way the works were made.

*Jazz* was a turning point, enabling Matisse to see his cut-outs as art works in their own right. Disappointed that in the published book the cut-outs seemed to lose the contrast of different surfaces layered on top of each other, Matisse said that printing 'removes their sensitivity'.

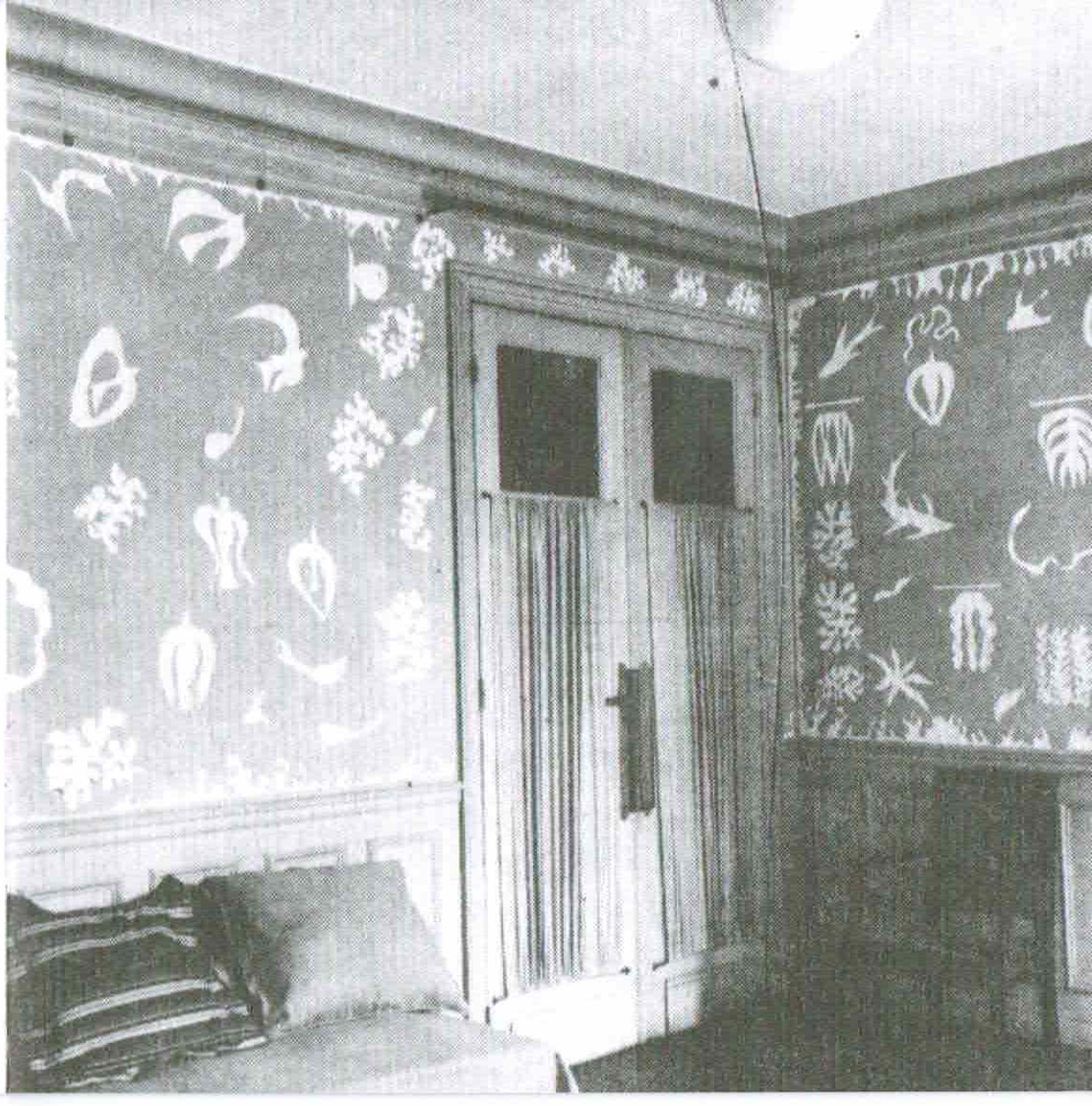
# ROOM 4 – OCEANIA

Matisse's studio assistant and secretary Lydia Delectorskaya recalled the starting point for *Oceania, The Sky*:

'Matisse had cut out a swallow from a sheet of writing paper and, as it distressed him to tear up this beautiful shape and throw it away, he said, he put it up on this wall, also using it to cover up a stain, the sight of which disturbed him. Over the following weeks other shapes were cut out and put up on the same wall.'

Matisse pinned cut-out birds, fish, coral and leaves directly onto the wall of his Paris apartment without knowing in advance what the outcome would be. His inspiration was a visit to Tahiti sixteen years before. 'It's as though my memory had suddenly taken the place of the outside world', he explained. 'There, swimming every day in the lagoon, I took such intense pleasure in contemplating the submarine world.'

'With my eyes wide open I absorbed everything as a sponge absorbs liquid. It is only now that these wonders have returned to me, with tenderness and clarity.' – Matisse

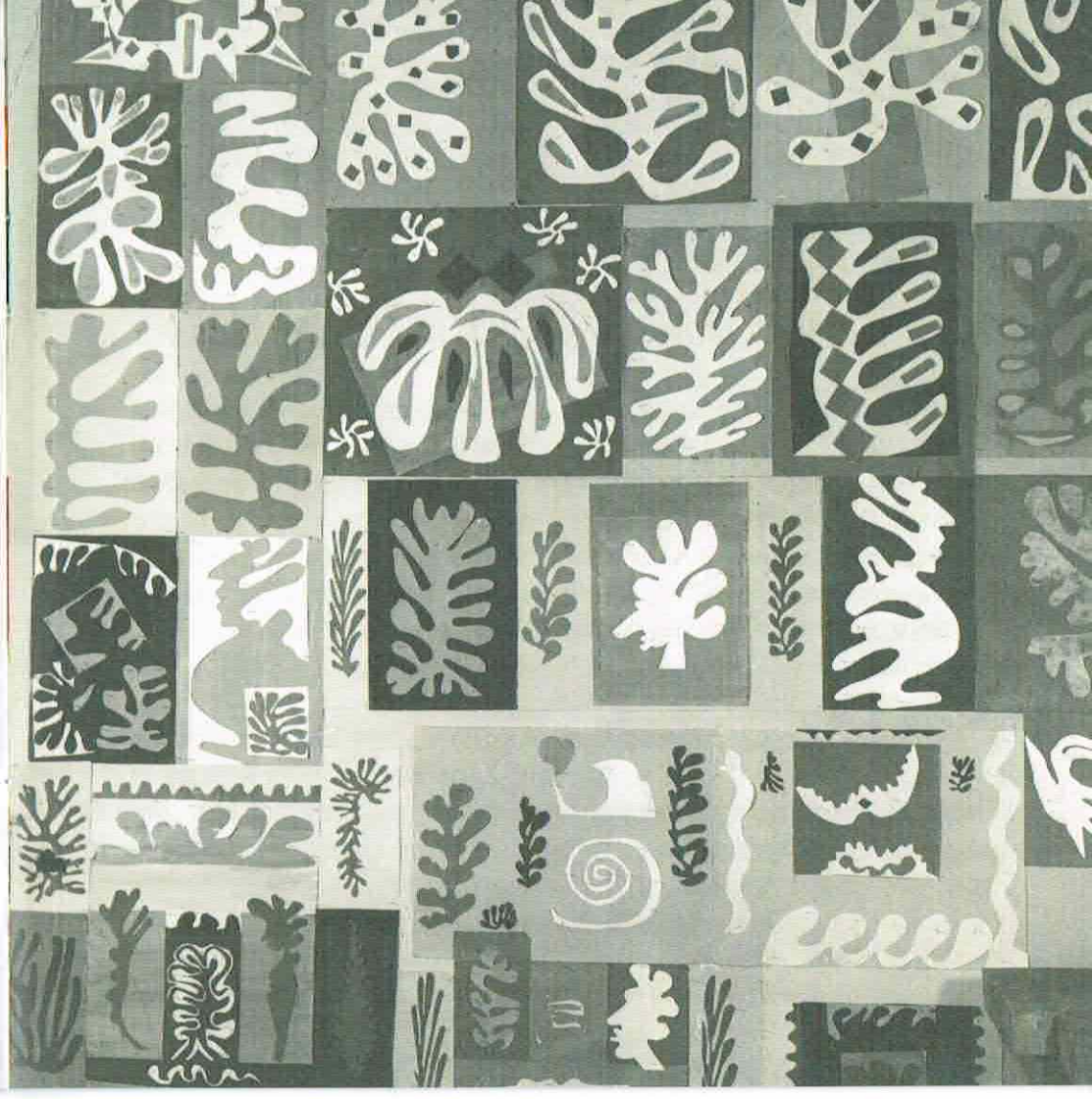


Hélène Adant, Matisse's apartment on Boulevard Montparnasse, Paris, October 1946
Centre Pompidou - Mnam - Bibliothèque Kandinsky - Hélène Adant

# ROOM 5 – VENCE, THE STUDIO

The two paintings in this room – among the last he ever made – show the interior of Matisse's home and studio at Villa le Rêve in Vence, Southern France. The studio, which had long been a favourite subject, was now also becoming the physical foundation for his cut-outs, which he composed directly on the wall. The cluster of cut-outs here is a partial reunion of works that began on a single wall of his Vence studio. Originally Matisse conceived of this group as one whole composition. The paper shapes were pinned to the wall, allowing him to move pieces around, rotate or invert shapes and try new combinations.

Today the shapes have been carefully traced and glued into their final positions, but while Matisse was working the tendrils of his plant forms would gently wave as air passed through the studio. A ship builder wanted to buy the whole studio wall to be mounted under glass and displayed in a new luxury boat. Matisse declined, concerned about the effect of humidity on the paper, and instead had the individual sections mounted and framed separately.



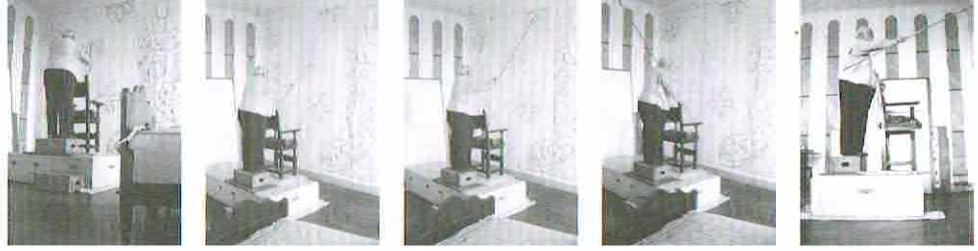
Villa le Rêve, Vence, 1948
Courtesy Henri Matisse Archives

## ROOM 6 – BOOK AND PERIODICAL DESIGNS

This room brings together cut-out designs for book and periodical covers Matisse made between 1937 and 1954. Over this period he shifted from treating the cut-outs as a practical planning technique to embracing them as a remarkable new medium. *Verve* was an arts magazine published by Tériade, who also commissioned *Jazz*. In the earliest cover shown here, for *Verve's* first issue in 1937, the delicate cut paper strips appear to be a substitute for the painted line. Later designs proclaim their cut paper medium more boldly.

The film shown in this room gives a glimpse of Matisse's handling of paper, how he holds the sheet in the air with one hand while cutting with the other. As the twisting form emerges, it becomes clear that this was a way of working in three dimensions.

Hélène Adant, Hôtel Régina, Nice 1950
Centre Pompidou - Mnam - Bibliothèque Kandinsky - Hélène Adant



## ROOM 7 – VENCE, THE CHAPEL

In 1947 Matisse embarked on designs for the Dominican Chapel of the Rosary in Vence. He was approached by Sister Jacques, a nun who had nursed him through an illness four years earlier, to advise on the design of one stained glass window. Soon though, Matisse had taken on the whole decorative scheme of the Vence chapel, from the windows to the chasuble robes worn by the priest. Matisse had to imagine his cut-out window designs transformed into glass, projecting their colours onto the white ceramic panels showing Christ, the Virgin and St Dominic on the opposite walls. These he designed with charcoal attached to a long bamboo 'wand' so he could work at a large scale from ground level.

In order to understand the relationships between the different elements he was designing, he turned his entire studio – and later his bedroom – into a kind of replica chapel so he was immersed in it all the time. Having revised the window designs several times, Matisse was hugely satisfied with the completed project, calling it 'the result of all my active life'.

## ROOM 8 – ZULMA AND CREOLE DANCER

As Matisse's skill and experience with the cut-out technique increased, so too did the scale of his work. For the first time, in *Zulma*, he gives a sense of depth in a cut-out composition, with receding space suggested by the angled table on which the figure leans. Made and exhibited when Matisse was eighty, *Zulma* was widely praised for its radical approach, hailed as the most youthful work in an exhibition of far younger artists.

Matisse worked very intensively, sometimes completing a cut-out in just one or two days. Although he relied on his studio assistants to pin the paper shapes in place during the day, he would continue to consider a composition overnight, reworking it with their help the next morning. *Creole Dancer* is based on sketches he made of a dancer invited to perform in his studio, and was made in a single day using left over pieces of painted paper.

## ROOM 9 – BLUE NUDES

The *Blue Nudes* are perhaps the most striking example of what Matisse himself called 'cutting directly into colour'. Here scissors both create the outline of the figure and carve contours into it. The paper's flatness coexists with a sense of the figures' intertwined limbs. Cutting is a way of drawing and sculpting at the same time. These cut-outs can therefore be seen as developing from Matisse's earlier sculpted nudes, some of which you can also see in this room, both in terms of pose and technique. Matisse's assistant Lydia Delectorskya described his work on a cut-out figure in these terms: 'modelling it like a clay sculpture: sometimes adding, sometimes removing'.

*Blue Nude IV* was in fact the first of the series (but also the last to be completed). In this work you can see traces of Matisse's struggle with the composition: faint lines of charcoal drawing and layered separate small pieces of blue paper. By contrast, the other *Blue Nudes* were cut 'in a single movement' from one blue-painted sheet.

# ROOM 10 – THE PARAKEET AND THE MERMAID

*The Parakeet and the Mermaid* is one of the largest cut-outs Matisse ever made. The two creatures of the title are nestled among fruit and his by now characteristic algae-like leaf forms. This composition is the product of long experimentation; Matisse tried out different shapes – including a *Blue Nude* – where the mermaid is today. As it blossomed across his studio walls, Matisse described the work as his garden. Too frail to leave his house, here was a way of bringing the outdoors inside.

He and his studio assistants established a regular system for working together. The assistants would do the preparatory painting of the paper in the gouache paint colours of Matisse's choice, and then – with pin-cushions strapped to their wrists and hammers hung round their necks – they would climb a ladder and position cut out shapes under his direction.

As all the works in this room demonstrate, the white background was not just a neutral setting but an active part of the work. Matisse felt that white's contrast with the coloured cut paper gave it a 'rare and intangible quality'.

Lydia Delectorskaya, Hôtel Régina, Nice, 1952
Courtesy Henri Matisse Archives

# ROOM 11 – THREE LARGE COMPOSITIONS

During the early 1950s Matisse made many ambitious large-scale works. Cut-outs in progress covered most available walls of his home and he was often working on several of them simultaneously, with cut shapes sometimes migrating across compositions. What had attracted him to cut-outs originally – the ability to try out and rearrange compositions – grew in potential as he pushed the technique further.

*Large Decoration with Masks* was made as a design for a ceramic panel. Its pattern of natural forms suggests that Matisse was drawing on his memories of Moorish mosaics seen forty years previously. 'It is such a consolation for me to have achieved this at the end of my life,' he wrote to his son. Around the same time as he was considering this symmetrical and regularly patterned composition, Matisse was also using cut paper in quite different ways, in the bold physicality of *The Acrobats*, for example. Here, when his own movement was so severely limited, Matisse chose to depict a body performing the extremes of flexibility and motion.

Lydia Delectorskaya, Hôtel Régina, Nice, c. 1953
Courtesy Henri Matisse Archives

## ROOM 12 – THE SNAIL

Matisse initially imagined *The Snail* and *Memory of Oceania* as part of one huge composition, with *Large Decoration with Masks* (in the previous room) at its centre. Perhaps Matisse's original combination was his triumphant demonstration of the power and scope of the cut-out method.

With *The Snail*, he pushed the technique further away from representation than ever before, but described it as 'abstraction rooted in reality'. The rotating paper shapes radiate out in a spiral, echoing a snail's shell. Working on an earlier snail, he talked about becoming 'aware of an unfolding'. Unusually, the individual shapes are not carefully scissored, but roughly cut and sometimes even torn, though there is one playful exception in the top left corner. *Memory of Oceania* shares this middle ground between abstraction and representation. Matisse once again drew on fond recollections of his 1930 trip to Tahiti, bringing the lagoon into his studio. While working on it, he remembered the light of the Pacific as 'a deep golden goblet into which you look'.

## ROOM 13 – ACANTHUSES AND THE SHEAF

For all his boldness and confidence in the cut-out medium, Matisse's process was still one of trial and revision. Conservation analysis has found more than a thousand tiny pin holes in the coloured shapes of *Acanthuses*, suggesting many stages of composition. *The Sheaf* is a design for a ceramic panel that was finally accepted by the couple who commissioned it for their Los Angeles home. Matisse had already proposed several designs, including *Large Decoration with Masks*, but they rejected these. He was undaunted by their response and embarked on alternative compositions with enthusiasm, reflecting the extraordinary creative energy of his final years.

# ROOM 14 – CHRISTMAS EVE

Matisse had long been interested in the connection between his cut-outs and stained glass. He said of his designs for *Jazz*, 'I cut out these gouache sheets the way you cut glass: only here they're organised to reflect light, whereas in a stained-glass window they have to be arranged differently because light shines through them.' Here you can see his cut-out model on a Christmas theme and the resulting stained glass, commissioned for the Time-Life Building in New York. Like his windows for the Vence Chapel, *Christmas Eve* conveys the spirit of religious expression without explicitly addressing religious subject matter.

'By creating these coloured paper cut-outs, it seems to me that I am happily anticipating things to come. I don't think that I have ever found such balance as I have in creating these paper cut-outs. But I know that it will only be much later that people will realise to what extent the work I am doing today is in step with the future.' – Matisse

# FIND OUT MORE

**Curator's Talk for Members**
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Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
£12; Tate Members only

**Out of Hours: Matisse Cut-Outs**
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**44, or Tales of the Night**
Sunday 11 May, 17.00

**The Lady from Cairo**
Tuesday 13 May, 18.30

**Moroccan Chronicles**
Friday 16 May, 19.30

**A Muslim Childhood**
Saturday 17 May, 19.00

**Girls and Swallows**
Sunday 18 May, 15.00

**The Sorrows of a Young Tangerian**
Sunday 18 May, 18.00

**With Matisse in Tangier**
20, 27 April & 4, 11 May, 15.00
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Free
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Nicholas Serota, Director, Tate

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