

Henri Matisse's *The Red Studio* includes portrayals of eleven artworks dating from the previous thirteen years, all in his possession when he created the painting in 1911. The works range from a landscape made in 1898, when Matisse was twenty-eight years old and just out of art school, to works that were brand-new when he painted *The Red Studio*. Some of the artworks on display are among those recognized as his most important early works, while others are far less well-known.

Matisse's subject in *The Red Studio* is not so much the artist's activity—there is no easel, palette, or model to be seen—but instead the products of that activity and the environment in which they were created. The adjacent gallery reconstructs, to the degree possible today, the presentation of his own work that Matisse staged in *The Red Studio*, joined by the painting itself.

The adjacent room presents a biography of *The Red Studio*, beginning with the 1909 construction of the building whose interior it portrays and concluding with the painting's acquisition by The Museum of Modern Art in 1949. In between lies a story with many twists and turns: the commissioning of the painting by Matisse's most important patron, Sergei Ivanovich Shchukin (1854–1936), Shchukin's firm rejection of the finished work, and the subsequent debut of *The Red Studio* on the international stage, where the painting was greeted mostly by bafflement.

For twelve years *The Red Studio* remained in Matisse's possession and out of public view, until it found an improbable first home in a chic London nightclub in the late 1920s and '30s. When the painting arrived in New York in the mid-1940s, it finally found an audience of art critics, curators, and artists who responded enthusiastically to its revolutionary approach to color and space.

In choosing his workplace as the subject for *The Red Studio*, Matisse turned to a key theme within his long career. Although he very rarely portrayed himself, the artist periodically chronicled the evolution of his style and his circumstances through depictions of his workplaces. The subject was entirely in keeping with Matisse's penchant for self-examination and reflection.

Characteristically, Matisse was grounding his new advances in a context well-defined by tradition: studio portrayal had a long and rich history in European art. Such paintings invite the viewer into the artist's private realm and offer a meditation on the very nature of art-making.

The workplace portrayed in *The Red Studio* was the first such space that Matisse invented entirely for himself. Since arriving in Paris to attend art school in the early 1890s, he had worked in a succession of rented spaces—the proverbial garret, cramped apartments, and converted rooms in two government-owned former convents. In spring 1909 Matisse was forced to seek new quarters due to the imminent sale of the convent in which he lived, worked, and taught. He looked outside the city to find the space he needed, eventually choosing the small industrial town of Issy-les-Moulineaux, about four miles southwest of central Paris. There he rented an affordable house with ample grounds for himself and his family, as well as an adjoining property on which he could erect a modern studio.

The studio was custom-built in summer 1909 by the Compagnie des Constructions Démontables et Hygiéniques, a maker of prefabricated and portable buildings established in 1894. Three letters from the director of the company present the specifications of the studio resulting from their discussions. The building was a spacious ten meters by ten meters (thirty-three feet by thirty-three feet), with walls five meters (sixteen and a half feet) high and a peaked roof. Skylights filled the north side of the roof, and the north wall was almost entirely glass. The studio was surrounded by gardens, which were filled with flowers that Matisse often cited as a source of inspiration for his work with color.

The textile magnate Sergei Shchukin had begun to build a vast collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting in the late 1890s. In 1906 he met Matisse and began collecting his work, soon commissioning specific paintings to decorate his home. The first, requested for his dining room, was *Harmony in Red (The Red Room)* (1908). It was followed by *Dance (II)* (1909–10) and *Music* (1910), for the mansion's grand stairway. That commission gave Matisse the financial footing to build the large studio in Issy-les-Moulineaux.

In January 1911 Shchukin commissioned a trio of six-by-seven-foot paintings on a subject of the artist's choosing. They were to decorate a small room in his Moscow home. Matisse's first response to Shchukin's commission was *The Pink Studio*, a relatively naturalistic portrayal of a portion of the Issy studio, created in spring 1911. Prompted by Shchukin's desire that Matisse see the room that would house this trio of paintings, he traveled to Moscow for a nearly three-week stay in November 1911. When Matisse returned to Paris, the bond between artist and patron strengthened, he turned his attention to another painting for the trio commission: *The Red Studio*.

At the end of 1911, Matisse wrote Shchukin to say that he had finished another work for the commissioned trio of paintings for a room in Shchukin's Moscow mansion. Shchukin asked Matisse to send him a watercolor based on the painting, which the artist sent together with a letter on February 1, 1912. This letter, which survives only in its draft form, is the sole detailed description of *The Red Studio* in the artist's words. The many crossings-out and rewordings reveal a man taking pains to explain what he had done. However, Shchukin replied with a brief note politely rejecting the painting (his commissions were not binding commitments). Shchukin went on to purchase many more paintings from Matisse over the next two years, but his ambitions for this trio of paintings were set aside.

Shchukin fled Moscow during the Russian Revolution, in 1917. His collection was nationalized the next year, and in 1920 his mansion was opened to the public as a museum. In 1948 his art collection—which included thirty-seven paintings by Matisse—was divided between the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, and the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, where the works reside today. Shchukin died in exile in Paris in 1936.

Tangier, February 1, 1912

Dear Sir,

I received your letter [of January 15] at the time of my departure; I made the watercolor that you asked me for and I am sending it to you from Tangier. It is of course very summary, but gives enough of an idea of the color relationships, even if it does not give the intensity. The whole is Venetian red. This red, which is a little warmer than red ocher, is a precise color of the palette. Thus the wall, the floor, the two tables at the right, and at the left the clock and the chest of drawers in the background, a chair in the right foreground are Venetian red. This color serves as a harmonic link between the green of a nasturtium branch, which soaks in a long-necked bottle placed on the table at the left; bottle green equally but differently, the warm blacks of a border of a Persian tapestry placed above the chest of drawers, the yellow ocher of a statuette around which the nasturtium has grown, enveloping it, the lemon yellow of a rattan chair placed at the right of the painting between a table and a wooden chair, and the blues, pinks, yellows and other greens representing the paintings and other objects placed in my studio.

The price of the painting is the same as that of the previous one, that is to say 10,000 francs.

The painting is surprising at first sight. It is obviously new. Mme Stein finds it the most musical of my paintings. I relay her opinion to you knowing that you value it. . . .

Do you know how Mr. Ostroukof liked his painting? Perhaps the painting hasn't arrived yet.

Have I told you that the painting represents my studio?

Please, dear Sir give my regards to your family and believe me to be your devoted

Henri Matisse

Moscow, February 14, 1912

Dear Sir!

Yesterday I received your letter from Tangier from February 1st and also the watercolor for the large red painting. It must be very interesting, but I now prefer your paintings with figures, mainly the portrait of your family. That painting is a huge success here, it is considered the most beautiful piece of yours that I have.

Mr. Ostroukoff has received your painting of the nude and is very happy with it, he finds it very beautiful.

We're having a very cold winter in Moscow and a lot of snow. Life goes on as usual, I'm very busy all the time. In the spring I hope to go to Italy again, to Rome and Venice. In July I will come to Paris for a few days to see you.

Perhaps you'll have something for me.

My regards to Mme Matisse.

I wish you good health, fair weather, and good work and remain your very devoted

Sergei Shchukin

P.S. I'm sending this letter to Issy-les-Moulineaux, it's more reliable.

The Matisse family's relocation to Issy earned mention by the American writer Gertrude Stein in her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933): "The grounds . . . were large and the garden was what Matisse between pride and chagrin called un petit Luxembourg [a public park in Paris]." Stein understood that this move marked the beginning of the next phase of Matisse's career, one that would include the making of *The Red Studio* and a host of other works embodying a new level of artistic experimentation. "They moved out and were very comfortable and soon the enormous studio was filled with enormous statues and enormous pictures. It was that period of Matisse."

The Red Studio made its public debut in October 1912 at the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, held at the Grafton Galleries in London. Matisse titled it “Panneau rouge” (Red Panel), referring to its color and large size rather than its subject. The exhibition was organized by Roger Fry (1866–1934), a writer, artist, and curator who played a key role in introducing modern art to England. The exhibition of about three hundred works by nearly fifty artists featured twenty-seven works by Matisse, more than by anyone else. Public response to the exhibition, and to Matisse’s work in particular, was mostly derisive. Voicing a common complaint about Matisse’s pictorial style, one critic wrote that “space, color, and line are used as the designer of posters might use them.”

The Red Studio traveled to London with every painting depicted hanging on its walls. The exhibition is also where the sculpture *Jeannette (IV)*, a 1912 bronze cast of the plaster bust seen in *The Red Studio*, made its debut.

Many of Matisse's paintings in the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, including *The Red Studio*, traveled directly to New York to appear in the *International Exhibition of Modern Art*. The Armory Show, as it would become known, opened in February 1913 at the Sixty-Ninth Regiment of Infantry on Lexington Avenue in New York. Featuring more than thirteen hundred works by three hundred artists, the Armory Show offered a broad American public its first encounter with modern art. After the month-long New York showing, the exhibition traveled at reduced scale to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Copley Society of Art in Boston.

Critics and laymen alike responded to the art in the Armory Show with ridicule and bewilderment, and the reaction to the seventeen works by Matisse was particularly hostile. The one critic who specifically addressed the “Panneau rouge” saw it as childish, a frequent insult leveled at modern art: Matisse “throws figures and furniture on his canvas with precisely the prodigal impartiality and the reckless drawing of a child.” As in London, *The Red Studio* was offered for sale, but there were no purchasers for any of Matisse's paintings.

Fifteen years after its public debut, *The Red Studio* would find its first buyer. In September 1927 it was purchased by David Tennant, the owner of a fashionable private nightclub he had opened in London two years earlier. The Gargoyle Club served as a unique gathering place for aristocrats, politicians, and businesspeople as well as artists and writers. The acquisition of a painting by Matisse was championed by Tennant's adviser for the club's design, the influential British aesthete Matthew Stewart Prichard (1865–1936), a longtime acquaintance and admirer of the artist. *The Red Studio* was installed in the club's newly renovated ballroom at the beginning of 1928, where it would remain on view for the next thirteen years, bearing witness to long nights of drinking, dining, and dancing.

In 1929 Tennant purchased a second painting by Matisse for the Gargoyle. Also depicting one of the artist's workspaces, *Studio, Quai Saint-Michel* (1916–17) took up residence one floor above *The Red Studio*, gracing the tables situated alongside the bar.

In 1938 David Tennant, the Gargoyle Club's owner, offered to sell *The Red Studio* back to Matisse. The artist declined, and a couple of years later, Tennant consigned *The Red Studio* to London's Redfern Gallery. It remained there until 1945, when it was sold to Georges Frédéric Keller, director of the Bignou Gallery on East Fifty-Seventh Street in New York.

In postwar New York, the painting's long-unrecognized merits became abundantly clear to a new generation of artists and art critics. Curators at MoMA first voiced interest in *The Red Studio* (then titled "Studio") in 1946, but Keller insisted that the work was not for sale. Finally, in December 1948, Keller notified MoMA that he would sell the painting, and Alfred H. Barr Jr., the museum's founding director, called an emergency meeting of the Committee on Museum Collections. By the beginning of January, funding was obtained, and the purchase was made. The painting was presented to the public on April 5, 1949, with the title *The Red Studio*.

Little more than a month after MoMA acquired *The Red Studio*, the Pierre Matisse Gallery (owned by the artist's son) presented an exhibition of Matisse's recent paper cut-outs, drawings, and oil paintings. All were presented without frames, as if they could thereby expand, unrestrained, across the walls. The bold simplicity of Matisse's current explorations marked a resounding return in spirit of the 1911 painting.

The largest of the works on view, *Large Red Interior* (1948), invoked its ancestor with its radical flatness and the immersive power of its red. It would be the artist's final fully realized oil painting. Over the remaining five years of Matisse's life, his paper cut-outs would fill the walls of his workspace, transforming the studio from the subject of a two-dimensional picture into a three-dimensional artwork in its own right.

The Red Studio, as its title suggests, is primarily defined by the Venetian red that covers most of the canvas. But this aspect of the painting was a late-stage decision: Matisse applied the red atop a nearly completed painting with a very different palette. That earlier version of the painting provided a more naturalistic portrayal of his studio, with colors that differentiated the floor and walls and the furniture depicted as solid forms. In the video, MoMA's conservators and conservation scientists discuss the painting's unlikely evolution.

Matisse's bold experiment was followed by uncertainty about what he had done. According to a journalist who visited the artist's studio soon after he repainted the canvas, Matisse admitted, "I like it, but I don't quite understand it." At that time, he could not have foreseen that this singular painting would become one of his most influential works.