

Matisse's Cut-Outs: A Celebration

In the late 1940s, Henri Matisse turned to paper as his primary medium and scissors as his chief implement, introducing a radically new art form that came to be called the cut-out. To make cut-outs, his studio assistants painted paper with vibrant gouache, which Matisse then cut into different shapes in varying sizes. Using pins, he arranged the forms into lively compositions that were later mounted. This suite of galleries features works that Matisse realized using this method, one he alternately described as “cutting directly into vivid color” or “drawing with scissors.”

As Matisse developed this practice, the cut-outs progressed from intimate to expansive in scale and ranged from decorative to abstract. Originally, the artist used paper motifs to design works ultimately realized in other mediums, including the illustrated book *Jazz* (1947) and the stained-glass window *Christmas Eve* (1952). Soon, the cut-outs became autonomous artworks, such as the monumental *Memory of Oceania* (1953), which straddles reference and abstraction. Experimenting with the technique's environmental possibilities, Matisse covered the walls of his dining room with paper forms to create *The Swimming Pool* (1952). After being shown for five years, this light-sensitive work is on view for its last months before being deinstalled for multiple years—a departure that has sparked this celebratory installation. Initially derided by one critic as an “agreeable distraction,” the cut-outs are today considered the culminating innovation of a restlessly inventive artist.

The Swimming Pool

One summer morning in 1952, Matisse told his studio assistant and secretary Lydia Delectorskaya that “he wanted to see divers,” so they went to a favorite pool in Cannes. Suffering under the blazing sun, they returned home to the Hôtel Régina in Nice, where Matisse declared, “I will make myself my own pool.” He asked Delectorskaya to ring the walls of his dining room with a white paper band just above the level of his head, breaking only at the window and doors at opposite ends of the room. Matisse cut divers, swimmers, and sea creatures out of paper painted ultramarine blue and pinned them onto the white paper.

The result was Matisse’s first and only self-contained, site-specific cut-out. The artist saw in paper’s pliability an ideal match for the fluidity of water, making the piece a perfect synthesis of subject and means. With its simplification of forms, dynamic use of positives and negatives, and expansion across the walls, *The Swimming Pool* was the culmination of Matisse’s cut-paper work up to that point.

The Swimming Pool, Matisse’s dining room, Hôtel Régina, Nice, 1952. © 2024 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photos: Lydia Delectorskaya



Acrobats

Lydia Delectorskaya, Matisse’s studio assistant and secretary, described the process that led to *Acrobats*: “On the request of H. Matisse, a model clothed in black tights had executed some acrobatic dance for him,” a session that resulted in a series of ink drawings. “Shortly thereafter he cut a Blue Acrobat. As opposed to the drawings that he found very good, this blue form left him unsatisfied. He therefore set himself to reworking it, modeling it like clay sculpture: sometimes adding, sometimes removing these volumes. During the weeks of this work, he cut a second blue Acrobat, but of a totally different expression.” This photograph shows *Acrobats* just beyond the doorway of Matisse’s dining room, where *The Swimming Pool*—with its related arching blue figures—was located.

Acrobats visible beyond the doorway of Matisse’s dining room, with *The Swimming Pool*, Hôtel Régina, Nice, 1953. © 2024 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Héléne Adant, © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Fonds Héléne Adant

