

Spring 2015

Ballet Review



Matisse Paper Cutouts at MoMA from Ballet Review Spring 2015

On the cover: Olga Smirnova and Evan McKie in
Onegin at the 2014 Youth America Grand Prix Gala.
Photograph by Hideaki Tanioka, YAGP

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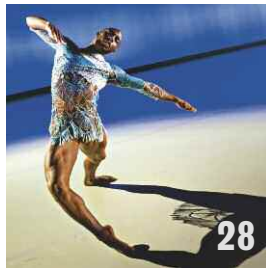
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and Evan McKie at the 2014 YAGP Gala.

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Beauty and Nothing Else

Marvin Hoshino

In 1911 Stravinsky wrote in a letter to Rimsky-Korsakov's son, Vladimir, that while looking at the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel he thought that if a Michelangelo were alive, the only thing his genius would recognize and approve would be the ballet, because it alone among the arts had taken as its task the problem of beauty and nothing else.

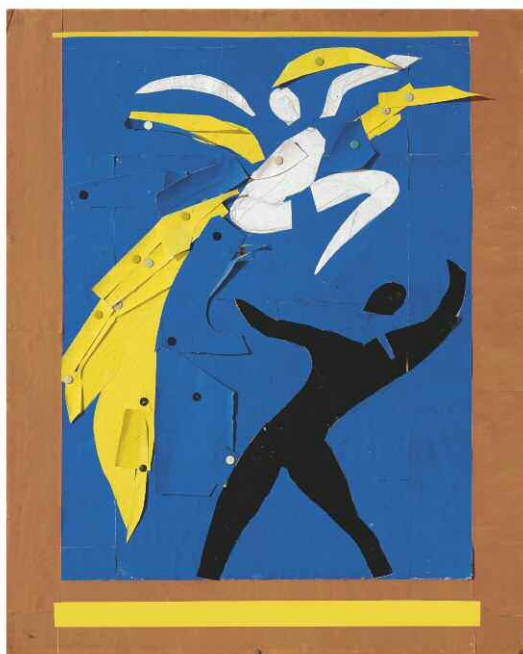
By then Henri Matisse had produced at least two masterpieces, *Dance II* and *Music* (both from 1910, painted for his early Moscow patron Sergei Shchukin), that also might be said to satisfy Stravinsky's memorable stricture. But the composer can hardly be faulted for not realizing as much because the outpouring of Matisse's final masterworks, the highly colored paper cutouts that he turned to when illness made easel painting increasingly difficult, still lay decades into the future, and the full recognition of Matisse's unwavering devotion to nothing but beauty, in a century not notable for it, took even longer.

Now a major exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art of the paper cutouts opens with *Two Dancers*, an early study for the front cloth of Massine's *Rouge et Noir*, commissioned by the Ballet Russe after the choreographer visited Matisse and saw the Barnes Foundation's *Dance* mural, then still a work in progress. As Matisse moved the mural's dancers from one panel to another, he temporarily attached strips of painted paper onto the oversized canvas as a quick way to judge changes in the colors and composition.

Two Dancers shows Matisse building up the figures with pieces of paper, as he had done with the Barnes mural, much in the way that a sculptor might add bits of clay to refine the contours of a form. The later cutouts are just

that, carved with shears into the paper in one continuing motion, which Matisse likened to "drawing directly in color."

A slightly later design for this same drop curtain, with one upright and one tumbling dancer, is visible on the next spread, just to the left of the fold. These two figures can be seen yet again on the right-hand page where they appear in black on the green maquette for the front and back covers of a 1945 issue of the deluxe art periodical *Verve*. The front cover as printed, simplified to just green and white, is displayed in the wall-mounted vitrine. The tumbling dancer, in particular, had a continuing interest for Matisse. In a sense he inherited her from the seated or kneeling



Two Dancers, 1937-38, Pompidou Center, Paris.

woman with her knees modestly drawn up to her breasts as seen in paintings by Ingres, Manet, and Cézanne.

Leo Steinberg proposed in a well-known essay that in a Matisse composition stasis is a pathological condition, like a traffic jam or a blood clot, to be avoided at all cost. Matisse's radical solution was to neutralize knots of visual importance at every point. For example, each woman in MoMA's *Dance I* (the freer,

All Matisse works © 2014 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art



Photo: Jonathan Muller, The Museum of Modern Art

1909 predecessor to the Russian version) averts her face, so the viewer's gaze instinctually jumps to somewhere else in the composition. In the same way, Matisse often rendered the hands of his models as just lumpy bunches of radishes, thus preserving the needed visual flow. This idea also suggests why the pensive nude women in Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* became, for Matisse, tumbling dancers.

It's true that Matisse made life drawings of women posed in tutus (as well as in North African or Spanish folk dress), but when he dreamt of dancers, he imagined not the coryphées at the Opera Ballet, but the shepherdesses of Arcadia, or, for that matter, those of the Folies Bergère. And one can posit an even more basic accord between Matisse and the art of the dance. Both show beauty, serenity, and the joy

of life *only in the act of vanishing*. In turn this helps explain a peculiarity in Matisse that still leaves even some sophisticated art lovers ill at ease, or oddly apologetic: how beauty can be ravishing, tragic, spiritual, and also just plain pretty, all at the same time. Dancers and balletomanes, I think, have no such qualms. Like Matisse, the best of dance isn't sentimental about beauty. Both can willingly let it go.

With scissors in hand, Matisse also fashioned maquettes for books and decorative projects. His tumbler makes yet another appearance, as the abandoned sledder in *The Toboggan*, one of the plates for the *Jazz* portfolio, an important commission from 1943 that Matisse began by recycling a pair of designs left over from *Rouge et Noir*. In *The Codomas*, named for a famed trapeze act, the swings, arena, and



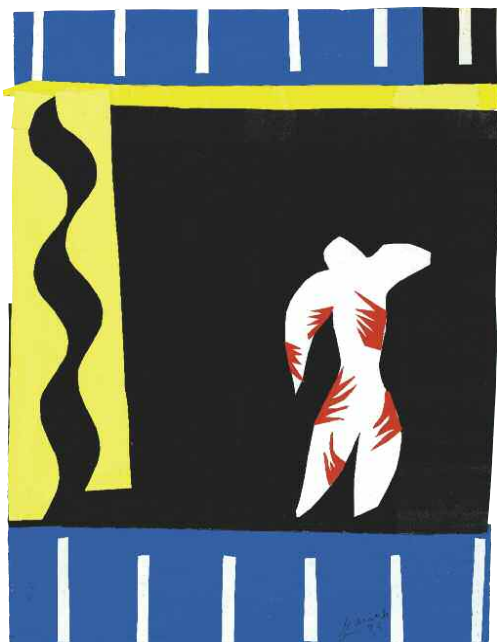
Composition, Black and Red, 1947, Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College.



White Alga on Orange and Red Background, 1947, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Marron, New York.



The Fall of Icarus, 1943, Private Collection.



The Clown (maquette for Jazz), 1943, Pompidou Center, Paris.



Palmette (Feuille violet sur fond orange), c. 1947, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Marron, New York.



The Codomas (maquette for Jazz), 1943, Pompidou Center, Paris.

lattice of the safety net are set forth with Cartesian rigor, while the aerialists have been reduced to two twisting, yellow squiggles.

A number of independent cutouts in the exhibition were scaled by Matisse to the oil paint-

ings he had still been physically able to complete just a few years earlier. One cutout, *Creole Dancer* (1950), was inspired, according to Louis Aragon, by Katherine Dunham. By contrast *The Swimming Pool*, now owned by MoMA,



The Parakeet and the Mermaid, 1952, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

was intended from the start to fit into a room in Matisse's hotel apartment-studio in Nice.

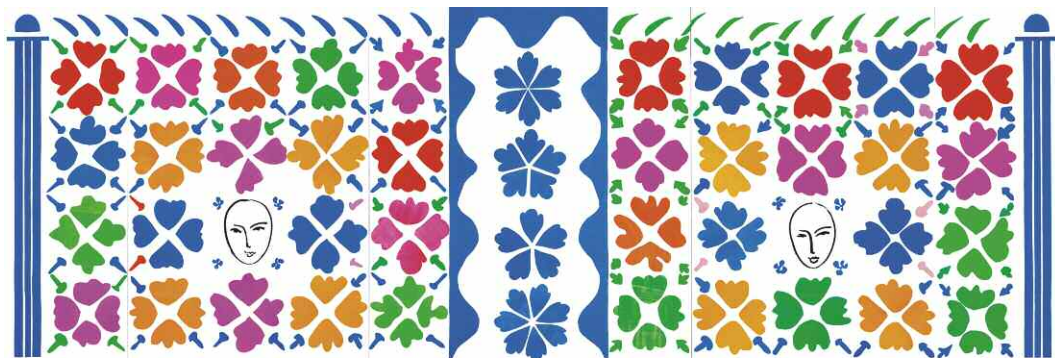
Matisse made a habit of massing groups of recently completed oil paintings, India ink drawings, and, eventually, the paper cutouts on the white walls of his bedroom so he could study them at his leisure. MoMA has re-created one such arrangement (visible on the left side of the gallery installation view) because, in the case of the cutouts, this practice gave rise to wall-covering paper murals assembled from many component pieces.

The Stedelijk Museum's *The Parakeet and the Mermaid*, above, is some 11' x 25'. To give an idea of the mammoth scale of the whole work, that pointy blue blob on the left side (an aloof parakeet, with its tail feathers sticking down as if it's sitting on a perch) is approximately three feet high. *Large Decoration with Masks*, below, from the National Gallery, at 13'

x 33', is even bigger. Another paper mural in Washington, *La Nègresse*, based on Josephine Baker, measures 15' x 21' and, regrettably, did not make the trip to New York.

Along with the *Large Decoration*, *La Nègresse* was long displayed with a costume designed by Matisse for Diaghilev in 1920 for one of the Mourners in Massine's *Le Chant du Rossignol*. In 1925, with Alicia Markova as the Nightingale, it was rechoreographed by Balanchine, his first ballet in the West to a score by Stravinsky. A picture in *Portrait of Mr. B* shows Balanchine awaiting a runthrough with some of the Matisse scenery and costumes in view.

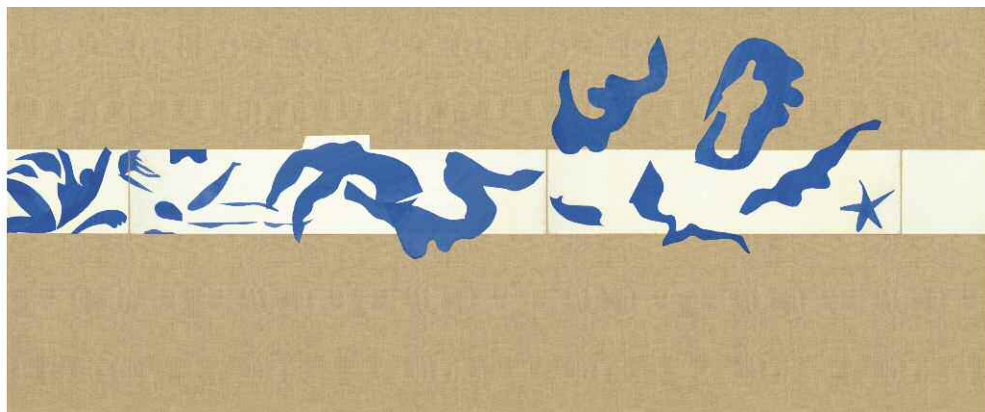
Washington's *Rossignol* garment is a white, felt cloak, covered overall in midnight-blue isosceles triangles, with a hood that extends down into a narrow cape chevroned in the same deep blue – motifs to which Matisse returned again in the paper cutouts.



Large Decoration with Masks, 1953, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Photo: Hélène Adant, Pempidou Center, courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art



The Swimming Pool, 1952, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photograph of Hôtel Régina, Nice, 1953.