

## Henri Matisse

Britannica Student Encyclopedia

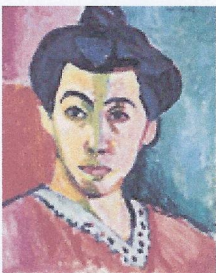


Henri Matisse.  
Alvin Langdon Coburn—  
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(1869-1954). Widely regarded as the greatest French painter of the 20th century, Henri Matisse also excelled at sculpture, illustration, graphics, and scenic design. His final masterpiece, completed when he was more than 80 years old, was the complete decoration—including windows, furniture, vestments, and murals—for the Dominican Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, near Nice in southern France.

Henri Matisse was born in northern France, in Le Cateau, on Dec. 31, 1869. The son of a local grain merchant, Henri showed no early interest in art. Instead, after five years in a secondary school in St-Quentin, he went to Paris in 1887 to study law. In 1890, while he was recuperating from an attack of appendicitis, Matisse passed the time by trying his hand at painting with a set of oil paints that his mother had given him. "Henceforth," he wrote, "I did not lead my life. It led me."

As a full-time art student in Paris, beginning in 1891, Matisse studied briefly with the popular painter and teacher Adolphe Bouguereau. He soon left Bouguereau, however, and began working under a more flexible teacher, Gustave Moreau, who had Georges Rouault as one of his other students. Matisse showed skill as a copyist, and his early works, which won some recognition, were conventional still lifes and interiors—copies of Louvre masterpieces. Soon, however, he discovered the paintings of Pissarro, Cézanne, Monet, Gauguin, and other revolutionary artists of the day, and the easy life of a copyist lost its appeal for him.



Portrait of Madame  
Matisse, an oil painting

(40.5 x 32.5 cm) by ...  
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Matisse began to experiment with impressionism and, later, with pointillism (see Painting, "The French Impressionists"). He developed a radical new approach to color, using it in a structural rather than a descriptive way. His paintings, with their bold areas of flat, pure color, outraged the French art critics. At the 1905 Salon d'Automne, he exhibited *Woman with the Hat*, a portrait of his wife. At this show Matisse, Rouault, and their colleagues were given the nickname *les fauves* (French for "wild beasts") because their work was considered barbaric.

Despite public rejection in France, Matisse soon found appreciative buyers among a large circle of foreign patrons, including the influential American writer and art collector Gertrude Stein. In the next years he completed a number of paintings that are now acknowledged to be masterpieces of 20th-century art. The sensational 1913 Armory Show in New York City, which introduced Europe's modern art to the United States, included 13 of his paintings.

After his association with fauvism, which ended about 1907, Matisse never again belonged to any identifiable school or movement. He believed that an artist should not allow himself to become a prisoner of his style or reputation. His own works display tremendous versatility, ranging in style from austere and geometric to lush and decorative. After a visit to Morocco he began to use rich colors and exotic patterns. Other trips—to Corsica, Italy, Spain, Tahiti—added new images to his visual vocabulary.

Matisse married in 1898. He established his family in one of the suburbs of Paris and divided his time between the family home, his studio in Paris, and another studio in Nice, on the French Riviera. In 1941, when he was in his 70s, he underwent an intestinal operation. The operation left him a semi-invalid, and after that Matisse settled permanently on the Riviera. He continued working, however, producing such remarkable paintings as *Egyptian Curtain* and *Large Interior in Red* when he was in his late 70s and 80s. He died in Nice on Nov. 3, 1954.

Although he did not begin his artistic career until the age of 20, Matisse's output during the next 60 years was huge. In addition to hundreds of paintings, his works include many sculptures; graphics, both lithographs and etchings; and designs for tapestries. He prepared illustrations for *Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1932) and other books. He also designed the stage settings for several of Sergey Diaghilev's ballets.

In the last years of his life, Matisse created a series of works using shapes he cut from brightly colored paper. He also completed his designs for the small chapel at Vence, a picturesque little town where he had owned a villa from 1943 to 1948. He had begun the project by agreeing to do some stained glass windows. He then went on to do murals and ended up by designing nearly everything inside and outside, including vestments and liturgical objects. The chapel is today one of the main tourist attractions near the Riviera. (See also drawing; dress; painting.)

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