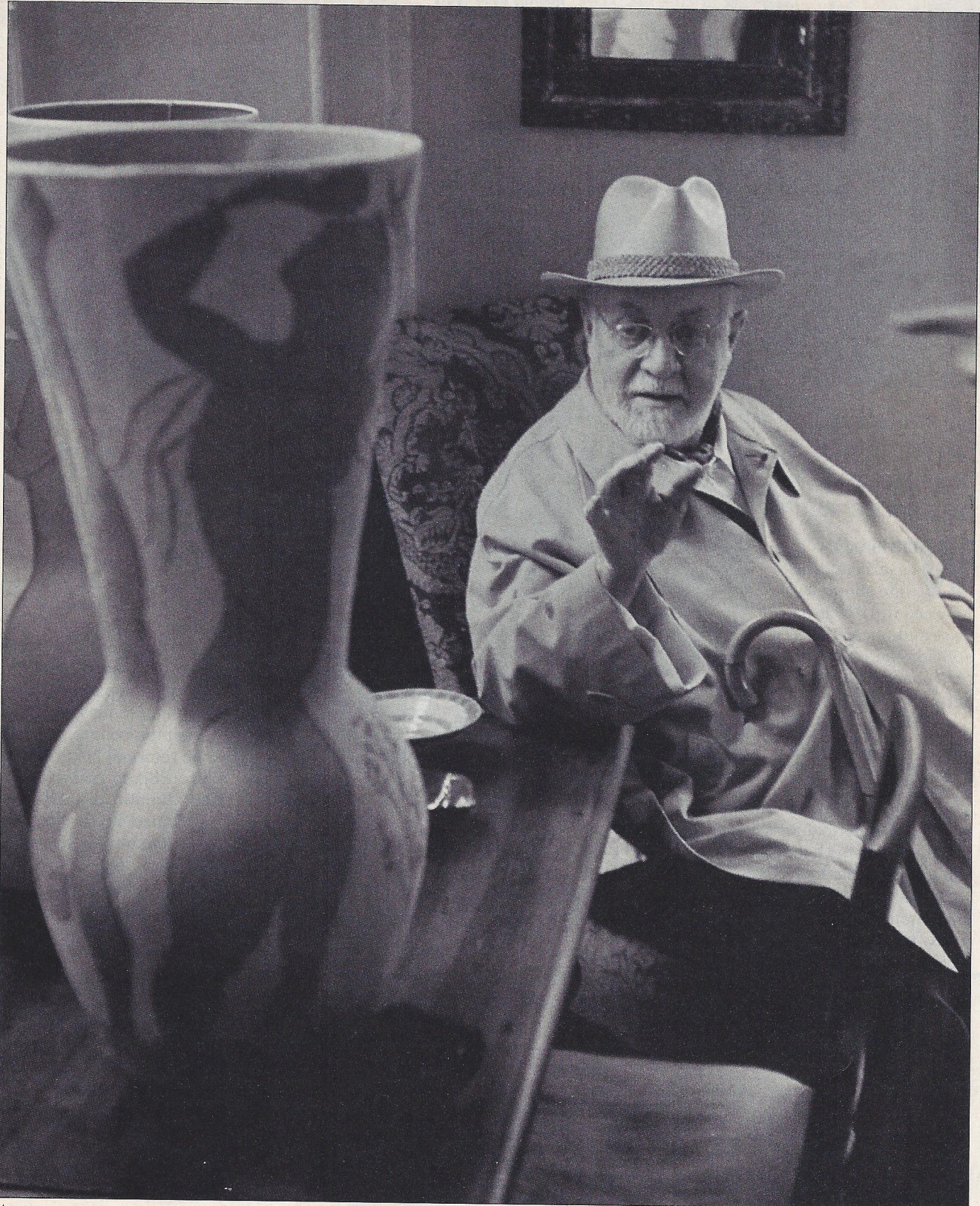


ARTS

Henri Matisse pursued pleasure in life and art ■ by Richard Lacayo

# PAINTER OF PARADISE



HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON/MAGNUM

▲ A revolutionary without a rebel's attitude, Matisse (shown here in 1944) wrote that "art should be something like a good armchair."



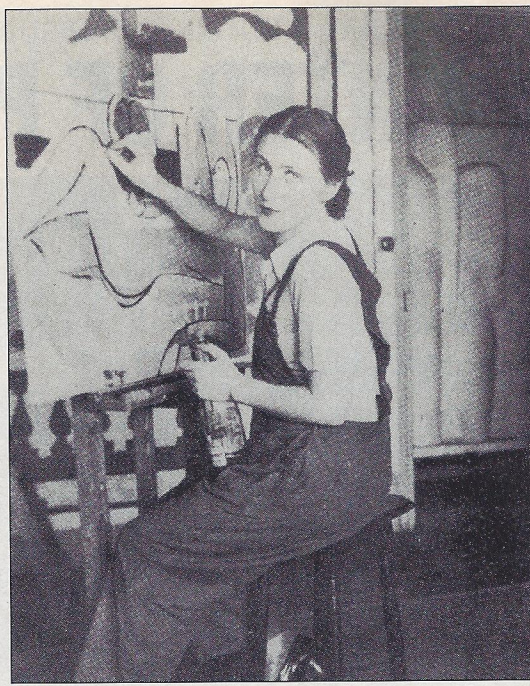


ALVIN LANGDON COBURN/INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHY AT GEORGE EASTMAN HOUSE

◀ “I only take an interest in myself,” said Matisse (here in 1913 with wife Amélie), who frequently lived apart from his family.

▶ Matisse hired Lydia Delectorskaya in 1934 as a companion for ailing Amélie. Lydia became Matisse’s model, then his mistress. He took this photograph of her.

▼ Lydia modeled for *Large Reclining Nude* (1935), among many other works.



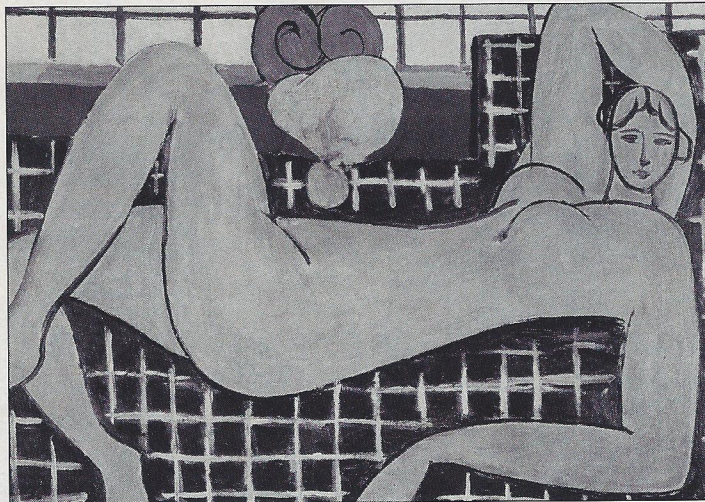
COLLECTION LYDIA DELECTORSKAYA/FROM MATISSE: A RETROSPECTIVE (MOMA)

He started as a lawyer, then began to paint, to his *père’s* chagrin

**W**HEN HENRI MATISSE’s paintings were shown in America in 1913 to a mass audience, not everybody was charmed. In Chicago students outside the Art Institute burned one of his paintings in effigy. Figuring that readers would want a glimpse of the man

who could inspire art criticism in the streets, an American writer searched out Matisse at his home in a Paris suburb for a *New York Times* interview. She found a gracious fellow in gold-rimmed spectacles, a suit and a neatly trimmed red beard. He begged her to tell her readers that he was “a normal man, a devoted husband and father . . . that I go to the theater, ride horseback, have a comfortable home, a fine garden—just like any man.”

Matisse was the great paradox of art history. All his life he had a buttoned-down manner but a bomb thrower’s instincts in everything that concerned painting. A large part of what makes “Henri Matisse: A Retrospective”—the definitive 400-



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work exhibit that opened last month at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and runs until Jan. 12—the hottest art event of this young decade is the painter’s graphic bravado and lust for color. As Matisse once observed, “I overdid everything as a matter of course.”

Yet even when his work was at its most visionary pitch, he dressed like the lawyer he once was, sketching for hours every day in a suit. Without loosening his tie, he created a vision of sheer pleasure on canvas, a world of lounging women, dancing nymphs and windows that open onto bright gardens. For better or worse, nothing in his art hints at the world wars and dictatorships that also went by outside those windows. “What I dream

of is an art of balance,” he once wrote. “Of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter.” He created what he dreamed.

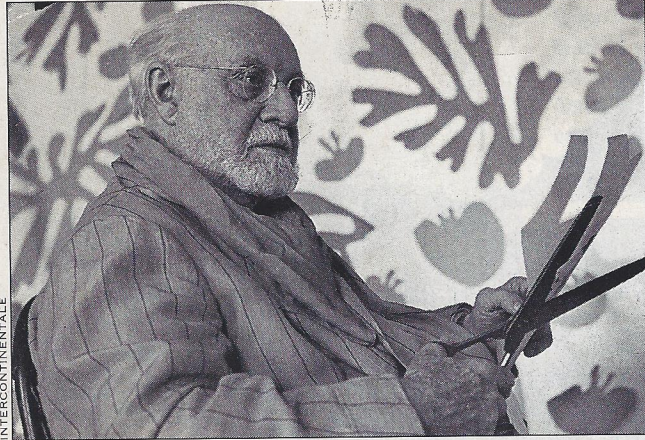
Among the artists of this century, only Picasso was his equal, but Matisse was a relatively late bloomer. While he was a law student in Paris, it apparently never entered his head to visit the Louvre. When he returned home at 19, in 1888, to start a law career in Saint-Quentin, a small town in the north of France, he enrolled in drawing classes that were held in the morning before work. The following year his mother gave him a box of paints to help pass the time while he was recuperating at home from a bout of appendicitis. Something clicked. The enchantments of color and line suddenly became more compelling than the security of a lawyer’s income. “I took fright,” he said years later, “realizing that I could not turn back.”

After a year spent begging permission from his father, a grain merchant with a businessman’s skepticism about bohemians, Matisse returned to Paris to study art full time. Within a few years he was liv-



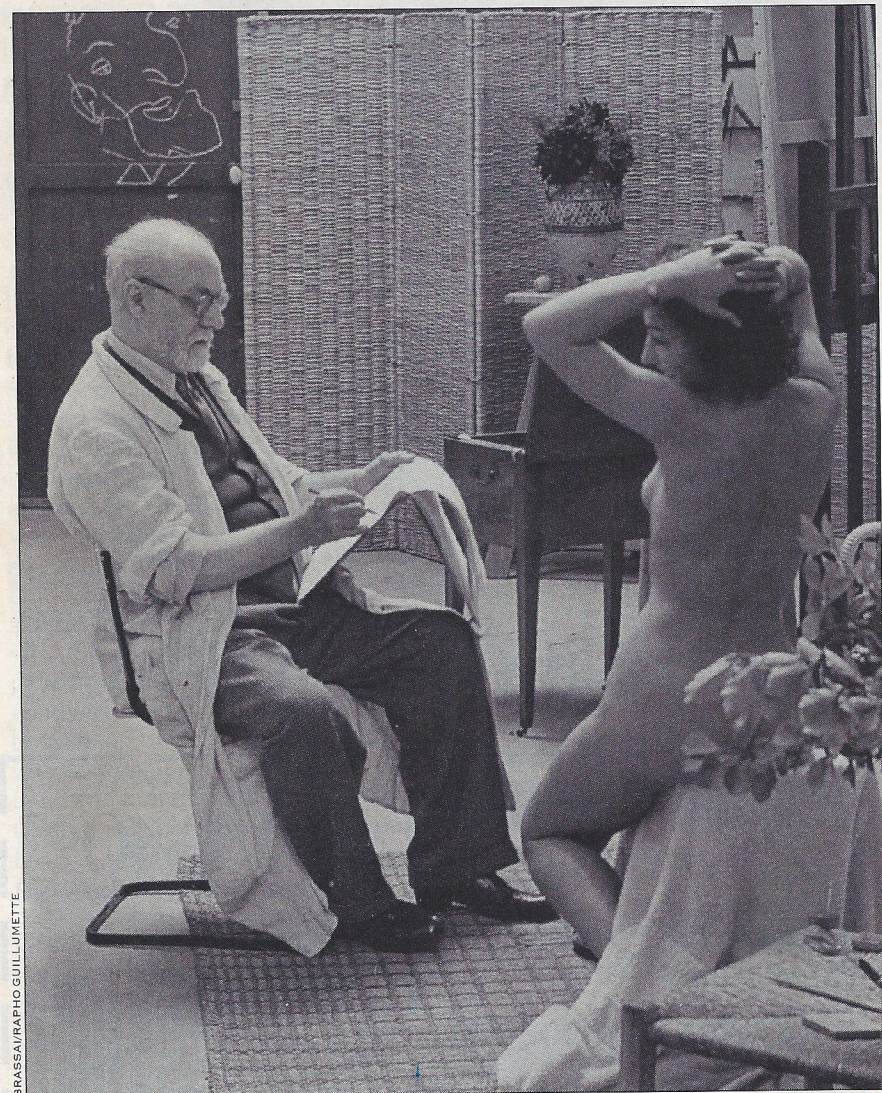
ing with one of his models, Caroline Joblaud, who gave birth in 1894 to their illegitimate daughter, Marguerite. When his relationship with Joblaud dissolved three years later, Matisse took custody of the girl. Perhaps because he was anxious to provide Marguerite with a mother,

he quickly took an attractive 26-year-old wife, Amélie, whom he married just months after their first meeting. Amélie also adopted Marguerite and throughout her life remained even closer to Marguerite than to Jean and Pierre, the two sons she had by Matisse.



◀ **“People who have nothing to say take shelter behind a disguise labeled abstract [art],” Matisse once said.**

▼ **Matisse sketched in Paris in 1939. He was so nearsighted, he sometimes worked with his chin resting on the model.**



When Matisse's reluctant father first saw him off for Paris, he shook his fist at him as the train departed, shouting, “You'll starve.” He wasn't far from wrong. Always strapped for cash, Matisse and his family would move back in with his parents for long stretches. To make ends meet, Amélie operated a hat shop for a while, and Matisse constructed decorations for the 1900 Paris World's Fair. He even collected an allowance until he was 33, when his exasperated father cut it off because his son never painted in a conventional style that would attract buyers.

Henri must not have gotten the message. Within a few years he was working on the most radical paintings of his career. When Matisse and his new circle first exhibited their hotly colored paintings in 1905, a tongue-in-cheek critic labeled them *les fauves*, French for “the wild beasts.” The notoriety did some good. Though his Fauvist period ran its course in just three years, it brought Matisse to the attention of collectors. With a stable income at last, he was able to devote himself to his great canvases of the next 10 years.

During the First World War, Matisse's search for bright, constant sunlight led him to Nice on the Mediterranean coast of France. His wife and children stayed behind in the Paris suburbs. Though they made extended visits, from now on Matisse would spend much of each year in a bachelor's paradise of sun, flowers, art and pretty models whom he called “the burning center of my energies.” He turned out lounging nudes and voluptuous drawings that art critic Sir Kenneth Clark once said brought the viewer “so close to the sprawling naked body that I, at least, retreat in embarrassment.”

By the 1930s Matisse had become everyone's favorite modern artist. But it pained him that he had long since lost his role as leader of the avant-garde to Picasso, 12 years younger, whose Cubist puzzles had more challenged mainstream taste than had Matisse's blue-green women. From the day in 1905 that they were introduced at the Paris apartment of Gertrude Stein, the American writer and art collector, the two men had an





ROBERT CAPAMAGNUM PHOTOS

▲ In 1949 the partially crippled master used brushes on sticks that let him paint from bed or, standing, reach high without stretching.

edgy and competitive friendship.

In her book *Matisse and Picasso: A Friendship in Art*, Françoise Gilot, who was Picasso's lover for eight years after World War II, recalls that for a time she became a pawn in their envious dealings. Her relationship with Picasso was still in its first tricky days when he brought her to meet Matisse—who immediately proposed to paint her portrait, with olive green hair and light blue complexion, no less. It was an invitation that led Picasso to become more attentive for weeks afterward. “Pablo began clinging to me,” she wrote.

What may have worried Picasso is that while he worked his lovers into his paintings, Matisse did the opposite. He took models, then made them his lovers. One of them was a devoted Russian, Lydia Delectorskaya, who would eventually become his lifelong companion. And in an arrangement unamplified by Matisse's biographers or by his family, Lydia remained under his roof even when Madame Matisse was liv-

ing there. But even Amélie had her limits. In a memoir, the daughter of an old friend of Matisse's wrote that, while visiting the family one day, she had witnessed an uncharacteristic outburst. “You may be a great artist,” Amélie reportedly screamed, “but you're a filthy bastard!”

Matisse gradually became estranged from his wife and vice versa—she angrily sought a legal separation in 1939, a chill worsened by World War II and the German invasion of France. Amélie and Marguerite joined the Resistance and were arrested by the Gestapo. Marguerite, who was tortured, escaped the train that was taking her to the Nazi labor camp at Ravensbruck only because it was halted by an Allied bombing raid. Meanwhile, Matisse remained in the south, opposed to the Nazis by instinct but for the most part enclosed in the problems of his art. The fiercely patriotic Amélie was so disgusted by his detached attitude that she demanded the separation, though in the end they did not

go through with it. Today they are buried together outside Nice, reconciled in death if not in life.

During the war, Matisse also underwent surgery for duodenal cancer, which was followed by complications that left him a virtual invalid for the rest of his life. It was in those mostly bedridden years that he arrived at a final flowering of his art, the wall paintings for a chapel in Vence, outside Nice, and the nearly abstract bright paper cutouts that made him, in his 80s, a leader again of the avant-garde.

As an old man, Matisse would create yet one more personal paradise, this time in a luxury hotel in Nice, where doves and parrots flew freely and one room became a “farm” of exotic plants with its own sprinkler system. He was working on his paper cutouts right up to his death in 1954. “As for me,” said Picasso, “I continue his work.” So long as color, light, paint and pleasure matter, it is a claim that many artists will always be proud to make. ■