
The period of Matisse’s work during 1913-1917, never examined thoroughly before, is the subject of this exceptionally designed book. During this time, Matisse left his arabesque figures and bold color to experiment with cubist forms and a palette dominated by blacks, grays, and whites.

Two paintings from this period, Large Bathers by the River (1909-1917) and The Moroccans (1915-1916), Matisse considered among the most pivotal in his career. Focusing on these two paintings and the bas-relief Back, curators Stephanie D’Alessandro and John Elderfield launched a multidisciplinary team inquiry into Matisse’s creative process, culminating in an exhibition of 120 works shown at the Art Institute of Chicago, and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, respectively, in 2010, to explain the development and context of Matisse’s least understood period.

Matisse believed in instinct but it was the advance of new technology which opens his creative process to current analysis. Seeing Matisse’s stages of reworking the paint surface on the canvas in Large Bathers by the River was possible only recently when a computer scientist wrote a program that digitally “stitched together” a collection of x-rays taken of the painting in the 1970s and visually reconstructed the stages of his painting process. The book is well-designed and produced with the reader in mind beginning with “Notes to the Reader,” which explains the organization of the catalog, sources, and contributors. A “Primer” also near the beginning provides definitions and terms that may not be familiar to those not versed in the visual arts. The traditional table of contents is a visual matrix of timeline, themes and contents, well-organized in three descriptive narrative sections with a chronology preceding each section followed by a collection of works by the artist aligning to different phases of Matisse’s artistic development and experimentation.

The five-page bibliography selectively brings up-to-date the most significant sources on Matisse. There are 650 excellent color reproductions of paintings, sculpture, drawings, sharp color details, and prints, as well as x-rays, infrared and archival images, many not viewed before.

Matisse’s radical reinventions during World War I were a search for something new. Color gradually faded out of his painting, and he explored applying techniques of sculpting to his canvas surfaces. Paintings were reworked over years in his search and this process is carefully detailed through a wide range of documentation including archival, conservation, and scientific information. This book provides a significant new understanding of Matisse’s engagement in the creative process and provides innovative art historical methods of inquiry.

Recommended for art research libraries with concentrations in twentieth-century art.

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