

Matisse and the Book Arts

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Dessins: Thèmes et variations, précédés par 'Matisse-en-France' par Aragon (Drawings: Themes and Variations, Preceded by 'Matisse in France' by Aragon), 1943. Portfolio of 158 plates produced in lithography and presented on single loose-leaf pages.

Collection Le Bouquinerie de l'Institut.



HENRI MATISSE

DESSINS

THÈMES ET VARIATIONS

Précédés de
"MATISSE-EN-FRANCE"
par ARAGON

MARTIN FABIANI, ÉDITEUR
M. CM. XLIII

Jazz and its prehistories

Two things intrigued me at the time of my 2014 viewing of the original collages for *Jazz*. The first was the inability of the printed images to do justice to the haptic collaged precursors of the famous folio-book. The second was that, in the curatorial scheme of the Tate's exhibition *Henri Matisse: The Cut-outs* in which I was standing, the *Jazz* collage works seemingly came about much later than other experimental work completed before Matisse's so-called 'second life'. My art-historical memory had placed the cutouts for *Océanie*, *Verve* and *Cirque* (later named *Jazz*) into the artist's period of convalescence;¹ the prevailing orthodoxy of my Matissian memory told me that the cutouts were the only way in which he could have continued his work, as cutting with scissors facilitated drawing with precision *into* colour something he had experienced much earlier when cutting into clay with his carving knife.

My experience of *Jazz* in London in 2014, however, exposed me to a prehistory of collages that dated backwards from a 1939 maquette for the periodical *Verve* (Vol II, No 8), through the *Dancer* project for the curtain of the ballet *Rouge et Noir* of 1937 (which included cut-and-pasted pieces of gouache on paper as well as thumb tacks), to maquette covers for the first issue of *Verve* in 1937 and for the journal *Cahiers d'Art* of 1936 (Nos 3–5). This prehistory goes even further back, to the gouache corrections² for the Barnes mural *La Danse* (*The Dance*) of 1931 and to a gouache-on-paper cutout study for the back wall in the ballet *Le Chant de Rossignol* (*The Song of the Nightingale*) of 1919.

And so, in 1943, when the cutouts began appearing for what would become *Jazz* in 1947, it was to a familiar manner of working out ideas as 'plastic signs' (Néret & Néret 2009: 137) by cutting into colour to which Matisse returned.

Samantha Friedman (in Buchberg et al 2014: 88) traces the evolution of the seminal cutout *Two Dancers* (1937–8) from their origin in the Barnes mural through their role as a design for the stage curtain for the ballet *Rouge et Noir* to become early maquettes for *Jazz*:

In extracting these two figures from an intermediary stage of his mural

design and rearticulating them in a study for his curtain design five years later, Matisse suppressed the hard-won labour of their piecemeal making in the fluid contours of discrete shapes cut from single sheets. These well-defined silhouettes were now ripe for further replication, and Matisse next split the standing and tumbling figures into two separate compositions. These nascent cutouts would eventually become maquettes for the first two plates, *The Clown* and *The Toboggan*, [that] he executed for the seminal illustrated book *Jazz*.

Lydia Delectorskaya³ recalls that, in response to the publisher Tériade's 'dream of a book on Matisse's colour' (Néret 2009: 137) first proposed in August 1940, Matisse, in 1943, 'brought [her] the two unfinished compositions, drawn from elements left over in his boxes from his work for the ballet' (Friedman in Buchberg et al 2014: 270 n.24). Delectorskaya continues: 'The project of an album reproducing 20 cutouts, composed by HM specifically to the dimensions of the volume and reproduced in facsimile, was born there' (Friedman in Buchberg et al 2014: 270 n.5).⁴

Cutouts from flat pieces of paper on which scintillating flat colours appear display a number of important formal and design advantages over their drawn or painted equivalents. The first is their discardability and contingent nature as possible and provisional ideas in space, what Hauptman (in Buchberg et al 2014: 19) refers to as their 'state of perpetual deferral'.

A second is their eminent instability and movability: turning over a cutout or slightly manipulating a figure's orientation re-energises compositional and directional forces and at the same time produces a double, an alternative figure or a new context for the narrative. This is seen in operation between the white figure in *Le Clown* (*The Clown*) (1943) and its reversed black figure in *Icare* (*Icarus*) (1943). This flexibility is also noted in the yellow stars against a blue sky in *Icare*, which have been transposed from similar white jagged motifs for the cover of *Verve* (Vol IV, No 13) completed in the same year. It is also from this cover of *Verve* that the black tumbling figure is ever-so-slightly realigned in order to describe the movement and instability of its blue double in *Le Toboggan* (*The*

1 Matisse underwent surgery for duodenal cancer after which he experienced two pulmonary embolisms and a bout of influenza, all between 8 January and 23 May 1941.

2 Samantha Friedman (in Buchberg et al 2014: 270 n.6) cites Jack Flam's essential text on *The Dance* (1993) where he notes that these cut-out and collaged additions were part of the *Paris Dance Mural* compositions of 1932 completed on top of the original *Unfinished Dance Mural* canvasses of 1931, and whose incorrect dimensions were only discovered in February 1932. Friedman (2014: 87) notes that when the mistake in the dimensions was discovered, requiring Matisse to start over on new canvasses, 'he enlisted the cut-out method once again. The process that would become the basis for the mature cutout practice of Matisse's last decade was thus established, though the technique remained, for the time being, purely a means to an end'.

3 Lydia Delectorskaya (1910–1998) was orphaned at a young age in Siberia and managed to flee Russia in its tumultuous post-Revolution years, ending up in Nice, France, with no job or connections. She found employment in the Matisse household as both a studio assistant and domestic worker, later, from 1939, becoming Matisse's model. In the last two decades of his life, she was Matisse's studio manager, secretary and devoted companion.

4 Friedman quotes from the Lydia Delectorskaya Scrapbook, 'Unpublished notes for a proposed book on Matisse's cut-outs', Archives Henri Matisse, Paris.

Toboggan (1943), 'demonstrating how Matisse's relatively constant repertory of cut forms adopts a multitude of significations, subject to context' (Friedman in Buchberg et al 2014: 89). According to Hauptman (in Buchberg et al 2014: 19), Matisse's 'serial cutting' partially accounts for *Jazz's* vibrant syncopation.

Third, the cutouts direct our attention to Matisse's process of thinking when he states in the pages of *Jazz* (Matisse 1947: 73–4):

It is no longer the brush that slips and slides over the canvas, it is the scissors that cut into the paper and into the colour. The conditions of the journey are 100 per cent different. The contour of the figure springs from the discovery of the scissors that give it the movement of circulating life. This tool doesn't modulate. It doesn't brush on, [but] it incises in; note this well, because the criteria for observation will be different.

Last, and to underscore my opening statement, is the tension between actual and visual flatness that the cutouts forge when viewing the printed 'facsimile' that is the *Jazz* folio-book on the current exhibition. Hauptman (in Buchberg et al 2014: 19–21) considers the cutouts' 'material logic' their 'flexibility and pliability' and 'sculptural sensation', and holds that even when the pins were removed and the paper elements glued down, often onto canvas, 'the profusion of pinholes [was] a visceral testimony [to] the numerous campaigns such seemingly simple work ... demanded'. The unique liveliness of the cutouts in the studio is, however, lost when they come off the walls, are unpinned and glued down; what Matisse's friend, the writer, caricaturist and graphic artist André Rouveyre described as 'the very physicality of this flexibility, all of this contributes to making something miraculous that loses its essence when laid out flat'. (Finsen 2001: 479)

Jazz, as we encounter it on this exhibition, as pages from a folio-book, is doubly distant from the contingent cutouts first pinned and re-pinned in Matisse's studio. After their gluing, yet still in command of the overlapping, indexical records of their once provisional states of becoming, their 'compositional paths not taken' (Hauptman in Buchberg et al 2014: 21), the *pochoir* stencils employed to help faithfully reproduce the colour and brushed integrity of the gouache originals can achieve few, if any, of these indices.

Matisse knew that *Jazz* should remain as 'originals – just gouaches' and lamented their 'loss of "charm" when translated into the stencilled *pochoir* prints of the finished book'. (Finsen 2001: 478) In a letter to Rouveyre dated 22 February 1948, Matisse accepted that 'for someone who has not seen the originals it is the impression that is given by the book that is the main thing'. (Finsen 2001: 486–7)

With the Vence Chapel window *découpages* on the walls of his studio and *Jazz* on view for the first time at Galerie Pierre Berès, Paris, in December 1947, Matisse's letter to Rouveyre expressed his disappointment with *Jazz* and that these new works – for the Chapel at Vence – would be 'certainly not a *Jazz*'. (Finsen 2001: 486–7) Rouveyre had seen the cutout maquettes in their developmental stage some two years earlier, and in an earlier letter Matisse had sought his friend's opinion of *Jazz* in its final folio-book form. (Finsen 2001: 475) Friedman (in Buchberg et al 2014: 126) tells us that Rouveyre's response one week later was 'decidedly negative' and that he in a further letter bemoaned 'the loss of materiality that occurred with the translation to a different medium. ... It's the material that's no longer there ... the fire is lost along the way'. (Finsen 2001: 477–78)

Matisse appreciated Rouveyre's honesty, stating that he was 'absolutely of the same opinion ... it is absolutely a failure' (Finsen, 2001: 478) and compared the cutouts' lively existence in his studio to the transposed *pochoir* plates through which, for him, their sensitivity had been removed. (Friedman in Buchberg et al 2014: 128)

But here in Johannesburg and in spite of Matisse's documented disappointment with the final *pochoir* folio-book, we are confronted with both *Jazz's* huge reputation and its material presence. Without any comparative limitation that the haptic sculptural manifestation of the auratic original cutouts could impose, viewers can appreciate the work on its own terms: an artist's book designed and produced almost entirely by the hand of the artist.⁵

The artist's book and the *livre d'artiste*

A well-documented debate within the international book arts community concerns the terms and definitions of elemental objects of the field. One of the more opaque aspects of this debate is a linguistic one. The term 'artist's book' translates directly into French as *livre d'artiste*. However, when this French term is used by English-speaking practitioners, it does not translate back comfortably into what is usually understood by the term 'artist's book'.

Lisa Fischman (2006: 2) notes problems in such 'translation' and 'understanding', stating in her catalogue essay for a major exhibition of exemplars⁶ that the term *livres d'artiste*

⁵ The edition consists of 270 books in large-folio size (42 x 32.5 cm) of colour plates and texts, and a separate edition of 100 portfolios with just the plates.

⁶ Dr Lisa Fischman was chief curator of the exhibition *Livres d'artistes: Selections from the Ritter Collection* at the University of Arizona Museum of Art which ran from 8 June to 6 August 2006.

complicates matters: a literal translation from the French, as ‘artists’ books’, misleads by implication, bringing to mind distinctly different aesthetic and material interventions by artists into the very notion of Book-ness; and the frequent substitution of ‘artist-illustrated books’, while accurate in a literal sense, too broadly suggests commercial intent. In other words, the *livre d’artiste* is a curiosity, an example of artistic work about which ... fine hairs [are] split. ... [T]he *livre d’artiste* not only represents a collusion of complex interests – social, political, economic and cultural – but also the establishment of a print tradition of commissioned collaborations between visual artists and texts (an inherently mutable and unpredictable process) toward the creation of unique volumes.

Given Elza Adamowicz’s 2009 study of the *livre d’artiste* in 20th-century France, in which she notes the breakdown of the logocentric conception of the illustrated book through the works of Rimbaud and Mallarmé, for our purposes then, the term *livre d’artiste* is used to denote a hand-bound, limited-edition fine-press book in which both images and texts have equal potency. Generally speaking, an established publisher would invite a recognised artist to illuminate existing texts by a renowned poet or writer, resulting in often highly prized and expensive objects. Examples of such books include Pierre Bonnard’s lithographic illuminations⁷ for Paul Verlaine’s text *Parallèlement* (Ambroise Vollard Editions, 1900); Picasso’s illustrations of Ovid in *Les Métamorphoses* (Albert Skira Editions, 1931) or Matisse’s fraught and much-criticised⁸ work on James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (Limited Editions Club, 1935).

The term ‘artist’s book’, on the other hand, implies an object in which

⁷ The word ‘illuminations’ is used to describe a body of images in both spatial and content dialogue with the text on the page. This implies a closer relationship between image and text than illustration might achieve, and it is noteworthy that in the context of *Poèmes de Charles d’Orleans*, Matisse was to describe his imagery as illuminations.

⁸ Elderfield (1978: 141–42) states that the use of Matisse’s drawings as supplemental plates by editor George Macy was to placate conservative members of the Limited Editions Club who might not have understood the more abstract visual elements of the etched plates. Matisse’s playing Homer’s *Odyssey* against Joyce’s *Ulysses* intensified the amorphous classical foundation of Joyce’s work, leading to erroneous claims that Matisse had misunderstood or never read Joyce’s work. In fact, Joyce had personally agreed to Matisse’s interpretation, a point contradicted by the author of a website on Matisse, who on the page ‘Matisse, French Poetry and the *Livre d’Artiste*’ states: ‘When he discovered that Matisse had not even read the book, but instead depicted six episodes from Homer’s *Odyssey*, Joyce flew into a rage and refused to sign any more copies’. Other problems were technical in nature: the lithographic materials Matisse was given by an ‘idiot lithographer’ (Bidwell, 2015: 97) were faulty, causing him to abandon the lithographic stones in favour of copper plates on which he produced soft-ground etchings. Thomas Craven described Matisse’s illustrations as ‘a bunch of studio sweepings having no discoverable connection with anything in Homer or Joyce’ (Elderfield 1978: 218. n.2). Aragon (1972: 194) states that ‘in fact Macy’s *Ulysses* is not one of Matisse’s books and he never considered it as such, never mentioning it amongst his books’ – another erroneous claim, as Matisse (in *How I made my Books* 1946) only mentioned the books he designed as a totality. For a fuller, albeit forthright, account of these tribulations, see Bidwell 2015: 94–101.

the artist is directly involved at all levels and in which elements of self-consciousness and reflexivity are at play in the book’s form, material and conceptual being, and where the object’s ‘bookness’ is as much evident as its content. Kathryn Brown in her analysis of Matisse’s *Poèmes de Charles d’Orleans* (1950) uses the two terms interchangeably.

Thus, Matisse’s etchings, which illuminate Albert Skira’s 1932 production of Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Poésies*, can be considered a *livre d’artiste*, while *Jazz*, published by Tériade Editions in 1947, exhibits Matisse’s hand, eye and production decisions exclusively and is typical of many conventions of the artist’s book.

Where *Jazz* differs in spirit and intent from the original cutouts is clearly demarcated in the textual notes, in the artist’s hand⁹ – often termed ‘artist’s manuscript’ in the literature – which contextualise and position the imagery. As demonstrated in his textual work for *Poèmes*, Rouveyre had already observed to Matisse in 1943 that there was ‘a close and delightful alliance of lettering and drawing which join together as one ... drawing is lettering, lettering is drawing’ (Néret & Néret 2009: 142). This, I argue, is one of the most potent attributes of *Jazz*.

The texts are described by Matisse as ‘an accompaniment to my colours’, and on page 17 of *Jazz* he writes:

I’d like to introduce my colour prints under the most favourable of conditions. For this reason I must separate them by intervals of a different character. I decided that handwriting was best suited [to] this purpose. The exceptional size of the writing seems necessary to me in order to be in a decorative relationship with the character of the colour prints. These pages therefore will serve only to accompany my colours, just as asters help in the composition of a bouquet of more important flowers. Their role is purely visual.

Matisse’s texts constitute personal meditations on, for example, the role of the artist, belief in God and the aeroplane (appearing next to the image of *lcare*), and include a drawn table of the illustrations themselves.¹⁰ Matisse’s 20 images include ‘crystallisations of memories of the circus, of popular tales, or of travel’

⁹ It is possible that by 1946 Matisse had already seen the handmade book produced by Paul Éluard and Picasso in 1941 titled *Divers Poèmes du livre Ouvert* in which 15 copies of Éluard’s handwritten texts were accompanied by Picasso’s bright abstract watercolours (Elderfield, 1978: 150).

¹⁰ These diagrammatic images might be considered forerunners of similar ‘sketchy’ imagery which constituted the *Fourteen Stations of the Cross* ceramic wall mural for the Chapel of the Dominican Sisters of the Rosary, Vence, 1951.

(Matisse 1947: 145).

Each full-page image is accompanied by five pages of text, and each half-page image is accompanied by three pages of text. Clearly, the texts are a significant element of the total enterprise, with Matisse 'juggling the decorative rapport between the texts and the illustrations . . . by the linear drawing, whether in reed pen and Indian ink or carved out of pure colour by the scissors'. (Néret 2009: 142)¹¹

The result is a dynamic and didactic artist's book that straddles different book formats: it can be held and the pages turned, as with a codex; or appreciated in its folio form, allowing the individual pages to be framed or displayed independently. On this technical level alone, the expanded relationship between artist, reader/viewer and multiple book openings makes *Jazz* one of the most important works of its kind, predating the proliferation of artists' books of the 1960s¹² by over a decade.

Perhaps of equal importance here is the substitution of one set of haptics by another. If the collaged cutouts are absent from the contextual reading of the folio-book, the peculiar haptics of the artist's book replace them: handling; page-turning; material texture between the fingers; recto versus verso negotiation and renegotiation; and, not least, finding evidence of the overarching presence of the artist in all facets of the production. These are qualities that theorists and makers of artists' books alike refer to as a work's reflexive 'bookness'.

Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans (1950)

In spending time unpacking the collaged-cutout context of *Jazz* as a frame for viewing (only) the folio on the Johannesburg exhibition, my aim is to make clear the importance of considering a work's prehistory, especially if that artwork has developed an aura or fame of its own. Such a prehistory seems relevant when considering Matisse's final artist's book, *Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans* (1950).

In September 1942, Matisse asked Rouveyre to find him a collection of poems by the 15th-century French duke Charles d'Orléans, celebrated as an



Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans, manuscrits et illustrés par Henri Matisse (Poems of Charles d'Orléans, Manuscripts Illustrated by Henri Matisse), 1950. Artist's book of 56 colour lithograph leaves on Arches paper, 41,28 x 26,57 cm. Le Bouquinerie de l'Institut.

accomplished medieval poet. During the 25 years spent as a prisoner of war in England after the Battle of Agincourt, Charles had composed more than 500 poems in both French and English.

The genesis of *Poèmes* arose from discussions between Matisse and Rouveyre during the early 1940s. Of this genesis, Brown (2013: 85) writes that:

Rouveyre became accustomed to receiving beautifully decorated letters and envelopes from Matisse. On occasion, Matisse would simply send an ornamented transcription of one of Charles's poems, a sharing of literary enthusiasm that consisted in the act of displaying a poem to his friend in a new and highly personal way.

This exchange prompted a detailed discussion about the poet and his work and '[i]n a letter dated 3 February 1943, Rouveyre raised the idea of an artist's book comprising Charles's poems, but written solely in Matisse's hand . . . "without the slightest trace of printing or typeface"'. (Brown 2013: 85)

¹¹ Edmond Vairel produced the *pochoir* work with fidelity as close to the qualities of the gouaches as possible, and Draeger Frères faithfully reproduced Matisse's handwritten manuscript.

¹² Building on experimental work produced in the first half of the 20th century by Dada, Futurist and Russian artists, a number of artists began producing artists' books as a primary activity in the 1960s. The most visible of these artists included Ed Ruscha, Dieter Roth, Maurizio Nannucci, Emmett Williams and Dick Higgins. Drucker (1995: 49–50) describes this proliferation as an exploitation of the book as a fresh and vital form for immediate, direct expression and communication, readily circulated, given away or sold for very little money. Such objects also plugged into the prevailing counter-culture of circumventing the formal gallery system which postal art, 'intermedia' and ephemeral objects, such as those produced under the Fluxus movement, were able to achieve.



Matisse comparing proofs of the *Florilège des Amours de Ronsard* (Anthology of Love Poems by Ronsard) with the lithographic stone in the Moulrot Studios, Paris, 1948.

Photo: Ina Bandy

Like *Jazz*, *Poèmes* became an artist's book redolent with the artist's hand and intentionality, but here, this was done through a process of 're-originating' (Brown 2013: 93) texts which were not his own. Matisse achieved this by self-consciously inhabiting 'the gestures of the poet for the purposes of staging his own unique "performance" as a modernist painter'. (Brown 2013: 96)

A reader and/or viewer of such performativity might want to acknowledge that between the conception of the project in 1943, its reworking in 1947 and its final publication in 1950, Matisse was battling on two fronts. The first was with his health and immobility, which often found him in his bed or a wheelchair, curtailing the production of easel paintings.

This immobility, however, seemed to have focused and freed him up to mature both his gouache paper cutouts and his bookwork in a period he described as his 'second life'. (Finsen, 2005)¹³ During these years, Matisse

¹³ In a letter to Pierre Matisse dated 3 November 1942, Matisse described his recuperation after surgery: 'It's like being given a second life, which unfortunately can't be a long one' (Spurling 2005: 402).

prepared and published *Thèmes et Variations* (Themes and Variation) (1943), *Pasiphaë*, *Chant de Minos* (*Les Crétois*) (*Pasiphaë, Song of Minos* (*The Cretans*) (1944), *Lettres d'une Religieuse Portugaise* (*Letters of a Portuguese Nun*) (1946), *Visage* (*Face*) (1946), *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) (1947), *Jazz* (1947), *Le Vent des Épines* (*The Wind of Thorns*) (1947), *Florilège des Amours de Ronsard* (*Anthology of the Love Poems of Ronsard*) (1948), *Midis Gagnés* (*Midi Attained*) (1948) and, finally, *Poèmes*, which was only published after the war, in 1950, after a suitable publisher was found.

Whether at the Hotel Régina in Cimiez, Nice, or at the villa Le Rêve in Vence, and with his secretary and companion Lydia Delectorskaya's scrupulous organisation about him, Matisse's second battle was the war and the occupation of southeastern France by the Nazis through the Vichy government.

In 1940 Matisse was offered a visa to the United States of America, which he never took up, perhaps because of the arrest of his estranged wife Amélie, daughter Marguerite Duthuit and son Jean for their work with the Resistance (Néret & Néret 2009: 138).¹⁴ In a letter to Marguerite, written in June 1940, Matisse stated:

Each one of us must find his own way to limit the moral shock of this catastrophe. For myself . . . in order to prevent an avalanche overwhelming me, I'm trying to distract myself from it as far as possible by clinging to the idea of the future work I could still do, if I don't let myself be destroyed. (Spurling 2005: 393)

Karl Buchberg (Buchberg et al 2014: 15) notes that Aragon saw the yellow bursts in *Jazz's* *Icarus* as 'exploding shells'; that Tériade 'was convinced that the earliest *Jazz* plates – *Toboggan*, *Icare*, *L'Enterrement de Pierrot* (*The Burial of Pierrot*) – reflected the tragic ambience of the time in which they were made'; that Riva Castleman read *Le Loup* (*The Wolf*) as 'a stand-in for the Gestapo'; and that Rebecca Rabinow saw acts of aggression in *Le lanceur de couteaux* (*The Knife Thrower*), *L'Avaleur de sabres* (*The Sword Swallower*) and *Le Cowboy* (*The Cowboy*).

Matisse's response to the 'catastrophe' was to produce his own subtle political act in *Poèmes*. Indeed, it was Aragon (1972: Vol I, 198), who had earlier remarked that the blinding of Polyphemus in *Ulysses* 'is the only true image of pain in Matisse's work' and who found the image of the prisoner to be a

¹⁴ Marguerite was later tortured for her part in the French Resistance. See Néret 2009: 138.

central figure of *Poèmes*. (Aragon 1999: 75–6) ‘More than an expression of artistic influence,’ states Brown (2013: 87), ‘Aragon interprets Matisse’s attraction to Charles’s poetry and, in particular, the painter’s insistence on the symbol of the *fleur-de-lis* in this and other works produced during this period, as a political gesture that constituted a personal act of resistance to the Occupation.’ She continues: ‘Just as poetry’s implicit reflection on literary history could constitute “a weapon for the unarmed man”, so too Matisse’s immersion in French medieval tradition expressed . . . a small tribute to “French splendour” at a time when national identity was threatened and France was in need of hope.’ (Aragon 1998 in Brown 2013: 87)

Matisse was ‘so obsessed by this poetry’ (Matisse in Bidwell 2015: 205) that he could not resist drawing Charles’s visage on the book’s frontispiece as the only non-heraldic visual element in the publication.

The book is a most appropriate format to place and indeed conceal such politically charged imagery, and by ‘writing out Charles’s words, Matisse would transform poems into visual objects intended to be appreciated as images in addition to being read as texts.’ (Brown 2013: 86) This ‘imagetext’ (Mitchell in Nelson & Shiff 1996: 53) of ‘Matisse’s own handwriting as the aesthetic object of the final work’ (Brown 2013: 86) is displayed within the seemingly decorative and ‘lyrical’ (Elderfield 1978: 143) border designs and in dialogue with the various *fleur-de-lis* motifs. Not only does this cut to the heart of the Frenchman-as-prisoner theme of Charles’s poetry brought into the contemporary world of Second World War France, but it facilitates Matisse’s own act of defiance from within a life and oeuvre of bourgeois ease. John Bidwell (2015: 205) states that ‘[d]ating to 1942, these calligraphic broadsides are among his earliest exercises in penmanship and prefigure the ornamental initials he designed for books of the 1940s as well as the handwritten texts of *Jazz*’.

Matisse (in Fourcade 20015: 215) describes *Poèmes* as a ‘plastic equivalent’ of the original poem, then, argues Brown (2013: 90), ‘the work of one artist can serve as a space of creative possibility for the imaginative work of another’; and, citing Matisse (in Fourcade 2005: 218), ‘the visual artist must not adhere too strictly to the written text and should instead work freely in order to express his own sensibilities’. In this way, Matisse undoes the conventional poet/artist hierarchy of the *livre d’artiste* and exploits the artist’s gestures of translation, design and production conventions of the artist’s book.¹⁵

¹⁵ In the book’s colophon a compromise in acknowledging Charles’s and Matisse’s contributions was reached. It states: ‘This handwritten book has been entirely composed by Henri Matisse. The artist has written by hand and illuminated the “Poèmes of Charles d’Orléans”.

Thus, Matisse’s ‘rewriting’ of the original poems expresses a way in which new meaning can accrue to cultural texts and artefacts through the form of the artist’s book. Brown (2013: 91) argues that ‘as letters “re-sent” by the painter for his own purposes and as an assertion of French cultural identity during the Occupation, the poems are imbued with additional significance by their “re-enactment” and publication in a new context’.

Given the unusual hand-drawn content of *Poèmes* and ‘the difficulties posed by making and selling such a book’, it was Tériade who ‘demonstrated a willingness to test the boundaries of book illustration’ (Bidwell, 2015: 205) and took on the risky publication when others (Fabiani and Mourlot) were unwilling to do so. Matisse and Tériade signed the contract two days after the launch of *Jazz*.¹⁶

Dessins: Thèmes et Variations (1943)

Matisse began his earlier work, *Dessins: Thèmes et Variations, précédés de ‘Matisse-en-France’ par Aragon (Drawings: Themes and Variations, preceded by ‘Matisse in France’ by Aragon)* (1943), in 1941, when both his convalescence and the war were at their height.

Dessins is an ensemble of 158 drawings divided into 17 suites or series. It was published by the dubious Martin Fabiani.¹⁷ Matisse entrusted this project to Fabiani with the expectation that he would produce an edition comparable to Picasso’s *Eaux-fortes originales pour des textes de Buffon (Original Etchings for Buffon’s Texts)*, which Fabiani had taken over from Vollard in 1942.

Meant to demonstrate that seemingly spontaneous improvisation was only possible after a long process of internalisation, the drawings that make up the imagery for *Dessins* were, according to Matisse, ‘one of the things for which I really wished to stay alive. . . . I have created an abundance of drawings which are wholly surprising. They are going to be assembled in a book.’ (Duthuit 1988: 48)

Matisse’s excitement for this project was communicated in many letters to both Marguerite Duthuit and Pierre Matisse, in which he described his drawings as ‘a “flowering” of work in this medium representing 50 years of effort’ and stated that if he could achieve similar results in his paintings he ‘would be able

¹⁶ Bidwell (2015: 205–6) states that the official retail price of *Poèmes* was 15 000 francs, forty times the price of an ordinary novel, but less than a sixth of the price of *Jazz*.

¹⁷ See Bidwell (2015: 116–117) for an account of Fabiani’s dealings with the art world, especially his attempt to liquidate the estate of Ambroise Vollard (one of the most important dealers in French contemporary art and publisher of some of the finest examples of the *livre d’artiste*), his collaborationist activities and Matisse’s short-lived relationship with him.



to “die content” (Bidwell 2015: 117). It is possible to read *Dessins* as a personal manifesto in which the artist reached out to the world while in isolation and unable to travel as much as he would have liked. (Bidwell 2015: 117)

Matisse invited Aragon (who, along with his wife, was hiding from the Nazis in Villeneuve-les-Avignon some 260 kilometres from Nice) to produce the letterpress preface. This turned out to be, as Bidwell (2015: 118) describes, a lengthy ‘effusive expository essay’ and ‘an act of patriotism, not just a tribute to a friend, but also a defiant proclamation of national ideals as embodied in the artist’s work, hence the title “*Matisse-en-France*”’. Lydia Delectorskaya, however, criticised the preface for being too long and laudatory, arguing that it did not clearly explain the themes or variations. (Bidwell 2015: 119)

Dessins, like *Poèmes*, contains a political charge and is presented in loose-leaf, folio-book form so that the collotype reproductions of the drawings can be grouped and viewed comparatively, an idea that was to be exploited again four years later in *Jazz*.

This move away from painting towards printmaking, drawing and cutting into colour resulted in a remarkable decade of gouache cutouts, and illustrated and artists’ books. Like *Jazz* and *Poèmes*, *Dessins* marks the design and production of a book almost entirely by the hand of the artist, described by Matisse as ‘a cinematographic record of the suite of visions that I experience during intense periods of work’. (Matisse in Fourcade 2005: 165)

It was in just such an intense period that Matisse overcame physical, emotional and political turmoil to revel in a ‘second life’, which can be glimpsed resonating in the three books on this exhibition.

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(From left to right) Lydia Delectorskaya, M. Tutin and Matisse examining proofs at the Mourlot Studios, Paris, 1948.

Photo: Ina Bandy