

# The Dance, 1932/3

Oil on canvas

339,7 × 441,3 cm (left); 355,9 × 503,2 cm (middle); 338,8 × 439,4 cm (right)

The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia

In addition to the "odalisques," music and dance were among Matisse's favourite motifs. As early as 1909/10 he had painted two pictures on these subjects for the Russian collector Sergei Ivanovich Shchukin which are on view today in the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg (pages 50/1 and 52/3). Twenty years later he took up the subject again, this time as a commission for an American collector. Albert C. Barnes came from a petit-bourgeois family, studied medicine and worked at one stage as a doctor. Then he studied pharmacy—in Heidelberg and elsewhere—and finally founded his own firm, the A. C. Barnes Company. He became a highly successful businessman, was also active in the social field and began to collect modern art. Initially he exhibited it in his factory before having a building erected for his excellent collection of twentieth-century French art in Merion near Philadelphia in 1924. He had purchased fifty-nine works by Matisse alone.

In 1931, Matisse took advantage of the opportunity presented by his return journey to Europe from Tahiti to visit the collector in Merion. Barnes commissioned him to decorate the arched wall spaces over the doors of the large room in his private museum with three pictures on the subject of "Dance". Each picture could command a space of almost twenty square metres.

Back in Nice, Matisse rented a former film studio and started work on the largest wall picture that he would ever paint. First of all he created drawings, colour sketches and several large oil pictures on canvas. They show the same scene in very different colour schemes. Among these sketches, the oil painting on canvas *The Dance of Paris (Dance 1)*, *Ochre-coloured Harmony* captivates the viewer with its harmonious colour scheme and the balanced composition between the opposing poles of rest and movement. The first version of the painting in its original size was created after this sketch but had to be abandoned because Matisse had been working from incorrect measurements. The final composition presents considerably more abstract and geometric forms than the previous sketches. During his preparations Matisse had used a new working technique in which he combined cut-out pieces of coloured paper with one other.



# Faun Bewitching a Sleeping Nymph, 1935

Charcoal on paper

154 × 167 cm

Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris

In Greek mythology, nymphs are female nature spirits that can appear in a variety of forms. As naiads, they protect the springs and streams; as nereids, they swim in the sea, and as dryads they inhabit the forest. They are all young and beautiful, and they are symbols of sexuality and fertility.

Faunus, known as Pan in Greek, is the protector of nature and the forest, and in this function he is responsible for the fertility of man and beast. Since the Greek and Roman pantheon was a remarkably human place, encounters between Faunus and the beautiful nymphs must have inevitably occurred.

The *Barberini Faun*—the most famous representation of the god—can be admired today in the Glyptothek in Munich. It is immediately comprehensible that the sleeping youth with his fine facial features and flawless body, created in about 220 BC, aroused great interest on the part of the nymphs.

The subject also inspired musicians and artists. Stéphane Mallarmé completed his poem *L'après-midi d'un faune* in 1879, further inspiring Claude Debussy to his composition *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. Vaslav Nijinsky, the choreographer and dancer of the famous avant-garde ballet ensemble Ballets Russes, combined the poem and dance to create a magnificent ballet performance, which in turn Henri Matisse used as his source of inspiration for his drawing. The elegant interplay of lines, incised by hand in the copper plate, lends the image density and elegance.

Hans Hildebrandt, Professor of Art History at the Technical University in Stuttgart and until 1933 one of the forerunners of Modernism in Germany before being prohibited from working by the National Socialists, wrote on the subject of Matisse's graphic works: "His line always strikes the essential. That is why Matisse can limit himself to mere hints which offer the viewer the pleasurable compulsion to join in the act of creation by completing what is missing."



# Reclining Nude, 1935

Pen and Indian ink on paper

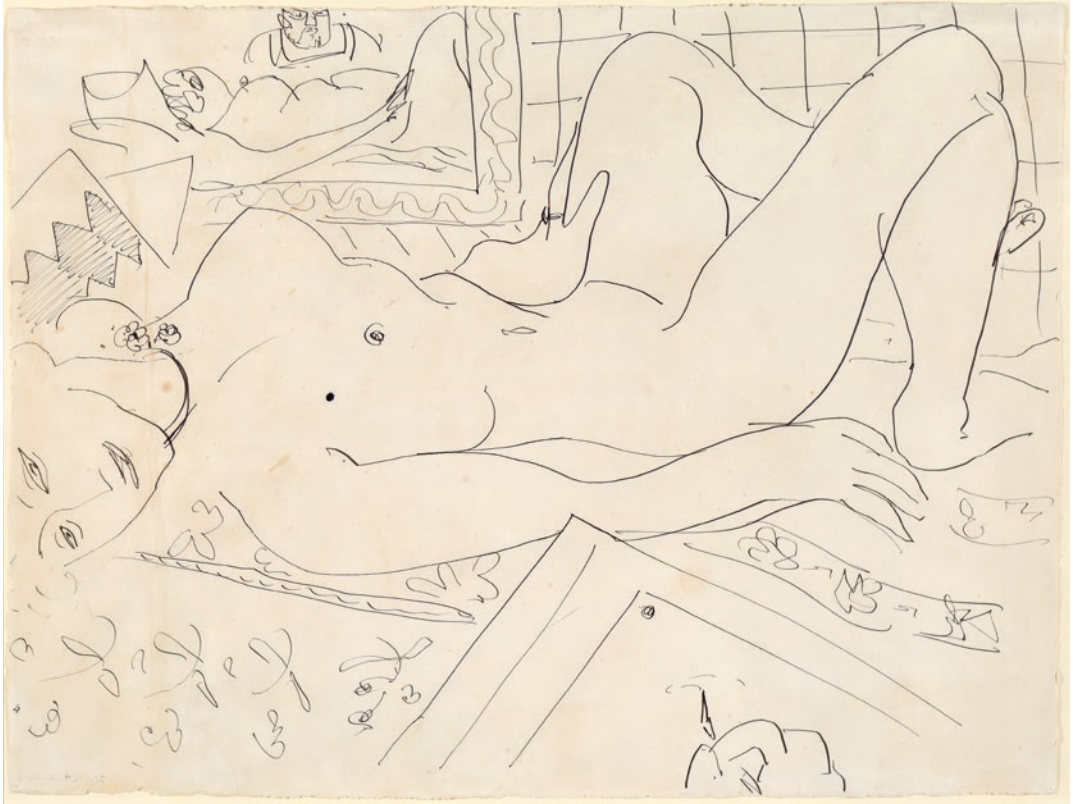
45 × 56 cm

The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

"They are drawings consisting of a single line which only ends when the drawing is complete." That was how Louis Aragon, the Surrealist poet, described Matisse's works in a novel. Indeed, the pen-and-ink drawings from the 1930s focus entirely on the line; there is no hatching, there are no shadows and no reflections. Matisse reduces the representation to the absolute essentials, but he does so with the confidence of a sleepwalker: each stroke, each flourish, each arabesque is convincing and necessary for the elegant overall effect of the sheet.

Matisse even achieves a spatial effect via the sophisticated picture structure in these sheets, although he never deviates at any point from his purely linear form of representation. The viewer's eye recognises the scene in the mirror and unconsciously completes the missing elements, namely the shadows and spatiality.

When the sheets were to be shown in London, they were greeted initially with resistance according to Hilary Spurling: "The problem was the unusual combination of absolute allegiance to the truth and the aesthetic rigour which these pictures present. It was impossible to misconstrue the sensuousness of their lines, which spiritedly dance around the curves and hollows of the body and pause appreciatively on the outlines of the beckoning fingers, the budding nipples, the vivacious tangle of pubic hair." The model for these wonderful drawings was Matisse's assistant Lydia Delectorskaya. Matisse said that her face and body were as familiar to him as the alphabet. But the relationship between the artist, by now over 70 years of age, and the young woman was not a sexual one. It took place on a different plane and was characterised by friendship and their working partnership. Matisse's biographer Hilary Spurling judged: "If Matisse had a love affair with Lydia, its consummation took place on the canvas!"



# Lady in Blue, 1937

Oil on canvas

93 × 74 cm

Private collection

It is hard to imagine that Matisse should paint a picture like the *Lady in Blue* during the 1930s, when he was creating his lively drawings that revelled in the physical forms of his models. No three-dimensionality, no seductive body, no enticing gesture! This lady is as flat as a board, and the entire picture consists of flat areas of colour. The figure has been painted without any form of modulation and displays only the most subtle hint of ornamentation. The fact that the picture resembles a cut-out is heightened by the symmetrical structure of both the areas of colour and the objects in the picture. The curving arms of the bourgeois-looking sofa create additional severity and confinement, as does the palette, reduced to a small number of locally placed colours: blue, red, black and yellow.

A letter to his artist friend Pierre Bonnard reveals that Matisse was well aware of the danger that his attempt to reduce the painting to smooth areas of colour and ornamental forms meant. "I have the drawing that I need, because it expresses the peculiarity of my feelings. But my painting is inhibited [...]. It does not match my spontaneity, which sometimes leads me to throw away work achieved over a long period of time within just a minute."

In any case, this picture is far removed from everything that Matisse had drawn and painted during the previous months. Perhaps it was just simply a "counter-reaction" to the elegance and sensuousness of his scenes of dancing and music.

He painted several more pictures in this vein, albeit in less pronounced form. With the painting *The Music* from 1939 (page 35) this attempt at form had been exhausted. He moved on to an impressive late phase of his expressive painting which is characterised by soft black contours and strong colours.





## Two Dancers, 1937

Cut-out / Collage (Papier découpé)

80.2 × 64.7 cm

Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris

This work served as a sketch for the curtain of the ballet *Red and Black*, a performance by the famous Ballets Russes in Monte Carlo. The choreography was by Léonide Massine, the head of the ensemble. Matisse designed the costumes, the stage set and the curtain; he also designed the programme. Matisse's biographer Hilary Spurling writes: "Massine and Matisse worked together to develop a scenario which aimed to represent the continuing struggle between White and Black, between the intellect and the physical side of humanity." In this sketch Matisse worked mainly with blue, white and yellow paper. It shows a dancing figure in black with outstretched arms radiating strength and dynamism. The arms are raised powerfully, while a figure in white and yellow hovers above. The dynamics recall ballet dances. However, it was the farandole in particular, a traditional folk dance from the Provence, which inspired Matisse to many of his dance compositions. The protagonists form a human chain or hold cloths in their hands which link them together, giving the individual dancers more freedom of movement. In swaying steps—almost hopping, in fact—the procession moves forwards in time with the music. If no band is playing, the procession is led by a flute player, whose moves result in various shapes, for example circles, figures of eight, ovals and serpentine lines. This imaginative dance has found its way into high art elsewhere. Georges Bizet composed the Farandole from *L'Arlésienne-Suite*, which is often played in purely concert performances as well as being performed as a ballet. There is also a Farandole in Charles Gounod's opera *Mireille*. In 1884 the German artist Hans Thoma saw it not as a roguish round dance, but painted the *Farandole* as a series of staid hops in a circle.



# Still Life with Magnolia, 1941

Oil on canvas

74 × 101 cm

Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris

This picture does not tell a story; it overwhelms us with its suggestive colour scheme. Five objects are distributed symmetrically across the smooth, glowing red of the background. The centre space is dominated by the vase with a white magnolia, with a copper vat behind it encircling the flower like an aureole. The arrangement is accompanied by four objects (clockwise): a blue flowerpot, a yellow shell, a purple water jug and—severely truncated by the edge of the picture—a green vase. The viewer searches in vain for an impression of depth and shadows.

Françoise Gilot and Pablo Picasso saw the picture in 1945 at a major exhibition of contemporary art in the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris. Picasso found the work too decorative and criticised the fact that although the objects touched each other, their overlapping was not shown spatially. Gilot saw the picture very differently: "I found the surprising juxtaposition of the individual parts interesting because it did not destroy the unity of the whole. [...] The subject was treated without any kind of rhetoric, the objects were neither related to each other in any sort of logical connection, nor did they show any other form of ingenious relation to each other—they were simply there. [...] The picture positively glowed. It was full of happiness and yet seemed to evade the viewer. [...] The whole thing reminded me of the figures on the painting *Dance* [pages 50/1] from 1910 [sic], executing their leaps for joy in a closely structured round dance. Two hands come very close to each other, like the forefingers of God and Adam on Michelangelo's painting *The Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel, but they do not touch and hence generate a thrilling tension."



## Study (Léda et le Cygne), c. 1942–46

Black Conté-crayon on paper

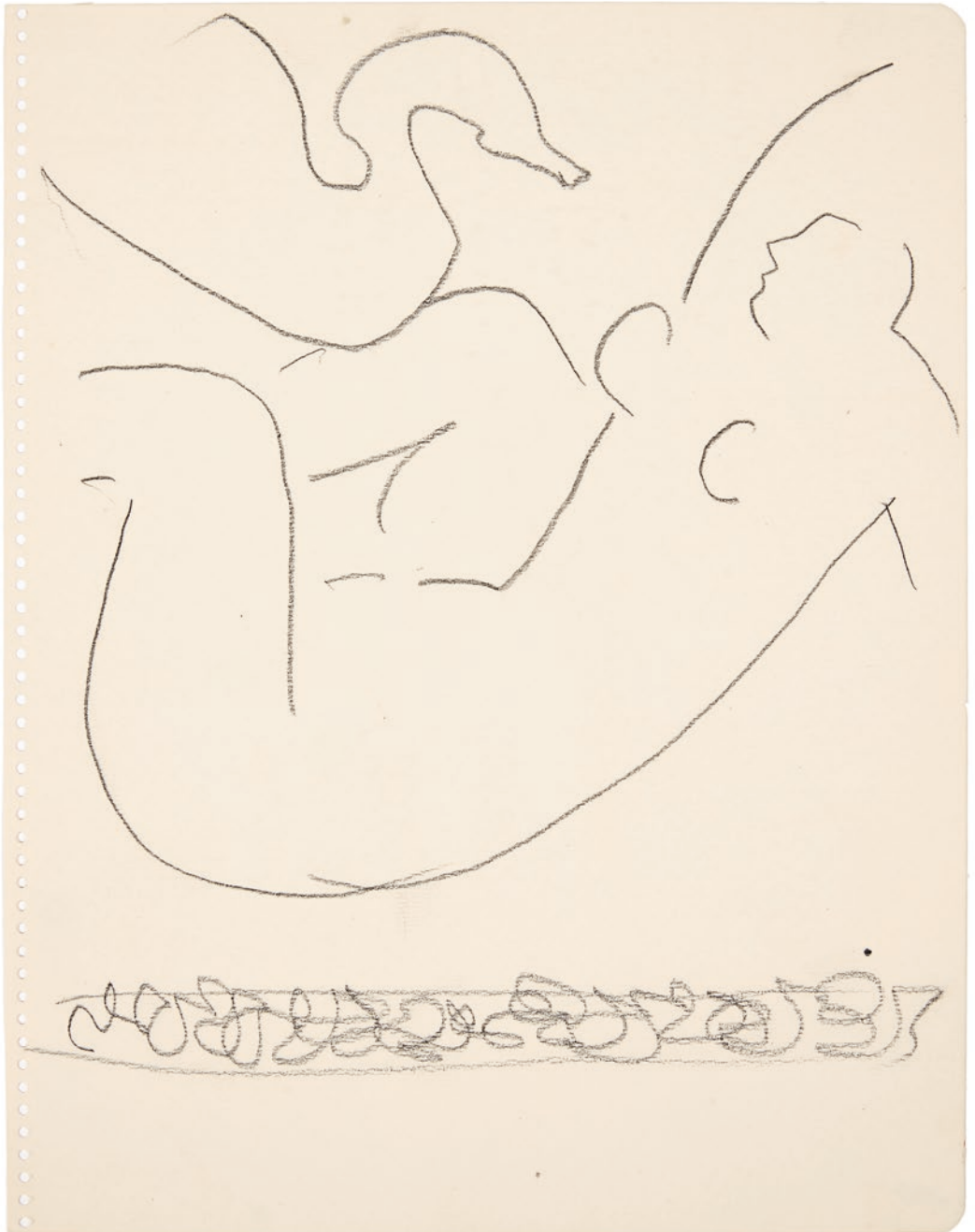
27 × 21 cm

Private collection

The study was produced for a large triptych which is definitely one of the most curious pictures that Matisse ever painted. It was commissioned by Hortensia and Marcello Anchorena, a couple from Argentina. They were regarded as rich eccentrics, but they were not art collectors. Nonetheless, they had successful artists paint all the doors in their flat in the Avenue Foch in Buenos Aires. Françoise Gilot recalled: "The *Leda* by Matisse adorned the door of Hortensia's bathroom, a real showpiece. Diego Giacometti designed the bronze door handles, Jean Cocteau decorated the grand piano and Picasso created an abstract silhouette of my figure."

Matisse chose the subject "Leda and the Swan", the icon of which is the missing painting of the same name by Michelangelo. On this work Zeus, the head of all the Greek gods, approaches Leda in the form of a swan. The powerfully erotic picture, created in 1529/30, shows openly how the couple kisses and consummates its love. Michelangelo's painting became the most famous artistic rendering of the subject in Europe. The original has not survived; the copy in the National Gallery in London originated from the circle of Rosso Fiorentino.

In Matisse's picture we can sense little of the erotic tension and artistic strength of the former painting. The swan which approaches in flight attempts to kiss the seated Leda, but she adopts a defensive pose. In the final work she even turns her head away. The simplification of form reaches its climax both in this sketch and in the large triptych; the entire picture becomes a sort of pictogram.



## Polynesia—The Sea, 1946

Cut-out / Collage (Papier découpé)

200 × 314 cm

Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris

During the spring of 1940, Matisse was diagnosed with bowel cancer, and a year later he had to undergo a major operation. He spent almost three months in a hospital in Lyon, which weakened him tremendously, and he suffered from two pulmonary embolisms. After being discharged from hospital he began to work again but remained physically weak.

In the summer of 1946, the artist, now aged 76, returned to Paris from Vence, where he had spent the spring. He was in poor health and Lydia and a nurse looked after him around the clock. He slept badly, suffered from strong, painful cramps, and spent restless nights racked by nightmares. "Memories which he had absorbed like a sponge fifteen [sic] years previously, resurfaced in the twilight zone between waking and sleeping", writes Hilary Spurling.

He began to work on two large-format wall decorations: *Polynesia—The Sky* and *Polynesia—The Sea*. He asked Lydia to buy him some blue paper, but she could only find wrapping paper in two shades of blue. He marked out the background for *Polynesia—The Sea* like a chess board and had Lydia glue the blue sheets onto strong packing paper. He cut the figures out of ordinary white drawing paper and with the help of his assistant arranged them across the entire picture surface.

*Polynesia—The Sea* is impressive simply because of its size—it is more than three metres wide. Against the blue-in-blue background, all kinds of birds and sea creatures cut their capers: the sky and the sea fuse to form a single living space. Five considerably larger forms—a fish, two birds and two water plants—stabilise the composition. Around them a wide variety of creatures with fantastic forms swarm. In addition to Matisse's beloved seaweed shapes we can see little fish and octopuses, birds and imaginary creatures—a wonderland drawn with a pair of scissors.





# Icarus, 1947

## Artist's book Jazz, plate VIII

Pochoir (stencil print)

33 × 42 cm

Tériade, Paris

"Drawing with scissors" became a passion for Matisse. The artist alone was responsible for cutting out the shapes, but his assistants helped him to arrange and glue the individual forms onto the paper background. His cut-outs, the *papiers découpés*, were created as single items.

On 2 May 1897, a child by the name of Stratis Eleftheriadis was born on the island of Lesbos. At the age of 18—in the midst of the turmoil of the First World War—the young man from a wealthy family left home and moved to Paris to study law and become a lawyer. Before long, however, he was drawn towards art. He shortened his family name and called himself henceforth E. Tériade. He became the chief editor of the famous art magazine *Cahiers d'Art* and from 1933 published elaborate books on contemporary art together with the Swiss publisher Albert Skira, including works on Marc Chagall, Le Corbusier, Alberto Giacometti, Henri Matisse, Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso and others. From 1937 he was the publisher of *Verve*, a quarterly highbrow art magazine.

In 1943, when Tériade saw some of the *papiers découpés* on the subjects of *Jazz* and *Circus* in Matisse's studio, he immediately wanted to make them into an elaborate artist's book. Henri Matisse was very receptive to his ideas and together they embarked on the project. But how could they reproduce the cut-outs and still preserve the unique character of the sheets?

There is no reliable source from which we can discover which of the two had the idea of using the pochoir technique for the reproduction of the coloured cut-outs. As early as 1925, the graphic artist Jean Saudé had produced guidelines for this type of stencil printing.

The pages of illustrations are accompanied by hand-written pages with "notes" by the artist—printed using the silk-screen method –, which are not only interesting to read, but which also result in fascinating double pages in conjunction with the pictures. Matisse wrote: "The unusually large size of the writing seems to me to be very important, so that a decorative interaction occurs in relation to the coloured plates."

un moment  
si libres.

Ne devrait-on  
pas faire ac.  
complir un  
grand voyage  
en avion aux  
jeunes gens  
ayant terminé  
leurs études.

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# The Codomas, 1947

## Artist's book *Jazz*, plate XI

Pochoir (stencil print)

42.2 × 65.1 cm

Tériade, Paris

The circus with its variety of acts developed into a theme for art even during the nineteenth century. The Cirque Fernando in Paris was especially popular with painters. It was here that Edgar Degas found the subject for his *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*, and Toulouse-Lautrec, Auguste Renoir and many others also turned their attention to the genre. Pablo Picasso, Matisse's friend and perpetual rival, liked to attend the circus and painted harlequins and jugglers during his Rose Period in particular.

Matisse's album *Jazz* comprises twenty plates, eight of which are dedicated to the subject of the circus. The large-format stencil prints were created during the years 1944/5, and the artist wrote the accompanying texts in 1946 after completing the series.

The trapeze artists Les Codomas were two brothers whose daredevil swinging and leaping delighted the audience. They worked on the so-called "Flying Trapeze". That meant that one of the performers would let go of his trapeze and execute various figures, pirouettes and leaps, before finally being caught by his partner.

Although the degree of abstraction in Matisse's depiction is very high, the events are powerfully portrayed. We can recognise the two swings between which the artistes fly like serpents as they sway to and fro. The protagonists are surrounded by plant-like structures whose restless forms further heighten the dynamics of the action. Black squares on a yellow background have an almost static effect as they indicate the circus ring and calm down the composition. The sheet captivates the viewer with its balance between rhythm and dynamism.

