Matisse, Henri
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The French artist Henri Matisse was born in Le Cateau in northern France on December 31, 1869. He grew up in a nearby town where his father was a grain merchant. When Matisse finished school, his father sent him to Paris to study law. At the end of two years he returned home. Matisse worked as a law clerk, but early every morning he took drawing lessons. Then in 1890, while he was recovering from an illness, his mother gave him a box of paints. From that time forward Matisse devoted his life to painting. In 1891, much against his father's wishes, Matisse left for Paris to become an artist.

For five years Matisse studied with the painter Gustave Moreau. To earn money, he made copies of famous paintings in the Louvre. By 1897 he had begun to paint in the style of the impressionists, experimenting with the effects of pure (unmixed) colors.

In 1899, Matisse married Amélie Parayre. They had two sons and a daughter—Jean, Pierre, and Marguerite. To help support the family, Madame Matisse set up a hat shop.

Matisse became the leader of a group of painters who used color in a very untraditional way. They used it to express their emotions rather than to represent nature. In 1905, paintings by these artists were accepted for an important exhibition of the French Academy of Art. The public was scandalized by the painters’ daring use of color. One outraged art critic labeled the artist les fauves ("the wild beasts"). Despite this criticism, Matisse’s reputation grew. He set up an art school, and collectors were eager to buy his paintings. Soon he became one of the most famous living painters.

Around 1910, Matisse’s style changed. Using calmer colors, he painted simple figures with dark outlines. These paintings have powerful rhythms. During World War I, Matisse’s paintings were somber in color and spirit, but after the war they became gay and decorative. About 1925, Matisse again began experimenting. After many lifelike studies he created simple compositions in flat colors.

Matisse was an accomplished sculptor as well as a painter. His sculpture follows the same development as his painting. He also illustrated many books and made designs for tapestries, carpets, and glass.

During World War II, Matisse refused to leave France. Shortly after the war, he began to design a chapel in the town of Vence. Because of illness, Matisse often worked in bed, sketching large designs with a piece of charcoal attached to a long pole. To create the designs for the stained-glass windows, he cut up pieces of colored paper and experimented with their arrangement. The chapel was completed in 1951, when Matisse was 82. The inside walls are covered with simple designs painted in black on white ceramic tiles. Brilliantly colored light floods into the chapel through stained-glass windows.

By his constant searching and experimenting, Matisse opened up new paths of art. His works were the result of much planning. Before beginning a painting he made many studies and sketches, but the final work he did quickly. Matisse continued drawing and painting until his death on November 3, 1954.

Reviewed by Pierre Matisse