

bernard jacobson gallery

Henri Matisse: Prints

“One must always teach for the desire of the line, where it wishes to enter or where to die away.” – Henri Matisse, 1908.

Bernard Jacobson Gallery is delighted to present Henri Matisse: Prints, an expansive new exhibition chronicling the seminal artist's evolution in the medium of printmaking from 1900 to 1954. Opening May 2nd, the retrospective sheds light on Matisse's inquiry into the potency of line and shadow across three pivotal phases of his career.

A giant of twentieth century art, Henri Matisse (1869-1954) rose to prominence as a pioneer of Fauvism, a movement that defied traditional representation with its vibrant colours and expressive brushstrokes. Born in Le Cateau-Cambrésis, France, in 1869, his artistic practice encompassed painting, sculpture, and printmaking, all bound by a relentless pursuit of new visual expressions. Matisse endeavoured not to replicate reality, but to evoke its essence. His human subjects are distilled into forms that range from the minimalistic to the delicate, in a palette that never strays from the monochrome.

Matisse's foray into printmaking began in 1900, a time at which he was still establishing himself as an artist. Opening the exhibition, *Henri Matisse gravant* (1900-1903), a self-portrait drypoint etching, showcases his early experimentation with chiaroscuro, a technique that sees light and shadow balanced to create compositional volume, depth and drama. Further attesting to his early fascination with the potential of monochromatic contrast, the heavily contoured outlines of woodcut *Petit bois clair* (1906) distinguish its subject from her finely patterned backdrop.

However, it was the turmoil of World War I (1914-1918) that unexpectedly pushed Matisse towards a more dedicated exploration of printmaking. Unable to work on large-scale oil paintings due to the material and practical constraints brought on by international conflict, he turned to the immediacy and intimacy of printmaking. This period, from 1914 to 1917, was to be remarkably prolific for Matisse: within a period of months he produced around fifty etchings, ten lithographs, and more than a dozen monotypes.

Works from these pivotal years, such as *Fanny de face* (1914) and *Lou lou au chapeau fleuri* (1914-1915), exemplify Matisse's contemporary focus on the power and energy of line. Striving toward representation with minimal detail, Matisse stripped away anything extraneous, allowing the effortlessness of his hand movements to define form and evoke emotion. Intriguingly, he would often create monotypes — the inverse of his etchings — using the same copper plate. These 'white line' monotypes make plain the refined precision of Matisse's handiwork, as each scratch upon the copper plate finds translation in a stark white stroke on the present prints.

By 1922, a contemplation of light and shadow had become increasingly evident in Matisse's printmaking. This period, marked by the return of relative serenity following Armistice, saw him embrace lithography with renewed enthusiasm. *Nu sur chaise de repos sur fond moucharabieh* (1922) and *Odalisque au Magnolia* (1923), for instance, showcase Matisse's introduction of modulated shading and elaborately detailed background settings – vases, fruits and florals, ornate furnishings – elements he had eschewed from previous compositions. These reclining nudes, reminiscent of Matisse's larger paintings, were influenced by his travels across North Africa. Matisse himself articulated this synthesis of lived experience and memory with artistic expression, stating, “Windows have always interested me because they are a passageway between the exterior and the interior. As for odalisques, I hastened them in Morocco, and so was able to put them in my pictures back in France without playing make-believe” (*Matisse Speak*, 1951).

Matisse's later years, marked by declining physical health, saw a renewed exploration of printmaking techniques. By the 1930s he had begun experimenting with linocuts, within which designs are carved into linoleum. This technique was particularly well-suited to Matisse's use of negative space to envelop his subjects. *La Belle Tahitienne* (1938) and *La Sieste* (1938) exemplify this approach, capturing the spectrum of his subjects' environments – from the tropical climes of Tahiti to the tranquil dreaminess of a *siesta*. This period also saw the emergence of his revolutionary aquatints. *Patitcha. Masque* (1947) and *Nadia au profil aigu* (1948) are characterised by bold, simplified forms and stark contrasts of light and dark.

Throughout his printmaking career, Matisse maintained his dedication to monochrome, setting himself and his works apart from the vivid palettes of contemporaries Paul Signac and Henri-Edmond Cross, who were known for their large-scale colour lithographs. For Matisse, the limitations intrinsic to black and white became an artistic challenge, pushing the expressive potentials of line, shade, and texture to their fullest realisation.

Despite adopting new techniques, the essence of line remained central to Matisse's oeuvre, embodying his belief that the simplest forms often express the most profound truths. Exploring an array of works across different mediums — from delicate etchings and naturalistic lithographs to dynamic monotypes and bold linocuts — *Henri Matisse: Prints* offers a unique window into the evolution of a master's artistic vision.