

# MATISSE



COMPOSITION: YELLOW, BLUE AND BLACK, 1947

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DICKINSON



HENRI MATISSE (1869 – 1954)

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Signed lower left *H Matisse*

Gouache on paper, cut and pasted, with pencil drawing *verso*

47 x 34 cm. (18 ½ x 13 ⅜ in.)

PROVENANCE

Berggruen et Cie, Paris, 1953.

Theodor (“Teto”) Ahrenberg, Stockholm, by 1954.

Thomas Gibson Fine Art Ltd., London.

Private Collection.

LITERATURE

J. Cassou, ‘Matisse va presenter au public ses papiers découpés’, *France Illustration* 383, 14 Feb. 1953, Paris (illus. pp. 234-35).

G. Di San Lazzaro (ed.), *Rapport sur l’art figuratif: XXe siècle, Nouvelle série*, no. 4, Cahiers d’Art, Paris, 1954 (lithograph illus.)

J. Cowart, J.D. Flam, D. Fourcade & J. Hallmark Neff, *Henri Matisse: Paper Cut-Outs*, exh. cat., The St. Louis Museum, St. Louis, 1977, p. 144, no. 76.

K. Buchberg, N. Cullinan, J. Hauptman & N. Serota (eds.), *Henri Matisse: The Cut Outs*, exh. cat., Tate Modern, London & The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2014, no. 58 (illus. p. 140).

EXHIBITED

Paris, Musée National d’Art Moderne, *Henri Matisse, œuvres récentes*, June – Sept. 1949.

Paris, Berggruen et Cie, *Henri Matisse, papiers découpés*, 27 Feb. – 28 March 1953.

Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, *Modern utländsk Konst ur Svenska privatsamlingar*, Nov. 1954, no. 54.

Helsinki, Helsingin Taidehalli, *Henri Matisse, Apollon*, 10 Dec. 1957 – 6 Jan. 1958.

Liège, Musée des Beaux-Arts, *Henri Matisse-Apollon, Collection Theodor Abrenberg*, 3 May – 31 July 1958.

Zurich, Kunsthhaus, *Henri Matisse, Das Plastische Werk, Sämtliche Plastiken des Meisters sowie Zeichnungen, Graphik und Collagen als Leihgaben der Sammlung Abrenberg, Stockholm*, 14 July – 12 Aug. 1959.

Göteborg, Konsthallen, *Henri Matisse ur Theodor Abrenbergs Samling*, 16 March – 10 April 1960.

Copenhagen, Raadhus, Fredriksbeg, *Moderne Verdenskunst fra Abrenbergs Samling*, 18 March – 9 April 1961.

Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art, *Henri Matisse: Paper Cut-Outs*, 10 Sept. – 23 Oct. 1977, no. 76; this exhibition then travelled to Detroit, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 23 Nov. 1977 – 8 Jan. 1978; and St. Louis, The St. Louis Art Museum, 29 Jan. – 12 March 1978.

Le Cateau-Cambrésis, Musée Matisse, *Matisse, His Art and His Textiles: The Fabric of Dreams*, 23 Oct. 2004 – 25 Jan. 2005, no. 73; this exhibition then travelled to London, Royal Academy of Art, 5 March – 30 May 2005; and New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 23 June – 25 Sept. 2005.

London, Tate Modern, *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs*, 17 April – 7 Sept. 2014, no. 58; this exhibition then travelled to New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 25 Oct. 2014 – 9 Feb. 2015.

*With greater completeness and abstraction, I have attained a form filtered to its essentials. You study, you learn, but you guard the original naiveté.'*

(Matisse, *Time*, 26 June 1950)

#### INTRODUCTION

In April 1947 Matisse returned from a winter in Paris to his Villa le Rêve in Vence. Now 78 years old, Matisse embarked with new vigour on a project that was to be the focus of the last two decades of his life: the cut-outs. As he wrote his to his friend, the poet André Rouveyre, in the following year: 'The walls of my bedroom are covered with cut-outs [...] The result is of more importance than it would seem' (22<sup>nd</sup> Feb. 1948). More than a final statement, the cut-outs opened new vistas in Matisse's art, embodying his tireless exploration of colour, line, space and texture. Executed in 1947, *Composition, Yellow, Blue and Black* was conceived at a defining moment in the cut-out project – an *annus mirabilis* which saw the publication of *Jazz*, a printed portfolio of the artist's cut-outs prepared by influential publisher Tériade, and the beginnings of Matisse's final grand project, the *Chapelle du Rosaire* in Vence (fig. 2).



Fig. 1: Matisse at the Hôtel Régina, Nice, 15 April 1950

Fig. 2: Henri Matisse, *Œuvres Récentes, 1947-48*, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, June – Sept. 1949





Fig. 3: Matisse (with Paul Bony), detail of *The Tree of Life (L'Arbre de vie)*, 1950, frosted coloured glass, set with lead 62.3 x 85 x 2 cm., Chapelle du Rosaire, Vence.

## THE CUT-OUTS IN CONTEXT

Matisse created his first paper cut-outs at the end of 1919, when he was commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev to design the decor and costumes for the London production of his ballet *Le Chant du Rossignol*. Over a decade later, the paper cut-outs became crucially important during the elaboration of the *Danse* panels for Alfred Barnes in 1932, and then once again when Matisse designed the decor and costumes for the ballet *Rouge et Noir* in 1937-39 (fig. 4). Matisse then turned to cut-outs during the mid-1930s as part of his preparation for other works, including paintings, prints, and – in the case of the designs for the *Chapelle du Rosaire* in Vence – even stained glass windows.



Fig. 4: *Two Dancers (Deux Danseurs)*, 1937-38, stage curtain design for the ballet *Rouge et Noir*, gouache on paper, cut and pasted

Fig. 5: Matisse at his Villa le Rêve, Vence, c. 1946-7



*'By renewing myself completely, I think I have found in them one of the main visual perspectives and constructs of our time. By creating these cut-out and coloured papers, I believe that I gladly embrace what is to come. I don't think that I have ever achieved such a perfect equilibrium as I have now, with these cut-outs. But I know that only later will people realise how forward-looking my current work is'*

(quoted in D. Fourcade, *Henri Matisse, Écrits et propos sur l'art*, Paris, 1972, p. 251).

Matisse's development of his paper cut-outs into an autonomous art form at the beginning of the 1940s has often been interpreted as a watershed moment in his career. Indeed, the cut-outs were a response to many of the same concerns as those that served as motivation for his paintings: 'There is no break between my early pictures and my cut-outs, except that with greater completeness and abstraction I have attained a form filtered to its essentials' (quoted in J. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995, p. 209). He drew parallels between the media, speaking of 'cutting directly into vivid colour' as though he were a sculptor.

Although both Matisse himself and later scholars have cited a desire to unify the disciplines of drawing, painting and sculpture as the reason for Matisse's increasing reliance on cut-outs in the 1940s, this decision also owed something to the artist's failing health. Indeed, during his recuperation from surgery in 1941-42, Matisse further developed and refined his production of paper cut-outs. The cut-outs were created in distinct phases using two core materials: paper and gouache. Studio assistants painted sheets of paper with gouache; Matisse then cut shapes from these painted papers and arranged them into compositions. For smaller compositions the artist worked directly on a board using pins, a method which allowed for quick and easy attachment and alteration as can be seen in the present composition. For larger compositions, Matisse directed his studio assistants to arrange them on the wall of his studio. Subsequently, cut-outs were mounted permanently, either in the studio or in Paris by professional mounters.

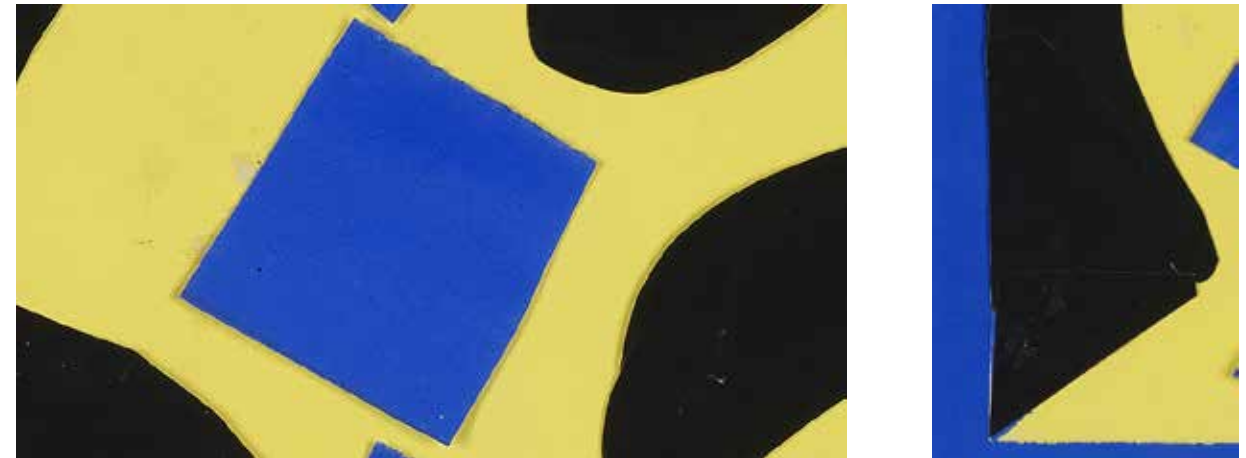


Fig. 6: Matisse in his studio, Hôtel Régina, Nice



Fig. 7: Matisse, his assistant Paule Martin, and unidentified photographer, Hôtel Régina, Nice, c. 1952

1947, the year in which the present work was conceived, was a seminal moment in Matisse's experimentation with the cut-outs. The publication of *Jazz* (fig. 8), a printed portfolio of Matisse's cut-outs in 20 colour plates released by Tériade, the famous publisher of *Verve*, in September 1947 was, in Jack D. Flam's words, the artist's 'first major cut-out project, and a pivotal work in his transition from oil painting to the cut-out technique that would dominate the last decade of his life' (J. Flam, 'Jazz', in *Henri Matisse: Paper Cut-Outs*, exh. cat., p. 37). Executed at the height of Matisse's experimentation with the visual register of the cut-out, the handling of the present work can be compared to the dynamism and strength of line and colour that characterise *Jazz* as a whole.



CUT-OUT PROCESSES AND TECHNIQUE IN  
COMPOSITION, YELLOW, BLUE AND BLACK, 1947

*'Drawing with scissors: To cut to the quick in colour reminds me of the direct cutting of sculptors'*

(Henri Matisse, *Jazz*, 1947, p. 14)

The present work is a significant iteration of the cut-out mode which Matisse brought to perfection in the 1940s. Striking contrasts of solid colour are combined with the bold arrangement of geometric form. Matisse layers a sheet of luminous yellow paper over the painted blue backing, and his desired composition is achieved by the subtle arrangement and overlapping of small cut-out pieces of black paper onto the yellow background. Square and rectangular blue forms float over the yellow, cut-out image, and the subtle overlapping of these shapes with the black and blue backgrounds at the highest and lowest parts of the work create a dynamic relationship between the layers of the composition (figs. 9-10). 'What the scissors discover', Judi Hauptman has written, 'are the positives and negatives, reversals and inverses, the organic relations between shapes, their generation of one from another' (J. Hauptman, 'Inventing a New Operation', in *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs*, p. 19).



Fig. 8: *The Clown*, Plate 1 from *Jazz*, 1947, colour stencil print (*pochoir*) on paper

Figs. 9-10: *Composition: Yellow, Blue and Black* (details)



#### VERSO: RECLINING NUDE

The *verso* of the present work (fig. 11) reveals a female nude study by Matisse, with loose flowing lines which reflect the easy felicity of the artist's later draughtsmanship of the 1940s. As John Elderfield has shown, Matisse's taking up of the cut-out medium must be considered alongside a renewed interest in drawing which manifested itself in the series of drawings entitled *Themes and Variations*. After undergoing surgery in January 1941 which almost ended his life, Matisse 'turned to physically less demanding media than painting: drawing and cut-outs. What happened in those years changed the character of his art yet again [...] more radically than ever before' (p. 22). As Matisse himself described, 'The cut-out paper allows me to draw in colour'. Considered together, the *recto* cut-out and *verso* study testify to the artist's last, and most remarkable, artistic development.

Fig. 11: *Composition: Yellow, Blue and Black* (verso)



## COLLECTION HISTORY

Heinz Berggruen opened his gallery in Paris 1947, concentrating on a small number of classic modern masters. In 1950 Berggruen moved his business to 70, rue de l'Université, and John Henderson described the new gallery as 'a small operation of left-bank seriousness where collectors could go' (G. Tinterow, 'Heinz Berggruen collectionneur', in *Berggruen Collection*, p. 14). The light and airy space was already ornamented with a plaster chandelier by Alberto Giacometti left by its former occupant, the publisher Louis Broder.

When Berggruen visited Matisse in 1952, the year prior to Matisse's exhibition at Berggruen's gallery, the dealer believed that his budget would only cover drawings and not the new cut-outs. Matisse, however, appreciated Berggruen's support for the works, having recently been denied the opportunity to show them at his son Pierre Matisse's gallery in New York. As Matisse confessed, 'he regards them as the desperate attempts

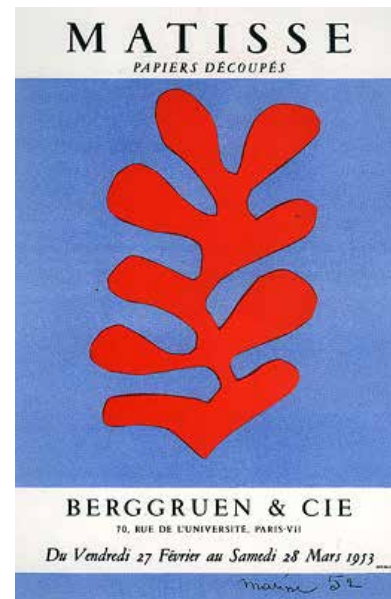


Fig. 12: *Matisse: Papiers Découpés*, Berggruen et Cie, Paris, 28 Feb. 27 – 28 March 1953

Fig. 13: Exhibition Poster, *Matisse: Papiers Découpés*, 1953

Fig. 14: Le Corbusier in Theodor and Ulla Ahrenberg's apartment in Stockholm with *Composition: Yellow, Blue and Black* on the wall, 1961

of an old man trying to find a new form of expression,' adding: 'he simply refused to exhibit them' (quoted in H. Heinz, 'Heinz Berggruen – Highway and Byways', 1998, p. 163). Matisse made an exception to his usual practice and allowed Berggruen to exhibit some of the cut-outs on a commission basis. The exhibition at Berggruen's gallery turned out to be one of his most successful, with all of the pieces selling, several of them to major museums around the world. James Lord comments on Berggruen's accomplishments as a dealer: 'Heinz occupied a role in the forefront of what was well established. But at the same time he presented new things within this well-established area [...] His very beautiful exhibition in 1953 of the Matisse *papiers découpés* (figs. 12-13) was almost the first glimpse one had of these things. People knew that they existed, and some had been exhibited at the Maison de la Pensée Française. But Heinz showed them to a much wider public' (*op. cit.*, p. 14).

The present work was bought from Berggruen by the Swedish collector Theodor Ahrenberg (1912 – 1989), who owned a major collection of works by Matisse, including fifty-four of his sculptures and the seminal cut-out *Apollo* (1953; Moderna Museet, Stockholm). In the early 1960s Ahrenberg was planning to build a museum in Stockholm for his large collection of masterpieces by Matisse, Picasso and Chagall. The artist and architect Le Corbusier was commissioned to design the structure and he visited Stockholm in June 1961 to inspect various locations for the museum and discuss the plans with Ahrenberg. A photograph of Le Corbusier shows the present work on display in the background, and is taken during this trip in Theodor and Ulla Ahrenberg's apartment on Strandvägen in Stockholm (fig. 14). Due to financial reasons the proposed museum plans were never realised.

#### CONCLUSION

Conceived at a time when the cut-out project had reached full maturity, the present work is an important example of the artist's achievement in the medium. With its striking contrasts of colour and bold geometric shape, the work embodies the artist's idea of 'cutting directly into vivid colour'. As Jack Cowart has written, Matisse 'had recognised in his cut-outs a means to something much more comprehensive and fundamental to his aspirations as an artist: a luminous environmental art capable of evoking the calm, untroubled ambiance he had always sought to create. The paper cut-outs were not his ultimate method but a beginning' (*Henri Matisse: Paper Cut-Outs*, op. cit., p.33).



Fig. 15: *Composition: Yellow, Blue and Black* (detail of signature and pin holes)

Fig. 16: The wall of Matisse's studio, Villa le Rêve, Vence, 22 May 1948

*'In my opinion, the cut-outs, which verge on abstract art, have something magical about them; it is hard to say exactly what it is. Their language is profoundly lyrical and, at the same time, monumental. I can imagine someone living in a huge white house entirely illuminated by a Matisse cut-out: the work would have such a radiant aura that one would not be able to put anything else alongside it.'*

Heinz Berggruen (H. Heinz, 'Heinz Berggruen – Highway and Byways', 1998, p. 163)



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