

THE FINE ARTS

MATISSE RECONSIDERED



—Collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

"Red Studio"—"one color against another on an admittedly flat surface."

ONE day, about twenty-five years ago, I went to an exhibition of contemporary French painting at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. Included were several paintings by Henri Matisse. Their ribbons of polyphonous color hit me hard. I remember going back day after day, more and more convinced that this was a new and admirable art—joyous, daring, unforgettable in its directness of sensuous appeal. Soon I bought from a New York gallery a small Matisse picture, then a larger one, then a third, carrying them home excitedly, staring at them with a sense of exhilaration for hours on end. But after a few months something happened. One by one these paintings began to lose much of their intensity, to appear frail, thin, and sweet, when once they had seemed strong and bold. My appetite for Matisse's color did not abate. But I found that it needed to be whetted by unfamiliar sensations, that is, by works I had not seen before. I traded these pictures for others and, later for others still. Eventually I be-

gan to replace the Matisses with paintings by other artists. By 1935 I felt convinced that he was much overrated, and not at all in the same class with Picasso, to whom he still was often compared.

My experience with Matisse was not unique, and that is why I recount it here. I know several American collectors whose enthusiasm subsided, as had mine. Only gradually, collectors' pride being nearly indomitable, did I realize that we had all made the same mistake. We had bought the wrong pictures by the right artist. The pictures we had bought, to be fair, were the ones most readily available on the New York and Paris markets. They were works of the 1920's, executed mainly at Nice—still lifes, interiors, and odalisques. They were not the best of these. No one can deny their charm. Yet even now, when I have again changed my mind as to Matisse's importance, many of them seem to me flimsy and forced in their insouciance, as though the painter were daring himself to contrive too much with too

little means. Today, however, we can see Matisse's art in the brilliant perspective supplied by the exhibition now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and later to be installed in the museums of Cleveland, Chicago, and San Francisco. He emerges as a very great figure indeed. He makes Picasso look to his laurels, and that is extravagant praise.

THE exhibition's main emphasis is on the works of roughly 1910 to 1920, though there is a careful selection of paintings completed since the recent war, and the 1920's and 1930's are represented by a few key pieces, all of them fine. The proportion is not only revealing but just, for to understand why Matisse has retained his stature as a revolutionary in painting (and, just as importantly, in sculpture) it is on the earlier works that one must dwell. In this exhibition they make a magnificent sequence. They propose so many solutions, never before explored, that I understand at last Joan Miró's shy, fervent comment one night at dinner: "We younger painters found Matisse ahead of us in many, many respects." And no one, I think, can look at the "Red Studio" (see illustration) without sensing how much Matisse has meant, not only to Miró, but to a whole generation of abstract artists. It was he as much as anyone who taught these artists to brace one color against another on an admittedly flat surface, with little or no linear support. It might be said of him that he translated Gauguin's dilemma into absolute certainty, achieving depth where all too often the latter ended in shallow pattern. And now that a frank acceptance of the oil painting's two-dimensional limitations has once more become a dogma among newer painters (especially in this country), I should imagine Matisse would take on a renewed meaning. His exhibition, at any rate, is crowded with painters—attentive and frequently awed.

There are in the present show a number of works in which Matisse reclaims the virtue often denied him on the basis of more trivial works—sheer power. We have tended to think of him as primarily a "tasteful" painter, delectable, thoroughly French, an epitome of long esthetic breeding. He is that, but more. When, for instance, one comes on "The Moroccans" of 1916 (see illustration) one feels an impact which reduces non-objectivists like Kandinsky to a quite secondary level. The picture is a masterpiece of "abstract" organization. But it has, besides, an enigmatic representational validity as an image. It is perhaps the most exciting painting in the show,

rivalled in terms of implacable authority only by the three bronze sculptures of "The Back"—those superb works which establish Matisse as one of the finest and most vigorous sculptors of our time.

UNLIKE Picasso, Matisse matured slowly and, for a time, hesitantly. That he was from the beginning a skilled technician is evident in the famous "Dinner Table" of 1897; by 1903 he was capable of the dazzling brushwork of the little "Guitarist," a beguiling picture which Manet would have turned to stare at. Then, in 1904 and 1905, he experimented with the neo-impressionists' flecks of color, and if his admiration for Signac and Cross seems a trifle belated, it was anyway a liberating influence, leading the artist to the broad arabesques of the "Joy of Life," now a chief ornament of the Barnes Foundation. By 1906 Matisse had become known as a leader of the Fauves, and deservedly so. Indeed, his paintings of that time seem to me far more convinced than those of any of his colleagues (except Rouault, who stood apart from the others) in that overrated movement, now much in vogue. But Matisse was too solemn an artist to be trapped by Fauve rationalizations, and by 1907 his painting had

become richer and more solid, though at intervals he returned to the problem of deliberately flat decoration, as in the two panels, "Le Luxe," and in "Harmony in Red," which Moscow's Museum of Modern Western Art is said to have relegated to its cellars for fear of its effect on native artists.

The years 1910 to 1917 were probably the most fertile in Matisse's entire career. To these years belong a large number of masterworks—"Dance," "Music," the remarkable bronze heads of "Jeanette," "Woman on a High Stool," "Mlle. Yvonne Landsberg," "Bathers by a River," "The Studio, Quai St. Michel," and numerous others, many of them, alas, now lost to sight in Moscow's vaults. The First World War does not seem to have interrupted the master's production, since some of his finest pictures were completed in 1916 and 1917. Yet the torments of the war years may have had their effect. Certainly they contributed to the mood of exaggerated relaxation which characterized the 1920's as a decade and Matisse's art in some, though by no means all, its manifestations. But we must always keep in mind the extraordinary productivity of this man—a productivity which seems to have increased rather

than declined as he has aged. When we look at his drawings of all periods, at his book illustrations, his prints, his tapestries, his sculpture, we realize that to an unusual degree he has been not merely a very fine painter, but also a rare type of creative personage.

In recent years, as nearly everyone knows by now, Matisse has poured his gifts and enthusiasms into the creation of a chapel at Vence. His ambition, brilliantly realized from the evidence of photographs and other documents, was to create a chapel which would be gay, which would approach the service of God in a spirit of exaltation rather than of contrition and penance. What a fitting continuation of the French tradition of fruitful longevity in the arts! One thinks of Renoir, with his aged, bandaged hands, working serenely as long as the day's light and his own would hold. And, as in the case of Renoir, it may well be that Matisse will have reached an added culmination in his final years. The sunburned nudes of Renoir's old age, once glibly dismissed, are now much esteemed. With artists of the stature of these two contemporary judgment should proceed on wary feet, giving them the fullest privileges of faith, the fullest benefits of doubt.

—JAMES THRALL SOBY.



"The Moroccans"—"masterpiece of 'abstract' organization."



"Flying Kites," by twelve-year-old Vera Baker.

Art & Personality Growth

THE ARTIST IN EACH OF US. By Florence Cane. New York: Pantheon Books. 370 pp. \$6.50.

By RALPH WICKISER

READING THE recent literature on teaching art might lead one to believe that art must be justified in terms of its usefulness to education and society before it is valuable. The literature abounds with ways and means of making art useful, a functional tool socially and individually.

This search for validation of the art activity in education led to the idea of integrating art with other studies as a teaching aid. In the recent work of Schaeffer-Simmern, Lowenfeld, and Florence Cane art becomes a therapeutic agent for personality adjustment. In Mrs. Cane's "The Artist in Each of Us" the cathartic value of art as an integrating force in personality growth is shown to purge the individual of undesirable personal and social

behavior, thus releasing an inherent creative force which the author finds is invariably blocked by physical and psychical conflicts.

Florence Cane is aware of the complexity of the problem in teaching art and seeks its solution in psychology by adopting its clinical techniques. This she calls a "modern method of teaching art" and seeks to show that creative productivity is dependent on psychological integration. We must assume that art to her becomes valuable because it is useful. She states that "art becomes a means of developing the human being, which is its true purpose and function." She selects three chief functions of man: movement, feeling, and thought as focal points to train for creative development. These functions are then treated separately and trained individually. It is highly debatable whether these three are the basic human functions. If they are, does this necessarily make them the main func-

tions to train for creative productivity?

Mrs. Cane writes in a vivid and dramatic style that is persuasive. The teaching methods are explained and documented with case histories, and a clinical attitude pervades throughout. Testimonials are offered as evidence of the success of the methods. It is obvious from these testimonials that the students' conflicts are resolved through the art exercises, but whether the great native art ability of highly selected students develops or disintegrates under the system is open to serious question. Her method assumes that the moral as well as the esthetic function of art is catharsis. To her these functions are one and the same. Most modern esthetic literature denies this limitation. It assumes that art is more than a function of living.

It is Florence Cane's belief that modern man has limited his experience to rational behavior, thus losing contact with his primitive elemental self. She points out the need for non-rational experience to complement rational behavior. This leads to a theory of teaching which seeks to develop the body, soul, and mind through art experiences. Her arguments are skilful and point out many flaws in today's art teaching methods. In addition she writes with a keen understanding of the growing child's problems and believes that the unintegrated individual is also creatively blocked. The question remains whether the creative process and the flowering of artistic genius is the result of psychological integration. Is the great artist that well-adjusted, healthy, happy product, the normal person which is the goal of modern pedagogy? Creative artists tend to react against any method of teaching in order to discover their individuality. Likewise they defy their environment rather than comply with its needs. Genius is never normal. Florence Cane deals with highly gifted children. Is her psychologizing of the creative process an unnecessary restraint on its intention and direction?

Undoubtedly the author is aware of the danger of clinical practice in the hands of teachers less skilful than she. A "couch in every classroom" may develop the well-adjusted child, but it also may destroy or pervert the art impulsion, the will to form, the desire to live individually, even to extremes—the impelling motivations of such artists as Van Gogh, Cézanne, Lautrec, Proust.

Ralph Wickiser is director of the art department of the Louisiana State University.