

Drawing with Scissors:

*The evolution of Henri Matisse's 'Jazz', as revealed by his hand-worked 'bon à tirer' artist's proof*

Essay by Alastair Sooke



Blindness may be every artist's nightmare, but when, in 1944, weak eyesight afflicted Henri Matisse – who implored, in a letter written that spring, 'Send me a white cane' – he felt triumphant. Three years earlier, shortly after his 71st birthday, he had only just survived an emergency operation for possible abdominal cancer, and, despite this fresh infirmity, the bearded, bespectacled French artist was still relishing what he called his postoperative 'second life'. Moreover, having completed nearly all the cut-paper compositions for *Jazz*, his scintillating printed album of almost 150 pages, including 20 colour plates, which was eventually published in 1947 (and has been described, by the art historian Jack Flam, as 'the closest thing to an autobiography that Matisse has left us'), he was so elated by the chromatic intensity of what he'd created that he didn't seem concerned his labours had almost cost him his vision. 'For the moment I am resting completely,' he explained. 'My eyes are strained and my sight has gone misty. My oculist maintains that it is due to my looking at too many vivid and sometimes virulent combinations of colours that are rich to the point of saturation, and doing so with such fervent passion, since they were stuck on the wall and constantly in front of my eyes, and the part of my brain that deals with colour was constantly overstimulated by an intoxication that is delicious but oh so dangerous.'

His words will resonate with anyone who has encountered *Jazz* up-close, because the book, Matisse's first important cut-out project, heralding his preferred medium – ahead of oil painting – during the final decade of his life, reproduces a suite of explosive collages (now in the Centre Pompidou in Paris) that he made during 1943 and throughout the following year, and still stimulates, in those who turn its pages, an irresistible 'intoxication'. In the poetic thoughts which Matisse wrote to accompany these images in one of the 250 numbered copies of *Jazz*'s book or 'folded' edition (a separate portfolio of 20 'pochoirs', or stencil prints, reproducing only its bright designs, was also released, in a 'flat' edition of 100), he refers to their 'vivid and violent tones', but this barely does justice to the album's almost barbaric effect: undimmed after more than seven decades, *Jazz*'s plates still seem to emanate pulses of pure light.

Exceptionally, at Frieze Masters, Lyndsey Ingram is showing the artist's hand-worked proof for the project, with several original cut-outs pasted by Matisse onto a trial set of prints that had been sent to him for approval. It reveals that, as late as March 1946, Matisse was still striving to refine many of *Jazz's* plates (except two, which he neither initialled nor signed), which he subsequently sent back to the publisher marked as *bon à tirer*, or 'good to pull', i.e., the master proof against which all 350 portfolios should be checked. In total, according to Antoine Coron, honorary director of the Rare Books Reserve at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, who has studied the set, Matisse made corrections to 14 plates, mostly "annotations in the margins", or, on the image, "paper cut-outs glued or pinned onto the sheets". In general, it seems, he wished to clarify colours: unhappy with the reproduction of certain tones – a rich violet, for instance, was "not lilac enough", he noted on the proof – he recut, before initialling and attaching, various shapes, this time coloured to his satisfaction; in one case, he pinned a sliver of white to reduce the width of a blue stripe at a composition's right edge. While other proofs must have circulated between the printer's workshop in Paris and the south of France, where Matisse was living, "no trace" of them, Coron says, "has yet been found": "This would therefore be the only surviving document on the technical preparation of the plates, prior to their actual production."

*Jazz* wasn't the first time that Matisse had summoned art from scissor-cut sheets of Arches or Canson vellum paper saturated with opaque watercolour (*gouache*). Towards the end of the Thirties, he'd deployed paper cut-outs while planning the décor for a Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo production of *Rouge et noir*; likewise, when designing covers for the modernist Parisian magazine *Verve*, which was overseen by Efstratios Eleftheriades, a Greek art critic, patron, and publisher best known by his nom de plume, Tériade. It was Tériade who published *Jazz*, having first broached the idea of producing an album illustrated with colourful designs by the artist in 1940. (The proof at Frieze Masters was a gift from Tériade – who inscribed the phrase 'ex-dono', in Greek, on the verso of the handwritten title page – to Katerina Charalabidis, who also hailed from Lesbos.) In May or June 1943, Tériade visited Matisse at home and saw 'two large bright coloured plates – *The Clown* and *The Toboggan* – which were to be the first and last pages of *Jazz*. The *Jazz* cycle was born.' In *The Clown*, a circus performer wearing a white costume decorated with red flame-like shapes stands to the right of a yellow curtain. In *The Toboggan*, in between strips containing explosive bursts of red and yellow, a blue female figure rolls weightlessly through violet space, as though she has just fallen off a sledge travelling downhill at high speed. This acrobatic woman anticipates by almost a decade the remarkable series of free-floating blue nudes, bathers, acrobats, and monkeys that Matisse would produce during the spectacularly productive year of 1952.



At some point, Matisse and Tériade agreed that the 'Jazz cycle', as the latter called it, should contain a text reproducing the artist's own handwriting in black and white. According to Matisse's assistant Lydia Delectorskaya, this was composed spontaneously in 1946, after the pictures had been finished, and consists of a series of gnomic reflections on the artist's life, as well as the essence of art. Matisse copied it out several times until he was satisfied with his handwriting's appearance, which, as he states near the beginning of *Jazz*, plays an important aesthetic role. Appropriately, given the project's personal nature – towards the end of his text, Matisse, who generally preferred indirection when it came to private matters, explains that the images 'derive from crystallizations of memories' – the loops and flourishes of his handwriting provide a lively impression of the artist's presence.

What, though, were the 'memories' that Matisse wished to record in *Jazz*? According to the artist, his designs derived from recollections 'of circuses, folktales, and voyages' (surprisingly, given that Matisse had rarely treated such themes in his art before); indeed, big-top imagery proved so fundamental to the book that, for a while, he toyed with another title altogether (*Le Cirque*). Inside its pages, in addition to that clown first seen by Tériade in 1943, we find acrobats, trapeze artists, a high-wire walker, a knife-thrower, an equestrienne, a sword-swallower, a swimmer in a tank, a cowboy, a ringmaster, and a white elephant balancing precariously on a ball emblazoned with a blue star – a cut-out stuck to the proof at Frieze Masters, its points casting shadows on the paper underneath. Matisse sometimes compared his own work to the performances of jugglers, tightrope walkers, and acrobats, so the tumblers who appear within *Jazz* are perhaps proxies for the artist. Interspersed among these circus illustrations are several more enigmatic images, such as two silhouetted female torsos, a wolf's head, a scarlet heart, and – most famous of all – the mythical figure of Icarus, hurtling to oblivion against a blue sky brightened by jagged yellow stars. In the set shown by Ingram, Icarus's heart – an egg-shaped blob of red gouache, against his black body – was added by Matisse.

On a straightforward level, *Jazz* expresses the joyful sense of rejuvenation and relief that Matisse felt following his reprieve from death; we could even read Pierrot's Funeral – in which jaunty autumn leaves surround a horse-drawn cortège bearing the coffin of a white-faced circus clown with a star-shaped heart coloured a passionate red – as a mock version of the burial that Matisse himself had narrowly escaped in 1941. Too frail to paint, following his operation, he had discovered a way of making art that allowed him to work even when he was still sitting up in bed, by cutting simple figures out of colourful sheets of paper. He loved this new method, which he described in *Jazz* as 'drawing with scissors', because, he believed, it stimulated the vigour and agility he now found it impossible to muster in front of an easel. The results were spontaneous, like jazz music. In fact, his new paper cut-outs appeared so pleasingly impromptu and off-the-cuff that Matisse changed the title of his book for Tériade to reflect the free-form, improvisational nature of their composition. 'Music was indispensable to Matisse,' Tériade said. 'Cut paper was like jazz music.'

Yet, there is another side to *Jazz*, which is not immediately obvious, but which may express something of the darkness of the moment of its composition. The poet Louis Aragon, who interviewed Matisse during the 1940s, was the first person to notice this. In 1971, he recalled seeing the initial version of *The Fall of Icarus*: 'From Matisse's own confidential comments we gather that the yellow splashes, suns or stars according to mythological interpretation, stood for bursting shells in 1943.' This insight provides the key that unlocks *Jazz*'s tragic secrets. If the spiky yellow stars of *Icarus* represent artillery explosions, then the serrated forms adorning the top and bottom of *The Toboggan* must be similarly threatening. Could the somersaulting fall of the tobogganist even allude to the death roll of a soldier who has just been hit by gunfire? A spectre of destruction may haunt several other plates, too. The red splashes of the costume in *The Clown*, for instance, could be the fresh wounds of a corpse recently lacerated by shellfire. *The Sword-Swallower* and *The Knife-Thrower*, whose sleek violet form is a visual pun that replicates the shape of an African throwing knife, openly evoke danger and violence. *The Nightmare of the White Elephant* is just that – a nightmare – as the white form of the poor performing beast is assailed and mangled by blade-like red welts, representing its suffering as its keeper cracks his whip. In the spring of 1944, Matisse received news that his estranged wife, Amélie, and his daughter, Marguerite, who were both active in the Resistance, had been arrested; according to one interpretation, the growling wolf in plate VI represents the Gestapo.

Surely, then, in *Jazz*, Matisse, who suffered merciless insomnia, was sublimating the vicious anxiety that he experienced during the war years. A sense of menace and melancholy is, moreover, amplified by the wistful text, which begins with an image of bodily mutilation: 'He who wants to devote himself to painting must begin by cutting out his tongue.' The juxtaposition of the overt brightness of the illustrations and the mournfulness of some aspects of their subject matter is what makes *Jazz* such a powerful and moving work of art. With this book, Matisse proved that a simple, childlike medium – scraps of coloured paper cut and pasted alongside one another – could create a rich effect, with personal as well as poetic resonance; with *Jazz*, Matisse's 'second life' as an artist had begun.

This essay adapts the second chapter of 'Henri Matisse: A Second Life' (Penguin, 2014) by the writer and broadcaster Alastair Sooke, chief art critic of The Telegraph.