"Woman before an Aquarium" and "Woman on a Rose Divan": Matisse in the Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection
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Woman Before an Aquarium and *Woman on a Rose Divan:* Matisse in the Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection

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There are so many things in art, beginning with art itself, that one doesn't understand. A painter doesn't see everything he has put in his painting. It is other people who find these treasures in it, one by one, and the richer a painting is in surprises of this sort, in treasures, the greater its author.

HENRI MATISSE[1]

THE TWO PAINTINGS by Henri Matisse in the Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago, *Woman Before an Aquarium* (fig. 1) and *Woman on a Rose Divan* (fig. 2), provide, along with the Art Institute's *Interior at Nice* (fig. 19) and *The Green Sash* (fig. 3), a surprisingly complete demonstration of the character of the artist's early Nice period.[2] Taken together, the four works are a summary of the themes, motifs, and styles of a decade, from 1918 to 1928, which has been for the most part critically neglected since the artist's death in 1954. Overshadowed by Matisse's late works, namely the paper cut-outs, the decorative commissions, and the Dominican Chapel at Vence, the work of the 1920s has seemed modest and unadventurous. Compared to the boldly constructed abstract canvases that preceded them and the chromatically intense neo-Fauve painting that followed in the 1930s, the Nice period works have seemed, like a woman of easy virtue, all too accessible.[3]

The two paintings from the Birch Bartlett Collection argue otherwise. They immediately challenge any facile generalizations about Matisse's sumptuous and self-satisfied odalisques and the vacuous anonymity of his contemporary women.[4] In fact, Matisse's costumed model in *Woman on a Rose Divan* seems lumpish and ill-at-ease in her harem costume; the girl gazing into the fishbowl in *Woman Before an Aquarium* appears at once introspective and shrewd. These two canvases underscore the chronological fluidity of the first and sec-

FIGURE 1 Henri Matisse (French, 1869–1954). *Woman Before an Aquarium*, 1923. Oil on canvas; 80.7 × 100 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection (1926.220).

FIGURE 2 Henri Matisse. *Woman on a Rose Divan*, 1921. Oil on canvas: 38.4 × 46.4 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection (1926.219).

ond parts of the Nice decade. The slightly later painting, *Woman Before an Aquarium* of 1923, looks back to the previous five years, when contemporary figures predominated in paintings whose mood was often febrile and anxious. The earlier *Woman on a Rose Divan* of 1921 looks forward to the suites of odalisques, that is, nudes in harem settings and costumes, which marked what Matisse termed the "sublimated voluptuousness" of the later Nice period. Neither work under discussion is really characteristic, however, of the type that it represents. The *Woman Before an Aquarium* has resolved, with a grave and elegiac monumentality, the theme of the solitary contemporary woman in a hotel-like room. In contrast, *Woman on a Rose Divan* barely sets forth the terms, as it were, of the exotic theater of the Middle East that was to be enacted with such opulent artifice from about 1923 onward. Both canvases, therefore, manage to be at once typical and idiosyncratic—which is characteristic of the work of Matisse's entire Nice period.

The "Nice period" denotes a chronological period in Matisse's work, a more or less homogeneous style, and a persistent subject: women in interiors. Chronologically, the period is said to have begun in 1917, when the artist spent his first winter in the south of France; stylistically, in 1918, when a shift in style became inescapably evident; or in 1919, when Matisse made Nice his primary place of residence and became obsessed with the southern light and atmosphere as filtered through French windows. The end of the Nice period, around 1931, is defined by another shift in style, although Matisse continued to reside in or near Nice until his death.

When Matisse first chose to absent himself from Paris and his home in suburban Issy-les-Moulineaux for seven months of the year, the artist was already nearly fifty years old. He was internationally recognized as the leader of French expressionist painting and as a continuing innovator in modern art. His somewhat gradual retreat from the French capital occurred at the height of his powers and at the culmination of his most ambitious endeavors. Behind him lay the works of heightened impressionist color (1904–08), of large-scale decorative expressionism (1909–12), and of sparely constructed near-abstractions (1913–17). None of these manners had succeeded its predecessor by way of rupture; at each new stage in the development of his painting style, Matisse utilized and extended his mastery of the particular elements of painting achieved in the previous mode. In the Fauve paintings, Matisse liberated color from its descriptive function and from traditional modeling, while retaining the intimacy with and dependence upon natural objects characteristic of his earliest works. The Art Institute's *Still Life with Geranium Plant and Fruit* of 1906 exemplifies this manner. In his decorative style, culminating in the great panels *Music* and *Dance* (The Hermitage, Leningrad) of 1910, Matisse exploited his newly liberated color in large-scale, imaginative compositions that use arabesques and patterns as major elements. In them, he substituted monumentality for intimacy. His final pre-Nice period effort was to synthesize this knowledge of color and surface expansion with the exploration of the "modern methods of [pictorial] construction," as Matisse put it, pioneered by the Cubists. The Art Institute's *Apples* of 1916 and *Bathers by a River*, also of 1916, are superb examples of the period that has been characterized as one of austerity and abstract experimentation.[5]

The shock of Matisse's admirers was therefore great when they found that, in his first major postwar exhibition at his dealer Bernheim-Jeune in Paris in 1919, the painter appeared to have resumed an earlier style, that of impressionist realism. The paintings are small, sketchily painted, of a blond tonality that evokes light and atmosphere, and depict women in spatially plausible interiors. They were not hard to enjoy, but difficult to respect as an advance over his previous achievement. They reintroduced, moreover, the elements that Matisse had left out of his preceding innovative paintings, which had successively explored color, surface, and construction. The new paintings and drawings reinstated modeling, spatial depth, light and atmosphere, richness of specific detail, and the manipulation of materials through a more gestural, painterly handling. We may say that painting as architecture was replaced by painting as writing (*écriture*)—a fluent, calligraphic manner. But, as Matisse himself insisted, the new works only "*seem* impressionist, made by chance and in haste"[Matisse's emphasis]. In fact, he was attempting a marriage of the "left-out" elements of his earliest impressionist style and the hard-won achievements of his most recent advanced style. Not the least of what Matisse wanted to reinstate was what he termed the "human element" in painting.[6]

Far from being *retardataire* or reactionary, the paintings of the Nice period

are the result of Matisse's enormously ambitious attempt at a grand synthesis of two roughly thirteen-year periods of previous work. By his own admission, Matisse did not attempt to fulfill this ambition in every painting. Through Bernheim-Jeune, he yearly exhibited drawings and studies from the model along with more and less important oils, offering his public a large group of works so that they could see what he was attempting and how well he was succeeding. In 1920, he brought out privately an album of fifty recent drawings, which are somewhat uneven in quality. He could have said of these works what he remarked of another group of transitional, small-scale paintings in 1905: "I was glad to exhibit, for my things may not be very important, but they have the merit of expressing my feelings in a very pure way." Matisse expected his viewers to be interested in the quality of his sensibility and his mind, as one is with a favorite writer whose minor work, even, is read with interest. With a mature artist, no part of his work is without interest or fails to illuminate the whole. "Cézanne ceaselessly redid the same picture," Matisse remarked in 1925, at the heart of the Nice period, "but don't we come upon each new Cézanne with the greatest of curiosity?"[7]

Woman Before an Aquarium, as we have said, is the more definitive of the two Birch Bartlett Collection works in its synthesis and resolution of motifs and themes. The motif of the goldfish in a glass bowl and of meditation in front of it was not new for Matisse. Six important paintings between 1911 and 1915 bring together a goldfish bowl, flowers, and a "human" presence (in all but one instance, the terracotta colored statuettes of a female nude; in the other, *Goldfish* [The Museum of Modern Art, New York], an almost totally effaced portrait of the artist himself). Four of these include a window as background for the glass bowl. Two Moroccan paintings, *Arab Café* (The Hermitage, Leningrad) of 1912 and *Zorah on the Terrace* (fig. 4) of 1912/13, also feature the goldfish motif as an object of contemplation; in the former by a group of male Arabs, in the latter by a single Arab woman. Both are set outdoors. Finally, there is the Art Institute's *Woman Before an Aquarium* and its companion study, the quite similar *Woman Regarding Fishbowl* (fig. 5) in The Barnes Foundation collection.[8]

Although just half of the goldfish paintings include an attentive observer, in every case the aquatic animals are presented for contemplation. With flora and human (or substitute sculptural) presence, the goldfish complete the hierarchy of creatures by providing the category of fauna. When pictured with the window, the glass container of the goldfish bowl provides an analogue to the transparency of the glass window/plane that permits inner and outer worlds to meet. As a vehicle of specular activity, the goldfish bowl mimics the eye's orb as well as the circle of the universe. In this latter sense, the bowl signifies a complete and self-contained world, framed for viewing. "By this equation," as Kate Linker observed in her subtle and penetrating article on the topic, "the contents

FIGURE 3 Henri Matisse. *The Green Sash*, 1919. Oil on canvas; 49.1 × 43.3 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester Collection (1947.91).

FIGURE 4 Henri Matisse. *Zorah on the Terrace*, 1912/13. Oil on canvas; 115 × 100 cm. Moscow, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts.

FIGURE 5 Henri Matisse. *Woman Regarding Fishbowl*, 1921. Merion Station, Penn., The Barnes Foundation.

of the spaces are aligned: the space of the fish is compared to the space of the room, the room's extent to the pictorial field and that field, implicitly, to the external sphere from which we, intently, observe."[9]

Rich in symbolist allusion and metaphoric echoes, the goldfish paintings preceding the two created in the Nice period belong, however, to a different formal endeavor. The Chicago painting has some elements in common with the earlier works, but it is striking as well for its differences. An examination of these reveals it to be both the culmination of the earlier versions (Matisse never painted the subject again) and a unique work that is pivotal for the whole Nice decade.

Matisse's daughter, the late Madame Marguerite Duthuit, stated in a letter of 1976 that The Barnes Foundation version of the woman and goldfish was painted in 1921, two years before Matisse took up the theme again in the Birch Bartlett version of 1923.[10] The earlier version has the character of a spontaneous study, the latter of a deliberated composition. The major elements are nearly identical (woman, table and chair, bowl, and pine cones) but the background of the Barnes version is busier in incident, pattern, and color. The dominant tonality of soft browns and warm apple-greens is broken only by the vivid reds of the patterned tapestry in the upper left corner and the lips of the woman, on which the hint of an amused smile plays. Everything in The Barnes Foundation's version trembles on the edge of mobility: the woman's expression is

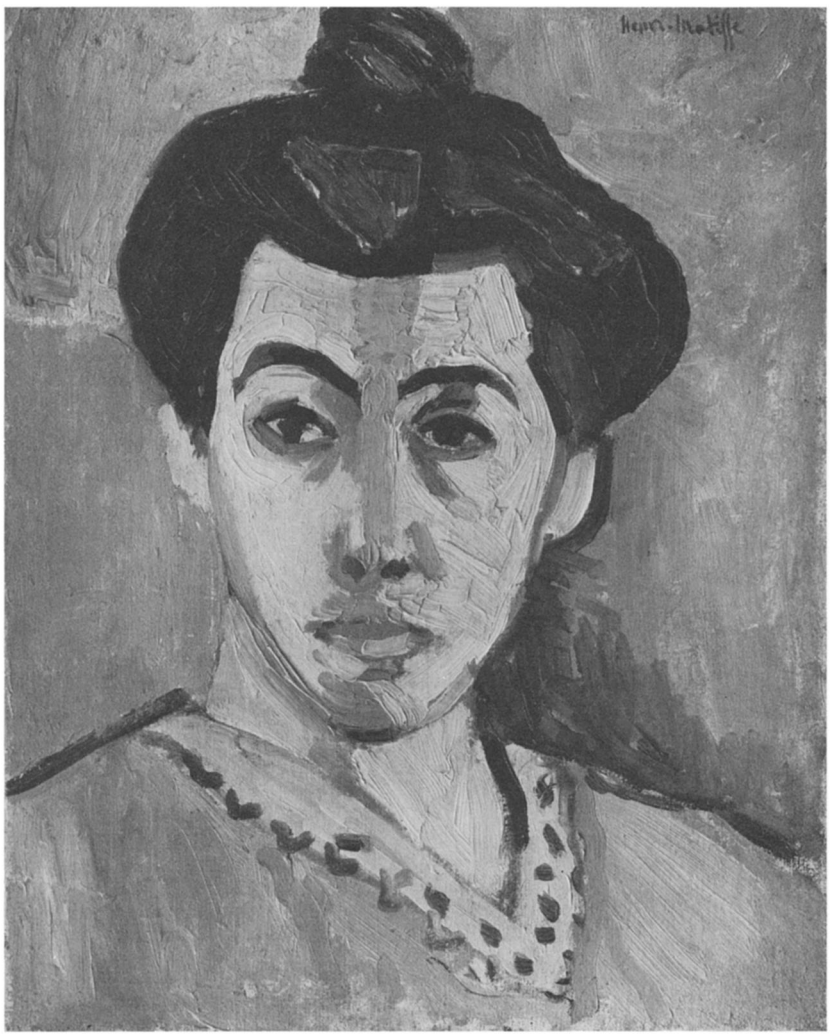


FIGURE 6 Henri Matisse. *Woman with a Green Stripe (Portrait of Mme. Matisse)*, 1905. Oil on canvas; 40.6 × 32.4 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum für Kunst.

fleeting, the fish thrash and turn, the pine needles quiver, the little notebook buckles, even the drawings seem to lift away from the wall, their images in restless motion. Thinly worked in discrete strokes and washes, the painting is more graphic than painterly. The charm of the work lies in its volatile, exploratory character that embodies the vibratory nuances of light, movement, and instantaneity.[11]

In contrast, nearly all movement is stilled in the Birch Bartlett *Woman Before an Aquarium*: the motif is concentrated and stabilized. The background has been subdued to a regular, unobtrusive pattern. The two-paneled screen that nearly fills the upper ground provides pillarlike verticals that frame the still life and emphasize the figure. These verticals are reinforced by continuation in the table legs and by the flickering black-and-white alternation of a striped skirt below the table across the lower frame.

Plastically rendered by the light, the woman is at the same time pressed forward between the background plane of the patterned screen and the foreground plane of the tipped table, between an illusionistic space and Cubist planarity. Like Cézanne, Matisse outlined opposite corners of the table (lower left, foreground, and upper right, middleground) to underscore the pine branches' diagonal movement across the table, while flattening the table surface

with the same device. At the right edge of the table, the ghost of a rejected diagonal remains to act as a "shadow" as well as to pull the background up to the picture plane. Also, to suggest space behind the dark hair on the far side of the woman's face, Matisse scraped away paint to reveal the light tan of the chair; what is exposed is the weave of the canvas, which asserts the material flatness of the support and destroys illusionism. This subtle warp of planes and shift of space keep the composition alive in spite of the stasis of its subject.

The color is local and used to model form, while at the same time being artificially manipulated to refer back to the surface plane. Subdued brown, tan, and mauve tones are played off against their complementary colors of blue and blue-green. A pale, fluorescent pink light enters from an unseen window at the left and bathes the tans, turning them lavender, and the blues, turning them gray. The light changes from a silvery twilight warmth on the left of the painting, the side nearest the light source, to a colder pink-lavender on the right which reflects from the table to the underside of the woman's left arm and shoulder. The pink on her right shoulder lies on the same plane as the pink tabletop.

The grays do the same subtle work as the pink tones, both declaring and denying space. For example, the background screen panels seem to stand at angles to one another because of a nuanced shift of values in the left and the right panels. This near-reversal of light and dark in the patterns suggests that the left panel is backlit and the right panel is lit from the front, which could only happen if they did indeed stand at different angles in relation to the (off-stage) window at the left. The screen also acts to immerse the woman in a pulsating blue ambiance, parallel to that of the fish.

Only the clear turquoise vertical behind the woman's head takes a stand against the invasion of iridescent pink-lilac light. The blue-green vertical performs the same function that the green stripe does on the face of Madame Matisse in the famous portrait *Woman with a Green Stripe* (fig. 6) of 1905. In the latter, it provides an "armature" for the face and calls attention to salience (the projecting nose) without recourse to traditional modeling. In the Birch Bartlett painting, the left edge of the turquoise vertical is implicitly aligned with the side of the model's nose and runs directly through the tip of her left elbow at its most projective point. The right edge of the blue-green joins the swelling contour of the chair-back and finally rejoins the line of the arm and evergreens in the foreground, thus joining the farthest plane to the nearest and giving a centripetal, ingathering impulse to the figure and still life.[12]

Theodore Reff rightly noted "the remarkable . . . concentration" of the figure, and remarked upon the "screen whose pattern of intersecting diamonds and circles . . . suggests intellectual activity."[13] Since the painting lacks a specific setting—clues to either studio or luxury apartment being absent—the woman is less apt to be read narratively. In combination with the other motifs—goldfish, pine branch, and empty tablet—she invites a symbolic reading. The painting becomes the culmination of a series of goldfish paintings whose theme is the profound contemplation of free, yet contained, natural beauty. The goldfish, englobed, represent a closed yet transparent world that yields its secrets to the attentive observer, a metaphor for art as process and as product. Both the artist and the viewer enter into an aesthetic realm through meditation—the former into the realm of nature; the latter into the realm of the work of art. The fishbowl is a metaphor for the artwork itself, which, in a closed system, traps and transmutes nature into an ideal aesthetic world.

But *Woman Before an Aquarium* also comes at the end of a series of paintings of and about young women alone in interiors. Matisse's earliest pictorial treat-

FIGURE 7 Henri Matisse. *Young Woman at the Window, Sunset*, 1921. Oil on canvas; 52.4 × 60.3 cm. The Baltimore Museum of Art, Cone Collection.

ment of women is of two types: 1) women engaged in "useful" activity within serene domestic settings; and 2) idealized nude female figures, idyllically dancing or dallying in arcadian nature. The modern young woman in a hotel room, the early Nice subject matter, mediates between the entirely role-oriented domestic woman (*femme de ménage*) and the totally emancipated archetypal nude. The young woman habitually presented in Matisse's Nice paintings is devoid of social role: she is neither wife, mother, servant, mistress, nor even model (except where the painter gives specific clues to the last-named role). Yet, she is not unconditionally free like the nudes in nature. In spite of its window onto the natural world, the room she inhabits functions as a real enclosure. Contemporary clothing and hairstyle bind her to a specific milieu and moment in time, as in *Young Woman at the Window, Sunset* (fig. 7). The hotel room setting—intimate but temporary—suggests a provisional situation, not an ideal permanent state.

The Nice paintings of women followed a powerful series of portraits of

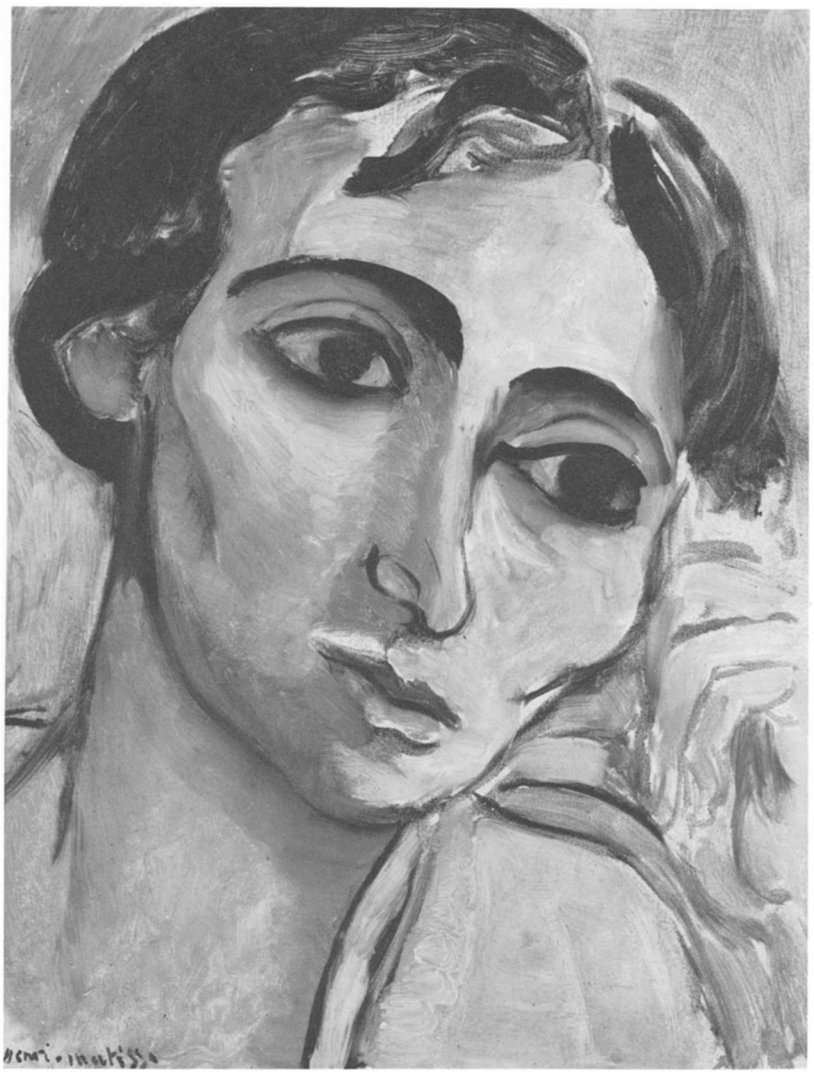


FIGURE 8 Henri Matisse. *Head of a Woman*. 1917. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Samuel S. White and Vera White Collection.

women that Matisse painted just before and during World War I. Through the study of particular—and often notable—women, the artist deepened his "almost religious feeling" toward the character of his models and prepared himself for the psychological empathy with his subject that characterizes the postwar work. A remarkable series of portraits of his model Laurette, for example, in *Head of a Woman* (fig. 8), conveys this sympathetic acuity.[14] In spite of his own freedom and prosperity in the 1920s, Matisse conveyed in his Nice paintings something of the mood of anomie and loss in postwar France, whose victory was after all somewhat Pyrrhic—her industrial provinces were ravaged and she was estranged from her former allies on the question of reparations.[15]

In these Nice "portraits" of a handful of models, he recorded the restless anxiety of women gazing at the sea, pining at open windows, neither dressed nor nude, going nowhere, twisting in their chairs, inert on their couches with unread books and unplayed instruments in their hands, never facing themselves in the omnipresent mirrored vanity table, indifferent to bouquets, absorbed in

FIGURE 9 Henri Matisse. *Woman with a Violin*, c. 1918. Paris, Orangerie des Tuileries, collection of Walter P. Guillaume. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux.

FIGURE 10 Henri Matisse. *Breakfast (Le Petit Dejeuner)*, 1921. Oil on canvas; 64.1 × 74 cm. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Samuel S. White and Vera White Collection.

their own mute presences (see figs. 9, 10). Matisse directed a silent cinema of particular stars—Antoinette, Henriette, Marguerite, and unnamed but recognizable others—playing out the role of the sometimes-cosseted but confined woman, the rootless modern female of the period who lived by her wits with little satisfying precedent to guide her. These are the women one finds in postwar novels, the women described by Jean Rhys or Paul Morand, available, bored in their self-absorption, and adrift.[16]

Woman before an Aquarium sets itself apart from these images, though it shares with them certain features. The woman in this painting was once thought to be the artist's daughter, Marguerite, but is, rather, his model Henriette Darricarrère. Still, the solemn attentiveness and intelligent concentration of the woman in the painting are typically found in portraits of Marguerite, who often sat for her father. Matisse in fact sometimes used Henriette as a stand-in for Marguerite, as in the family scenes of Henriette and her two younger brothers which restaged earlier paintings of the Matisse children—Marguerite, with her brothers, Jean and Pierre. Further, this subject of the woman and goldfish was taken up again in 1923—the year of Marguerite's marriage to art historian Georges Duthuit.[17]

It is not inconceivable, therefore, that the artist painted the remarkable *Woman Before an Aquarium* with his daughter, more or less consciously, in mind. His understanding of his daughter may well have been the key to his sensitivity toward the theme of the twentieth-century woman at this time, at liberty but not yet free, that is, not yet independent and self-determining. In the Birch Bartlett canvas, however, the young woman has achieved an equilibrium in rapt absorption. Her reverie is neither blissful nor transcendent, however, but judicious and wary. It does not take her out of herself, but into herself. No longer merely the object of our viewing, she is the prime viewer. We identify with her and her sober reverie induces ours.

The unflinching and unsentimental gravity of the image is further conveyed by the cool, dry handling of color and by the orchestration of the composition toward a single effect—that of the absorptive gaze—as much as through the expression of sagacious brooding on the woman's face. The painting thus also relates to the realism and extreme sobriety of the European (especially German and Italian) style of the 1920s known as the New Objectivity (*Die Neue Sachlichkeit*). This movement, a reaction to expressionism and abstraction, is characterized by a stern, detailed realism—precise to the point of unreality—of everyday subjects often frozen in an uneasy stasis. Jean Clay, a French writer on art, has suggested that work of this type often exhibits the theme of melancholy, a state of intense awareness of spiritual malaise. He pointed out the similarity among certain inter-war images, often of women, that recall Renaissance depictions of the brooding allegorical figure of *Malinconia* (see fig. 11). The figure alludes to both the artist and thinker and embodies self-awareness coming to grips with the limits of knowledge and freedom. Matisse's *Woman Before an Aquarium* conveys something of this melancholy and is consonant with this postwar mood.[18]

Woman Before an Aquarium and *Woman on a Rose Divan* seem to have little in common other than chronological proximity. A previous painting already cited, however, *Zorah on the Terrace* (fig. 4), in which a Moroccan woman contemplates a bowl of goldfish, provides a clue to their possible affinity. The inhabitant of a North African *oda*, or harem, is here joined, via the fishbowl , to the themes of enclosure and rapt contemplation. Although there is only one other oil that pairs an odalisquelike nude with a goldfish bowl, the themes are interrelated.[19]

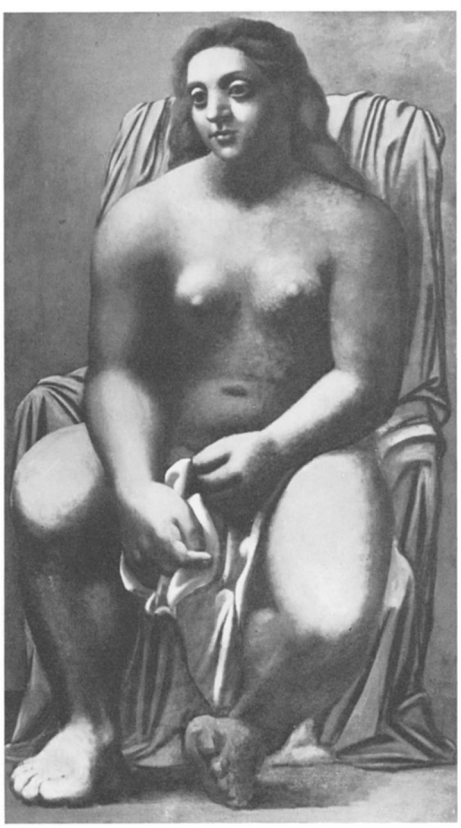
FIGURE 11 *Malinconia (Melancholy).* From Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, reprint, New York, 1976, p. 324.

By the latter half of the Nice decade, odalisques were to dominate Matisse's oeuvre, replacing the troubled contemporary woman who had presided over the first half. One is tempted to suspect Matisse of being less than ingenuous when, in 1929, he gave his reasons for painting odalisques:

> I do Odalisques in order to do nudes. But how does one do the nude without it being artificial? And then, because I know that they exist. I was in Morocco; I saw them. Rembrandt did his biblical subjects with authentic Turkish materials from the bazaar and his emotion was there. Tissot painted the Life of Christ with all the documentation possible, even going to Jerusalem. But his work is false and has no life of its own.[20]

Painting studio nudes was common among School of Paris artists in the 1920s; in what way could they be considered artificial? Charles Vildrac, in his introduction to Matisse's 1920 album of drawings, remarked that they "yielded neither to fashion nor to archaism," that they were neither *à la mode* nor *à l'antique*.[21] He meant that the artist avoided the then-widespread trend among advanced painters to imitate Ingres's svelte line, as well as the classicizing tendency of the day, which even Picasso (see fig.12) did not spurn. Neither of these current stylistic manners was without conservative implications in the general "call to order" of the postwar period.[22] To escape these styles, Matisse shaped a subject that could arouse his sensibility in such a way as to ensure authenticity of expression. In other words, the subjectivity of the Nice manner was a function of the artist's desire to safeguard his sincerity. "I belong to a generation for whom everything had to arise from feeling," he admitted. "If I had continued in that other path [i.e., Cubist-influenced abstractions]," he confided to an interviewer in 1919, "I would have ended in mannerism. One must keep one's freshness of vision and emotion; one must follow instinct."[23]

FIGURE 12 Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973). *The Large Bather*, Paris, Orangerie des Tuileries, collection of Walter P. Guillaume. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux.



Matisse's experience with the exotic—two extended visits to Tangiers in 1912 and 1913—had left an indelible impression that could be called upon for an authentic emotional response.[24] In the above quotation on the Odalisques, Matisse identified with Rembrandt, who was inspired by provocative, exotic materials. While Matisse had visited the Middle East, his emotion was really triggered by the authentic fragments—carpets, ceramics, clothing—that he had collected and, even more, by the women who were the "seat of his energy." In the beginning, a bit of oriental fabric or clothing was enough to stir memory and desire; as with Marcel Proust's *madeleine*, even the savor was sufficient to evoke nostalgia. The earliest versions of the subject, between 1916 and 1921, simply suggest the ambiance of a North African setting.[25] Neither the costume nor the setting was fully developed: a prop or a bit of clothing suggested the whole.

Woman on a Rose Divan is an early, if not the earliest, example of the fully-staged harem subject. It is still a costume piece, a fake theatrical staging of the model in exotic garb. When Matisse took up the convention of the costumed studio model, both at the turn of the century and during the Nice period, he was reexamining the work of Edouard Manet (who had utilized that convention and called attention to its artificiality) and painting with something of Manet's direct style. Matisse's landscapes and still lifes painted at Etretat in the summers of 1920 and 1921 are veritable homages to Manet in their use of black and in the succulence of both subject (oysters, lemons, salt-spray seascapes) and technique (wet-on-wet paint and fluidly articulated brushstrokes). *Woman on a Rose Divan* shares the painterly handling of these Etretat landscapes.[26]

The composition of the canvas, however, belies the spontaneous immediacy

FIGURE 13 Henri Matisse. *Interior at Collioure*, 1905/06. Zurich, Kunsthaus.

of its surface manipulation. Against a background of warm earth-reds and cooler red-purples, a bulky figure is splayed across the picture plane in an inverted Y-configuration. Although the figure straddles the vertical-horizontal composition, she is locked firmly into its structure. From right elbow to toe, from heel back to the finger tips of her right hand, she spans the strong horizontal wedge of the couch and the frieze of wall patterns. Her right foot anchors the whole composition, becoming the fulcrum for a counter V-shape: its right side joins the edge of the red drape; its left side incorporates the diagonal black shading of the side of the burnoose and is discharged, via the pillow behind the head, into the vertical bands behind it. As in *Woman Before an Aquarium*, Matisse has effected a complex synthesis between a certain illusionism and post-Cézannean methods of pictorial construction.

The color scheme is a favorite of the artist's from the earliest days of Fauvism: the juxtaposition of complementary (pale) green against the split (warm and cool) reds can also be found in *Woman with a Hat* (Hans Collection, San Francisco), *Woman with a Green Stripe* (fig. 6), *Interior at Collioure* (fig. 13), and many other works from around 1905 and 1906. In *Rose Divan*, however, the pale green also functions as an aerating agent, the equivalent of light, that suggests an out-of-view window at the upper right. The warm reds lack the aniline-dye tartness of the Fauve reds; the back curtain is so worked with cream flowers and green leaves that it takes on an earthy brown inflection, a brown actually present in the neighboring pattern to the left. How earth-toned the drape has become is evident when it is compared to the sharp scarlet of the trousers. (In another version of the painting, also in The Barnes Foundation, discussed more completely below, the patterned drape has in fact a brown, rather than red, background.) Black, Manet's color, is oddly used, seemingly as an afterthought. The visual weight of the black pillow is necessary to support

the oversized arm, just as the visual weight of the rightmost shadow-fold of the drape is necessary to anchor the tumescent tip of the couch. Matisse resorted to drawing in black over the filmy burnoose, tightening the pattern of folds so that the torso is bound in their coils.

There is only one other known painting of the same model identically clothed: the *Odalisque* in The Barnes Foundation collection (fig. 14). Not differently worked than the Birch Bartlett painting, it is larger and the model seems more happily settled—physically and psychologically—into her role; hence, it is probably a later variant. There are no known sketches or drawings for these two works, and the striped garment, covering upper torso and head, is never used in this way again.

Both paintings are of interest because they are among the few stagings of the harem woman earlier than *Odalisque with Red Trousers* (fig. 15), the first painting by Matisse to be purchased, in 1922, by the French government. *Odalisque with Red Trousers* was painted shortly after Matisse had moved to a more permanent apartment on the Place Charles-Félix in October 1921. The Birch Bartlett and Barnes Foundation canvases were painted while Matisse was still at the old Hôtel de la Méditerranée, where Matisse confessed to finding the ambiance "fake, absurd, terrific, delicious!"[27] The two odalisques painted there seem undisguisedly fictitious. Still, even in the *Odalisque with Red Trousers*, where the larger new apartment was able to be fitted out as a "harem" with greater theatrical verisimilitude, the model remains a contemporary woman looking to the painter for stage directions. One only has to compare Renoir's model's expression in *Odalisque* (fig. 16) with that of Matisse's model in these 1921 canvases to see that, for Matisse, the subject was as yet unresolved.

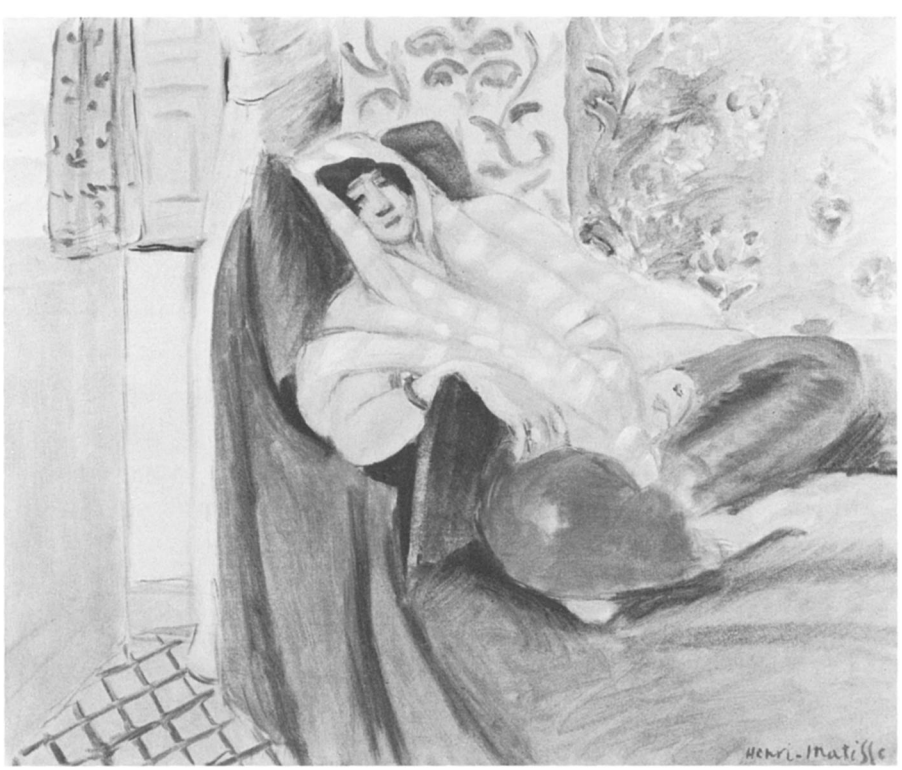


FIGURE 14 Henri Matisse. *Odalisque*, 1920. Oil on canvas; 55.9 × 66 cm. Merion Station, Penn., The Barnes Foundation.

FIGURE 15 Henri Matisse. *Odalisque with Red Trousers*, 1921.
Oil on canvas; 65 × 90 cm. Paris, Musée national d'art moderne.

FIGURE 16 Pierre Auguste Renoir (French, 1841–1919). *Odalisque*, 1870. Oil on canvas; 69.2 × 122.6 cm. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection.

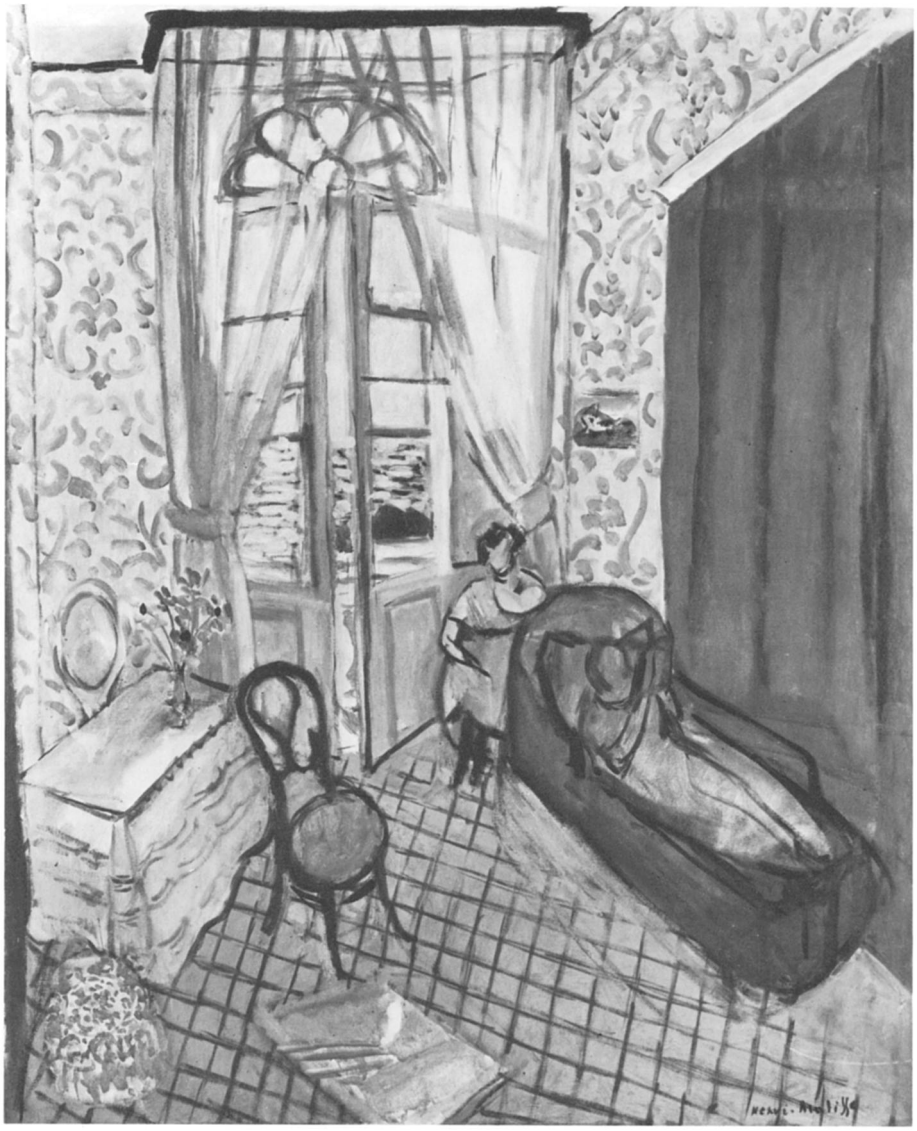


FIGURE 17 Henri Matisse. *Woman on the Sofa (Femme au canapé)*, n. d. Paris, Orangerie des Tuileries, collection of Walter P. Guillaume. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux.

FIGURE 18 Matisse drawing from a model in his apartment on Place Charles Félix, Nice, c. 1928. Photo: Special Collections, Library, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Space in the Hôtel de la Méditerranée was relatively cramped.[28] Another painting, *Woman on the Sofa (Femme au canapé)* (fig. 17), better indicates the interior in which the Chicago *Rose Divan* was painted. In the former, we see the red couch set against the hanging drape at the right; in the latter, the painter has confronted the model head-on and at close range to eliminate the rest of the room. In The Barnes Foundation *Odalisque*, the figure is viewed from a slight angle, permitting the window more play both in light and space, though the modern furnishings are still eliminated. Several drawings, probably dating from after the Birch Bartlett and Barnes Foundation paintings and before the *Odalisque with Red Trousers*, indicate that Matisse tried different costumes on his model before settling on the open transparent blouse and filmy veil. The background of one of these drawings is identical to the Art Institute's *Rose Divan*, though the model's costume is partially changed and her gesture and expression are sensual.[29]

The "staged" quality of the odalisques is most evident at the beginning and end of the Nice period. From 1921 to 1923, the motif was just being developed and remained a transparent studio set-up. Later, from 1926 to 1929, Matisse

created a "real" stage such as can be seen in a celebrated photo of the era (fig. 18), a niche where the women, more doll-like than real, became impersonal mannequins in an overripe middle-eastern decor. These later works evidence a loss of belief in the subject's possibility for transformation, of a disillusionment with make-believe even as it is ironically enacted. But in the middle Nice years, 1923 to 1926, paintings such as *Odalisque with Magnolias* (private collection, New York) convey with utmost voluptuousness a radiant supra-sensible message of blissful self-absorption.

It would seem that even as the reclining odalisque was beginning to be explored as a major theme, the modern woman was removed from the room to the balcony (see fig. 19), distanced both compositionally and psychologically from the viewer. A related canvas, the aforementioned *Woman on the Sofa (Femme au canapé)* (fig. 17), reveals the moment when the two subjects—modern woman and odalisque exemplified by the Birch Bartlett canvases—split off from one another; the ghostly female on the sofa was soon to crystallize as the idealized odalisque. An early Fauve painting, the previously mentioned *Interior at Collioure* (fig. 13), sets up the two types: a partially clothed

FIGURE 19 Henri Matisse. *Interior at Nice*, 1921. Oil on canvas; 132 × 89 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Mrs. Gilbert W. Chapman (1956.339).

woman lies sprawled on the bed, while another, clothed and hatted, stands on the balcony gazing at the outdoor scene. The reclining figure is the artist's wife and the girl on the balcony, at the juncture of inner and outer worlds, is significantly, the artist's daughter, Marguerite.[30]

The middle-period odalisques, which become precious icons of self-enjoyment, are not unlike the goldfish as Matisse portrayed them. The iridescent swimmers, exhibited in their transparent globes, lose none of the untrammeled exercise of their natures because they are viewed. So Matisse's harem creatures, though totally available to the viewer within the confines of the artist's depiction, yet function as symbols of fulfilled human nature. The Birch Bartlett painting of the meditating *Woman Before an Aquarium* has less of fantasy in its image of the female; the pensive woman's reverie on the goldfish seems tempered by the sobriety of a knowing realism.

The two Matisse paintings in the Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection suggest the subtlety and range of Matisse's Nice period oeuvre. Stylistically, the paintings are a gauge of the artist's success in integrating a modern sense of color and structure with the intimacy of a highly personal, atmospheric style. Thematically, the two works comprise his major Nice motifs: the contemporary and the costumed woman. *Woman on a Rose Divan* demonstrates the deceptively simple development of the theme of the odalisque, which was to unfold fully from 1923 to 1926, representing a type rather than an individual. *Woman Before an Aquarium* is a special kind of portrait, that of an individual within the framework of a type. It brings to a unique resolution the theme of the modern postwar woman to which the artist had given such penetrating and varied expression in the preceding decade. Both pictures are full of surprises, of treasures, that establish them, with Matisse's other paintings of the Nice decade, as ambitious works of synthesis and as subtle reflections of postwar European sensibility.

NOTES

1. Matisse, cited in Pierre Courthion, "Rencontre avec Matisse," *Les Nouvelles littéraires* (June 27, 1931), p. 1; for a translation, see Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art* (New York, 1978), p. 65.

2. In addition to the two paintings in the Birch Bartlett Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago possesses six oil paintings by Matisse: *Still Life with Geranium Plant and Fruit*, 1906, 97.7 × 80 cm, Joseph Winterbotham Collection (1932.1342); *Apples*, 1916, 117 × 89 cm, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel A. Marx (ex. Quinn) (1948.563); *Bathers by a River*, 1916, 262 × 391 cm, Worcester Collection (1953.158); *The Green Sash*, 1919, 49.1 × 43.3 cm, Worcester Collection (1947.91); *Interior at Nice*, 1921, 132 × 89 cm, gift of Mrs. Gilbert W. Chapman (1956.339); and *Daisies* (*Marguerites*), 1939, 91.5 × 66 cm, gift of Helen Pauling Donnelley in memory of her parents, Mary Fredericka and Edward George Pauling (1983.206).

3. There is no major study of the Nice period; it is briefly treated in the basic monographs dealing with the total life and oeuvre of the artist: Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Matisse, his Art and his Public* (New York, 1951); Gaston Diehl, *Henri Matisse* (Paris, 1954); Raymond Escholier, *Matisse, ce vivant* (Paris, 1956); Lawrence Gowing, *Matisse* (New York, 1979); and two more specialized studies: Louis Aragon, *Henri Matisse: roman* (Paris, 1971); and Pierre Schneider, *Henri Matisse* (Paris and New York, 1984). Specialized texts have appeared on Matisse's prints, drawings, and sculpture; the Fauve works and the paper cut-outs have been extensively treated. Although there is no catalogue raisonné of the paintings, a useful—though incomplete and sometimes inaccu-

rate—compilation has been made which includes the Nice period works: see Massimo Carra and Xavier Deryng, *Tout l'Oeuvre peint de Matisse, 1904–1928* (Paris, 1983; Ital. ed., Milan, 1971). A major exhibition of works of the period organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., is scheduled for November of 1986. The scholarly catalogue for this show will redress the neglect of the period and will undoubtedly revise the current assessment of it.

There are two collections of the written and recorded words of Matisse: Jack D. Flam (note 1) and Dominique Fourcade, *Henri Matisse, écrits et propos sur l'art* (Paris, 1972). Hereafter, in citing the words of Matisse, both the original source and the page reference in Flam's translation will be given.

4. No one has seriously challenged Alfred Barr's judgment that the period is "a rather unexciting and anticlimactic interim in which even the best paintings with all their charm and quiet gaity do not approach the masterpieces of 1905 to 1916" and that "there seems to be a falling off from the intensity, boldness, scale, and sheer pictorial excitement" and a setting in of "reaction and relaxation" (Barr [note 3]), pp. 208, 214). In the generally laudatory *The Art of Henri Matisse* (Merion Station, Pa., 1933) by Albert Barnes and Violette de Mazia, one reads: "Persons in his portraits, no less than in his compositions, are primarily assemblages of plastic traits. He lacks not only Rembrandt's religious sense of human personality, but also interest in characterization of the sort that appears in Dürer, Goya, or Daumier. . . . To Matisse nature and personality are mainly counters in the decorative game he plays" (pp. 204–05).

5. Matisse on modern methods of construction: E. Tériade, "Matisse Speaks," *Art News Annual* 21 (1952) (Flam [note 1], p. 132); for Alfred Barr's (note 3) assessment of the preceding period, see chapter 4.

6. The best indication of Matisse's intentions at this time is to be found in an interview with Ragnar Hoppe, translated from the original Swedish ("Pä visit hos Matisse," *Städer och Konstnärer, resebrev och essäer om Konst* [Stockholm, 1931]) into French by Cecilia Monteux in Dominique Fourcade, "Autre propos de Henri Matisse," *Macula* 1 (1976), p. 94. On the human element in his work, see Matisse's letter of February 14, 1934, to Alexander Romm cited in Flam (note 1), p. 68.

7. The 1905 citation, referring to the first Fauve works that were exhibited at the Salon d'Automne of that year, is from a letter by Matisse to Paul Signac of September 28, 1905, cited in Schneider (note 3), p. 188. The Cézanne quotation is from Jacques Guenne, "Entretien avec Henri Matisse," *L'Art Vivant* 18 (Sept. 15, 1925) (Flam [note 1], p. 55).

8. See the discussion of these goldfish paintings in John Elderfield, *Matisse in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York, 1978), pp. 84–86, 100–02, 197–98, and 204–05, where the significance of the theme is thoroughly traced. Two later paintings, not mentioned by Elderfield, are *Nude with Goldfish*, 1922, Stephen Hahn Collection, New York (illustrated in Schneider [note 3], p. 352) and *Still Life: "Les Modes" (The Goldfish)*, 1922, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

9. Kate Linker, "Meditations on a Goldfish Bowl: Autonomy and Analogy in Matisse," *Artforum* 19, 2 (Oct. 1980), pp. 65–73; and "Matisse and the Language of Signs," *Arts Magazine* 49 (May 1975), pp. 76–78. Another major article on the theme is Theodore Reff, "Matisse: Meditations on a Statuette and Goldfish," *Arts Magazine* 51 (Nov. 1976), pp. 109–15. Schneider (note 3) also discussed the goldfish motif: see pp. 420–24.

10. Letter from Marguerite Duthuit to Courtney Donnell, March 25, 1976, in the Department of Twentieth-Century Painting and Sculpture, The Art Institute of Chicago:

> Two paintings of the same subject were worked on by Matisse several years apart: in 1921, in the first contact with the subject, the painting was treated rather lightly and in a descriptive manner with respect to the background. . . . Then, two seasons later in 1923, Matisse took up the same subject again on a much larger canvas, worked on at length and treated in an entirely different manner; but in the two paintings, one recognizes the same expression of gravity in the person depicted. It is the latter painting which belongs to your museum. [Author's translation.]

Madame Duthuit's recollection is offered without hesitancy; therefore, until new evidence indicates otherwise, this author has accepted the 1923 date for the second version. The Bernheim-Jeune records also indicate a 1923 date for the painting, which was purchased by the Bartletts on June 4, 1923; *Woman on a Rose Divan*, dated 1921, was bought nine days earlier, on May 26, 1923.

11. The Barnes Foundation *Woman Regarding Fishbowl* is not illustrated in the Barnes and de Mazia monograph (note 4). It is reproduced, however, in Charles Vildrac, *Nice, 1921: Seize reproductions d'après les tableaux de Henri Matisse* (Paris, 1922), no. 6, under the title *Jeune fille devant un aquarium*.

12. I am indebted to my colleague, the painter Theodore Halkin, for sharing with me his insights regarding the formal structure of the painting under discussion.

13. Reff (note 9), p. 114.

14. Among the remarkable portraits that Matisse made just before or during the war were those of Yvonne Landsberg, a wealthy young Brazilian; Josette Gris, wife of the artist Juan Gris; Greta Prozor, actress; Eva Mudocci, violinist and former mistress of Edvard Munch; Germaine Raynal, wife of the Cubist critic and writer Maurice Raynal; Emma La Forge; Mme. Demetri Galanis, wife of the engraver and painter; Sarah Stein, painter and sister-in-law of Gertrude Stein; and the painter's daughter, Marguerite, then in her twenties. The series of paintings of Laurette must also be considered a substantial achievement in portraiture; see a selection reproduced in Schneider (note 3), pp. 478–82.

From his 1908 "Notes of a Painter," *La Grande Revue* 52, 24 (Dec. 25, 1908) (Flam [note 1], pp. 32–39) to the late article entitled *Portraits* (Monte Carlo, 1954) (Flam [note 1], pp. 150–53), Matisse insists on the importance of the human figure, the model, in the expression of his profoundest feelings about life. "My models, human figures, are never just 'extras' in an interior. They are the principal theme in my work." In "Notes d'un peintre sur son dessin," *Le Point* 21 (July 1939), pp. 104–10 (Flam [note 1], p. 81).

15. The moral and physical devastation in Europe after World War I was universal, affecting victor and vanquished alike. Matisse's move to Nice, often seen as an escape, brought him to a city that hosted a transient multi national population, the flotsam of international displacement, and Matisse himself was aware of the insubstantiality and loneliness characteristic of the city: "Nice is a décor, a fragile thing—very beautiful, but where no one real is to be found. It isn't a city with depth. . . " (Matisse to Pierre Courthion, cited in Schneider [note 3], p. 517).

16. A longer study by this author on Matisse's early Nice period, which will explore the relation of Matisse's subject matter to the fiction(s) of the period, is in progress.

17. Madame Duthuit's letter (see note 10) does not mention her marriage, which took place on December 10, 1923, just six months after the painting was sold.

Theodore Reff ([note 9], p. 114) found a Japanese source in which the goldfish, symbol of happiness and prosperity, is paired with the pine tree, symbol of longevity. He did not suggest that Matisse knew and worked from such a source but rather that he may have been aware, in a general way, of comparable oriental usages of motifs. The goldfish and pines, even if used unconsciously as symbols of long life and happiness, would permit an interpretation that accords with his daughter's impending marriage.

18. Jean Clay, "Sous le Signe de Saturne: notes sur l'allegorie de la Melancholie dans l'art de l'entre-deux-guerres en Allemagne et en Italie," *Cahiers du Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne* 7/8 (1980), pp. 176–206. Clay referred to the classic text by art historian Erwin Panofsky on Dürer's engraving of the subject, *Melancholia*, in *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, 1955), pp. 157ff., where the full explication of the allegory is developed.

19. See note 8. In 1929, Matisse resumed the goldfish theme in a series of etchings. Those that pair the fishbowl and contemporary women's heads, often in modish cloche hats, retain the pensive quality of the *Woman Before an Aquarium*. Another group of etchings, however, uses the fishbowl merely as part of the nude model's oriental decor.

As a mere still-life element, the motif loses its significance beyond a certain exoticism. See: Fribourg, Musée d'art et d'histoire, *Henri Matisse, gravures et lithographies*, exh. cat. (Fribourg, 1982); nos. 146–49, 151, 155–56, 158–59, 165–66, 170, 172, 181, 195–97, 200, 206.

20. Matisse to E. Tériade, "Visite à Henri Matisse," *L'Intransigéant* (Jan. 17, 1929) (Flam [note 1], p. 59).

21. Charles Vildrac, *Cinquante dessins par Henri Matisse* (Paris, 1920), p. 6.

22. For the post-World War I situation in France as it affected the arts, see *Le Retour à l'ordre* (Saint-Etienne, 1974); Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, *Les Réalismes, 1919–1939*, exh. cat. (1980); and Kenneth Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Great War and French Art, 1914–1925* (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1981).

23. Interview with Ragnar Hoppe (note 6), p. 94.

24. On the Morocco visits, see Flam, "Matisse in Morocco," *Connoisseur* (Aug. 1982), pp. 74–86, and Schneider (note 3), pp. 459–93.

25. For instance: Laurette in a turban or with turkish coffee, paired with the mulatto model Aïcha in eastern robes, or with Antoinette in trousers and transparent jacket. The motif dates from as early as 1916, when Matisse painted his large canvas *The Moroccans* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York).

26. *Woman on a Rose Divan*, first exhibited with Etretat landscapes, was once thought to have been painted there; the background, however, is clearly that of the artist's hotel room. Matisse wrote of Manet in 1932: "Edouard Manet vu par Henri Matisse," *L'Intransigéant* (Jan. 25, 1932), p. 5; (English trans. in Schneider [note 3], p. 306). See also Dominique Fourcade, "Matisse et Manet?," *Bonjour Monsieur Manet*, exh. cat., Paris, Musée national d'art moderne (Paris, 1983), pp. 25–32.

27. Matisse, cited in Francis Carco, "Conversation avec Henri Matisse," *L'Ami des peintres* (Paris, 1953); (Flam [note 1] p. 86). The original interview was conducted in 1941.

28. Charles Vildrac (note 11), p. 1, called attention to Matisse's transformation of his hotel room in 1922: "First of all, this chamber was not as large as I had supposed: I had, from certain canvases, the impression that one could walk freely there with large strides, even dance there with ease; but its size was totally in the length, rather crowded, and the window occupied the greater part of the width. Beyond that, I had to admit that the painter had lent it an airy soul and one totally subject, like flowers, to the variations of the skies—a soul it certainly did not possess in reality. It was a lovely hotel room, to be sure, but its soul was that of a hotel room."

29. This drawing, whose present location is unknown, is reproduced in Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, *Matisse, oeuvres de Henri Matisse, 1869–1954, dans le Musée National d'Art Moderne* (Paris, 1979), p. 112. It is shown in conjunction with a drawing in the museum entitled *Odalisque étendue, pantalon turc*. An oil painting that is very close to the museum's sheet is reproduced in *Cahiers d'Art* 6, 5/6 (1931), n.pag., that was devoted to Matisse. Related to these drawings (and to the Chicago painting) is a series of carefully worked pen and ink drawings which was published in Elie Faure, *Henri Matisse par Elie Faure, Jules Romain, Charles Vildrac, Léon Werth* (Paris, 1923), nos. 19, 35, 39, 41, and 53. Yet another variant drawing appears in Victor Carlson, *Matisse as a Draughtsman* (Baltimore, 1971), no. 39.

30. Louis Aragon ([note 3], vol. 2, pp. 67–80) has some affecting pages on the tender relationship between Matisse and his daughter and (vol. 1, pp. 138–41) recounts the artist's detailed reminiscences about *Interior at Collioure* some thirty-five years later: for example, the exact color used for Marguerite's dress and its harmonization throughout the composition. Jack Flam has also called attention ("Some Observations on Matisse's Self-Portraits," *Arts Magazine* 49 [May 1975], p. 51) to the projection by the artist of his own feelings onto some images of his daughter.