Words of Henri Matisse

"I do not distinguish between the construction of a book and that of a painting and I always proceed from the simple to the complex, yet I am always ready to reconceive in simplicity. Composing at first with two elements, I add a third insofar as it is needed to unite the first two by enriching the harmony—I almost wrote 'musical.'" [i]

"I have often thought [the linocut], which is so simple, can be compared to a violin and bow: surface and gouge—four taut strings and horsehair. The gouge, like the violinist's bow, is directly connected to the engraver's sensibility. This is so true that even the smallest distraction during the execution of a line can involuntarily bring with it a slight pressing from the fingers on the gouge and thus influence the line adversely. Similarly, all it takes is for the fingers which are holding the violin bow to tighten a little and the character of the sound will change—a soft sound becomes loud. Linoleum is a method heaven-sent for the painter-illustrator." [ii]

"I picture myself reading [Charles d'Orléans] the first thing every morning of every day, just as when you leap out of bed you fill your lungs with fresh air. That's how I proceeded with Mallarmé." [iii]

[i] Henri Matisse, "How I Made My Books" (1946), in *Matisse on Art*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 168.
[ii] Henri Matisse, "How I Made My Books," in *Matisse on Art*, p. 109.
[iii] From a letter to Louis Aragon (1943), printed in Louis Aragon's *Henri Matisse: A Novel*, vol. 1; reprinted in John Elderfield, *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992).

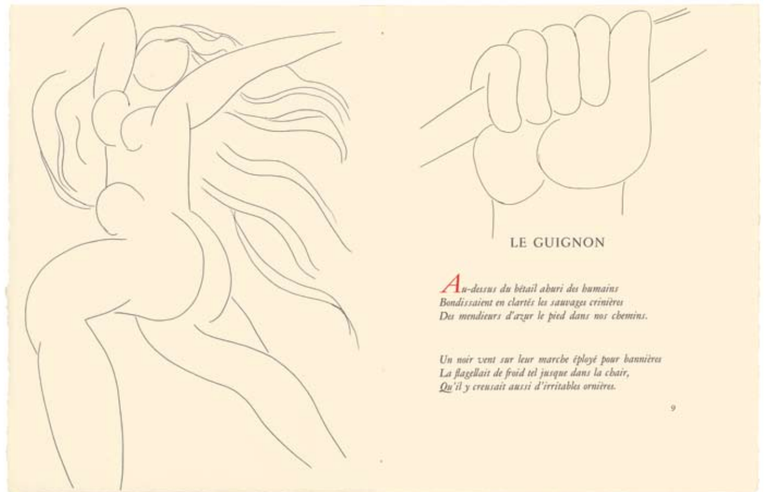
Cover credit:
Le lanceur de couteax (The Knife Thrower), plate XV of XX, from *Jazz*, 1947, stencil (*pochoir*) on Arches paper, 16¾ x 25⅝

The Essayist

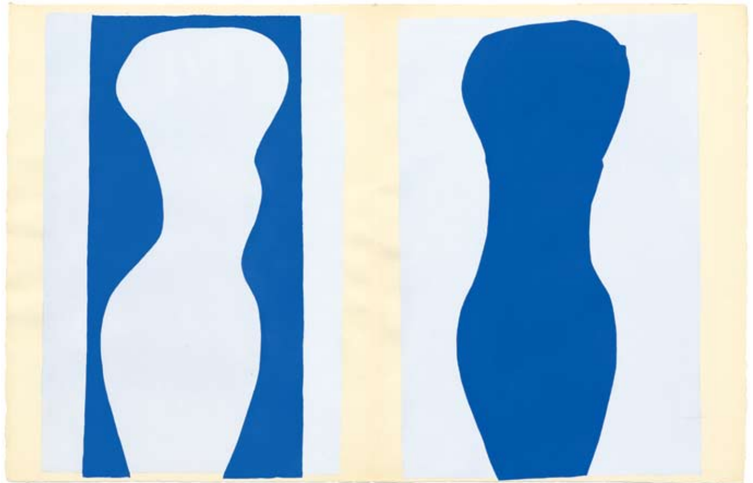
Yve-Alain Bois is professor in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. He has written extensively on twentieth-century art and artists, from Matisse and Picasso, Mondrian and Lissitzky, to postwar American art, particularly Minimal art. A collection of his essays, *Painting as Model*, was published by M.I.T. Press in 1990. He co-organized the retrospective of Piet Mondrian that was exhibited at The Hague, in Washington, D.C., and in New York in 1994–1995. In 1996, he curated the exhibition "*L'informe, mode d'emploi*" with Rosalind Krauss at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. The book accompanying this exhibition has been published in English under the title *Formless: A User's Guide* (Zone Books, 1997). Other exhibitions that he has curated include "Matisse and Picasso: A Gentle Rivalry," at the Kimbell Art Museum (Fort Worth, Texas), for which he also wrote the catalogue (*Matisse and Picasso*, Flammarion, 1998), "Ellsworth Kelly: Early Drawings," at the Fogg Art Museum (Cambridge, Massachusetts), which traveled to Atlanta and Chicago in the United States and Winterthur, Munich, and Bonn in Europe (March 1999–August 2000), and "Ellsworth Kelly: Tablet," at the Drawing Center, New York, and the Musée des Beaux Arts, Lausanne (May–October 2002). Bois is one of the editors of the journal *October* and a contributing editor to *Artforum*. Among other projects, he is working on a study of Barnett Newman's paintings and the catalogue raisonné of Ellsworth Kelly's paintings and sculpture.

[1] "Poetry, when it represents a good poet, has no need of the declamatory art of a good reciter, or even the extraordinary qualities of a good composer, or the plastic virtues of a good painter. But it is agreeable to see a good poet inspire the imagination of another artist. This latter could create an equivalent. Then, so that the artist can really give himself to it entirely, he must be very careful to guard against following the text word for word; but, to the contrary he must work with his own sensibility enriched by his contact with the poet he is illustrating," Henri Matisse, "Statement to Tériade: Around a Retrospective" (1931), in *Matisse on Art*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 96.
[2] Henri Matisse, "How I Made My Books" (1946), in *Matisse on Art*, p. 167.
[3] Matisse's *Florilège des Amours de Ronsard*, prepared in 1941–1942, did not appear until 1948.

THE ART BOOKS OF HENRI MATISSE



Illustrations for the poem *"Le guignon"* ("Bad Luck"), from *Les Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé*, 1932, etching, 13½" x 19⅝".



Formes (Forms), plate IX of XX, from *Jazz*, 1947, stencil (*pochoir*) on Arches paper, 16¾" x 25⅝".

"... emportes jusqu'aux constellations..."
from *Pasiphaé, Le Chant de Minos (Les Crétois)*, 1944,
linocut on *vélin d'Arches filigrané* paper, 13½" x 10⅛".

Untitled (Fleurs-de-lys), pages 6–7, from *Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans*, 1950,
lithograph on *vélin d'Arches*, 16¼" x 21⅛".

Henri Matisse, one of the two most important artists of the first half of the twentieth century (the other being Pablo Picasso), came late to the art of the book (he was past sixty). In fact, his on-and-off competition with Picasso must have played a role in his decision to finally enter the fray, as, when the young Swiss publisher Albert Skira commissioned Matisse's first book in the spring of 1930, Skira let the painter know that his Spanish rival had just signed on to illustrate Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Whatever the case, unlike Picasso, who finished his Ovid in a matter of weeks, Matisse agonized over *Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé* (*The Poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé*) for two years, producing a masterpiece that not only revolutionized the whole concept of the illustrated book but also marked a turning point in his own career (facing page, and page 10).

Working on this book lifted Matisse out of a terrible crisis (by the end of the 1920s, he was no longer able to paint) and plunged him back into the modernist atmosphere of his experimental years (1904–1917). Another venture that rekindled Matisse's fire was Albert Barnes's commission for a mural in Merion, Pennsylvania, that came in at around the same time. (In fact, it is possible that it was while visiting the Barnes Foundation in September 1930 and looking at many of his own early works that Matisse decided to shift from Jean de la Fontaine, as planned in the initial contract with Skira, to Mallarmé, a poet he had cherished in his youth.) The two projects were intrinsically linked in Matisse's mind: he worked on them side by side for two years, completing the book only a few months before finishing *The Dance*, his mural for Merion. As commentators have noted, the two works share many stylistic traits. Most important, Matisse abandoned traditional modeling, to which, abjuring the pictorial principles of his youth, he had returned in the early 1920s, and replaced it with an activation of the surface by large undivided planes—that is, with a mode of pictorial organization that he had mastered a quarter of a century earlier with *Joy of Life*, whose flat planes of pure color had scandalized even his champions.

The choice of Mallarmé, the leader of French Symbolism, as an author is particularly important, because it shaped Matisse's approach to all his subsequent book projects. The writer was himself opposed to having his poems illustrated, the motto of his evocative aesthetic being "to name not the thing, but the effect it produces." Matisse understood that to do justice to Mallarmé's poetry he had to steer away from any descriptive, literal visual transcription and instead create what he called an "equivalent." This meant, among other things, that Matisse had to become thoroughly familiar with the notoriously difficult poems themselves. [1]

Selecting the poems himself, Matisse produced an extraordinary object that is perfectly akin to Mallarmé's conception of the book as a totality in which every part has a unique role to play. Matisse's insistence on etching "an even, very thin line, without hatching, so that the printed page is left almost as white as it was before printing" seemed a direct response to Mallarmé's famous notion that in a poem it is "only the whites" that are "important." Radically departing from the illustrative tradition, Matisse orchestrated the whole book as a sequence of double pages, meticulously balancing the printed text (usually on the left with the etched plate on the right), as a juggler would do "with a black and a white ball," as he noted.

The contrast is stark between the dense typography massed toward the center of the page and the open compositions that face it, spilling off the sheet of paper (to create this effect, Matisse used copper plates that were larger than the page format). In these compositions, no single shape is ever closed onto itself, ensuring the free circulation of our gaze as it follows the sinuous arabesques.

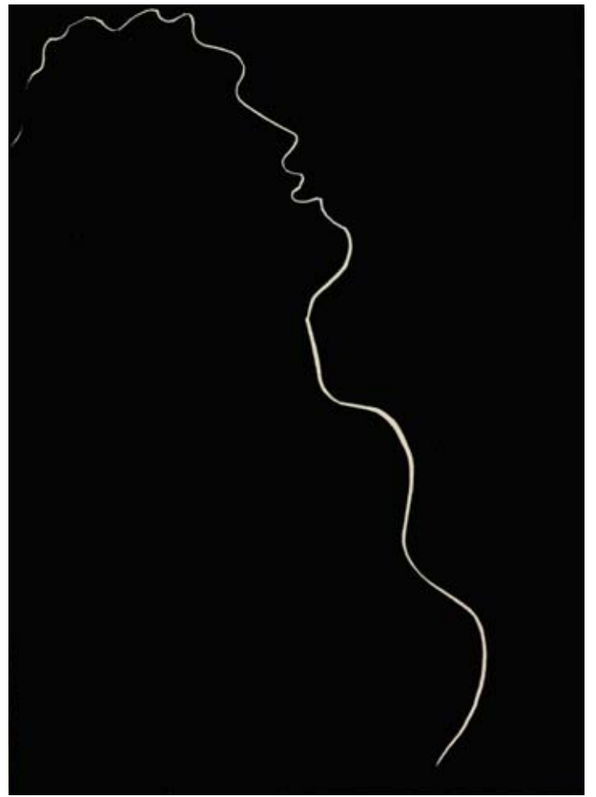
Response to the Mallarmé book was immediate and enthusiastic. The act was a hard one to follow. Although Matisse illustrated James Joyce's *Ulysses* soon thereafter, he never considered the volume fully his (in part because he had no control over its overall design and perhaps also because he could never really engage with Joyce's English text and thus could not, and certainly did not, produce an "equivalent").

It was not until May 1944, at the end of World War II, that Matisse issued what he considered his second book, Henry de Montherlant's *Pasiphaé, Le Chant de Minos (Les Crétois) (Pasiphaé, Song of Minos [The Cretans])*, the story of an ancient Cretan queen cursed by the Greek god Poseidon with a passion for a bull (the Minotaur is the result of their mating).

Montherlant had already approached Matisse in 1935 but had submitted to him a text that was already too rich in imagery, too specific, leaving no room for the artist's imagination. Matisse opted to use linocuts, against the wish of the writer, who recanted his prejudice as soon as he saw the result (right; also page 12, left). Since Montherlant's somber thematics were the exact opposite of Mallarmé's *azur*, this new book had to be the negative of the preceding one. Matisse concluded:

> *Here the problem is the same as that of the "Mallarmé," except the two elements are reversed. How can I balance the black illustrating page against the comparatively white page of type? By composing with the arabesque of my drawing, but also by bringing the engraved page and the facing text page together so that they form a unit . . . A wide margin running all the way around both pages masses them together.* [2]

Gone are the thin lines of the Mallarmé etchings, the shapes expanding off the page, the white breeze circulating between text and images. The heavy contours remain open, but the margins function as a classical frame, the composition of each double page is monumental, stark—it would have even been too stark, Matisse thought, if, struck by the funereal



"... L'angoisse qui s'amasse en frappant sous ta gorge...," from *Pasiphaé, Le Chant de Minos (Les Crétois)*, 1944, linocut on *vélin d'Arches filigrané* paper, 13⅛" x 10⅛".

Frontispiece and title page, *Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans*, 1950, lithograph on *vélin d'Arches*, 16⅛" x 21⅛".

dominance of black in the book, he had not introduced red initial letters, a third ball, into his juggling game. Taking full advantage of this nocturnal, ominous tenor, Matisse transformed each of the lines he gouged out from the linoleum sheet into a bolt of lightning—as is particularly noticeable in the illustration bearing the one-line quotation: "*L'angoisse qui s'amasse en frappant sous ta gorge*" ("The anguish that piles up while beating at your throat," page 5).

Although Matisse's edition of *Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans (Poems of Charles d'Orléans)* did not appear until 1950, Matisse did the bulk of the work in 1942–1943, even before he tackled Montherlant's text. An aftereffect of the painter's involvement with the work of a much later and better-known French Renaissance poet, Pierre de Ronsard, the volume *Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans* is unique in Matisse's book production in that it is almost entirely devoid of figurative imagery.[3] Furthermore, it has no typographic elements, since the texts are calligraphed by Matisse himself, and the illustrations are not "original" in the sense that they were lithographed by the master printer Mourlot after Matisse's mock-up in colored pencils. Except for the frontispiece, a rendering of the poet based on period sources (facing page), the book contains only four portraits (all of women). Other than that, all the double pages of this slim book (with a total of 100 pages) are based on the same scheme: on the left, an allover dispersion of *fleurs-de-lys*, the emblem of the Bourbon dynasty to which the poet belonged (page 12, right); on the right, traced with the same colored pencils, a sonnet or rondel within a decorative frame. Strangely repetitive, drastically limited in its visual vocabulary, the book perhaps corresponds best to Matisse's ideal of a "decorated," rather than an illustrated, book.

As for the book's stylistic oddity within Matisse's oeuvre, it can be accounted for by Matisse's deep knowledge of the author and his appreciation for d'Orléans's ornamental wordplay. Frequently bedridden after very serious surgery in January 1941, Matisse spent months reading the large corpus of Charles d'Orléans (often credited as being the first French lyrical poet), copying by hand his choice of the day and regularly sending his samplings to his old friend the poet André Rouveyre for approval and also for a bit of exegesis. Endlessly rearranging his selections, Matisse was attentive above all to underscoring d'Orléans's lightness once one adjusted to the difficulty of the fifteenth-century French. Paradoxically, while Matisse became a greater connoisseur of d'Orléans's work than of that of any other poet—one detects in Matisse a strong sense of kinship with the poet—this book shows the artist at his least assertive.

Le cow-boy (The Cowboy), plate XIV of XX, from *Jazz*, 1947, stencil (*pochoir*) on Arches paper, 16¾" x 25⅜".

Matisse's *Jazz* is of a very different nature. Like the d'Orléans book, it has no typography and no "original" prints: it is a reproduction, this time by way of stencils, made after a mock-up in paper cutouts that Matisse provided to the printer—but that is about all they have in common (cover, facing page, page 11). True, one could admit *Jazz* into the category of the "decorated book," but with the provision that it is the text in this case that functions as adornment—Matisse is perfectly clear about this: he wrote his accompanying remarks long after having determined all the images he would include in the volume, as well as their order, because he needed to separate the color-saturated plates "by intervals of a different character." "These pages serve only as an accompaniment to my colors, as asters add to the composition of a bouquet of more important flowers," he wrote in the introductory paragraph. Paradoxically, and even though Matisse's handwriting is elegant and perfectly legible, his statements are hard to read—the reason being the most unusual scale discrepancy between the size of the letters themselves and that of the book (with an average of twenty-five words on a page and a minimal margin). This is particularly striking in the few double pages that combine text and image: in these cases, one has to make an effort to wrench one's gaze from the mesmerizing rhythm of the color plate, whose control over us is thus even further enhanced.

Matisse-the-perfectionist did not like *Jazz* when it first came off the press in September 1947—despite the amazing length to which the printer had gone to satisfy all his demands, such as having a chemist research a new fixating medium for the gouache, looking for a particular brand of rubber, or searching throughout Europe for a special kind of violet hue. Matisse complained that the printed plates did not convey the sharpness of his scissor cut, the sculptural and sensual quality that he cherished in his original paper cutouts. But soon he came to value *Jazz* as much as he had his Mallarmé volume—and rightly so, for, just as his first book had done, his passionate work on *Jazz* had opened up a new chapter in his life: the stunning adventure, during his last ten years, of the paper cutouts, for which Matisse used scissors rather than a brush or a pencil. Some of these late works, such as *The Flowing Hair* and *Memory of Oceania*, directly allude to plates of the Mallarmé book, confirming once more the sea change that this first volume, out of the dozen created by Matisse, represented in his oeuvre.

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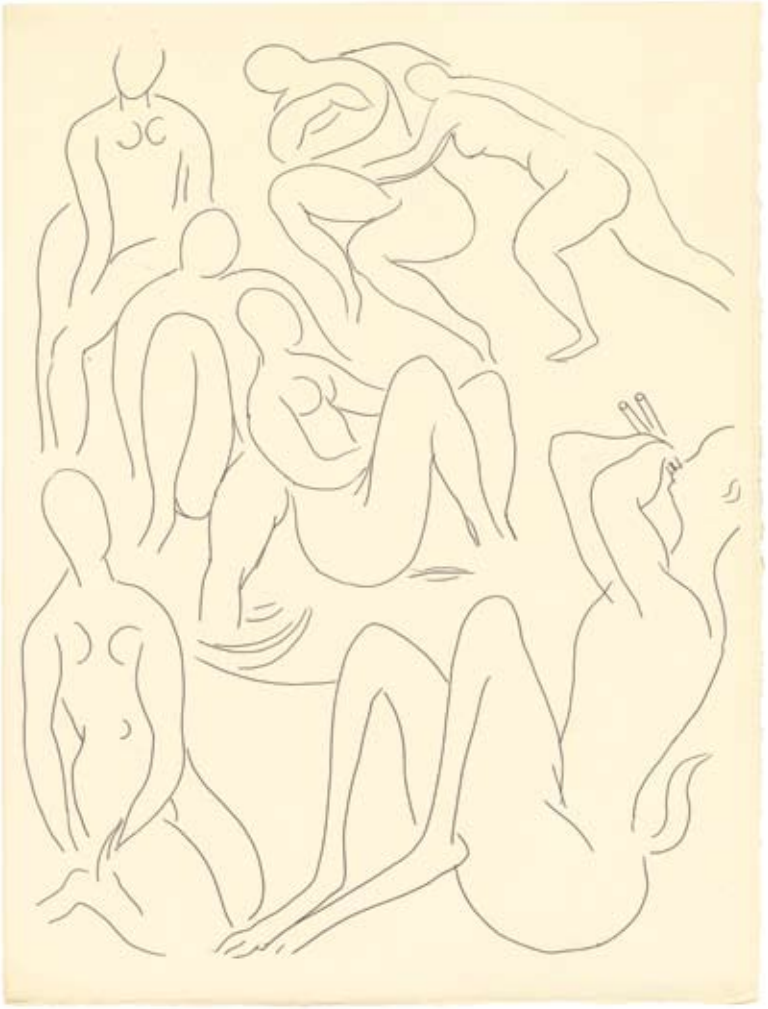

Untitled (Nymphs and faun: the concert), page 77, from *Les Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé*, 1932, etching, 13⅛" x 9⅘".