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**LEADERS & SUCCESS**[E-mail](#) | [Print](#) | [License](#) | [Republish](#) | [Post](#)**Henri Matisse, A Step Ahead**

**BY MARY O'NEILL**  
FOR INVESTOR'S  
BUSINESS DAILY

Posted 1/26/2009

His career began and ended  
on a sickbed.

Safely on track for a law  
career, Henri Matisse at age  
21 was fortuitously struck  
with appendicitis.

During his long  
convalescence, his mother  
brought him a paint box to  
pass the time, which was "a  
kind of paradise," he later  
wrote. "It was as if I had been called. Henceforth, I did not lead my life. It led me."

The paint box led Matisse, to his father's chagrin, to drop his clerk position in favor of art school in Paris. The relatively late start — he was 26 for his first exhibition — proved the least obstacle to his greatness.

Matisse created a new dialect in art, one suited for a new century, and every difficulty — public derision, world wars, serious illness — seemed only to renew his instincts. Born in 1869 in northern France, Matisse remained nimble and groundbreaking through six decades.

In 1905, at the prestigious Salon d'Automne in Paris, critics and the public were scandalized by a group of paintings in room No. 7, thereafter known as the cage. Here was an explosion of color so garish, those responsible were dubbed fauves, or wild beasts. One of the artists agreed, declaring that their colors were like "sticks of dynamite." Visitors, according to witness Gertrude Stein, scratched at the canvases in disgust. At the helm of this color riot was the mild-mannered Matisse.

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The derision was not limited to Europe. The Armory Show was a 1913 exhibition that introduced modern art to America and prompted ex-President Teddy Roosevelt to coin the phrase "lunatic fringe." According to Hilary Spurling in "Matisse the Master," "Henri Matisse was generally agreed to be the ringleader in this den of lewdness, profanity and pollution. The New York Times famously pronounced his works ugly, coarse, narrow and revolting in their inhumanity."

When the Armory Show arrived in Chicago from New York, the crowd wreaked its revulsion on Matisse's "Blue Nude." Whether it was the unblended blue highlights, the knobby figure, the flattened perspective or the keyed-up red and green rhythms that so incensed people, they made their reactions clear. Unable to grab the original, the crowd burned a copy in effigy.

Fauvism, as Matisse's color revolution came to be known, was the first avant-garde movement of the 20th century, and it could not have occurred without the camera. By the turn of the century, photography could capture optical reality — what our eyes see — as well as (or better than) a painter could. Film also usurped any descriptive or documentary function that painting had.

Astute artists such as Matisse took these developments as a liberation. Rather than reproduce appearances, Matisse used shapes and colors, the basic elements of a picture, to convey his feelings. According to Spurling, "Emotion was his prime test of authenticity in painting."

This injection of emotion is evident in Matisse's iconic 1910 painting "Dance." Commissioned by an intrepid Russian collector, the 12-foot-wide work shows five nude figures holding hands, circling in an ecstatic gyration. The entire image — its massive size; the palette limited to the primaries of red, blue and green; the nudity; the economy of sinuous lines — was designed for the senses, to catapult viewers to a visceral state of pleasure. "Dance" hung in the entryway of the collector's Moscow palace, a primitive counter to the erudite world of the visitors it confronted.

Matisse and the Fauves recognized that a new century — which opened with Einstein redefining reality itself as relative — needed new ways to reach the modern citizen. Matisse wanted to create a harmonious refuge for the overstimulated — "a balm, a soothing influence on the mind, something akin to a good armchair," he said.

Oliver Shell, associate curator of European painting and sculpture at the Baltimore Museum of Art, told IBD: "Visual richness humanizes, especially when people are returning from war in pieces."

So Matisse staged a clever coup. He orchestrated intense colors and patterns in improbable combinations, but while using the most ordinary subjects — domestic interiors, goldfish, languorous women, airy windows. "Nothing mechanical," Matisse proclaimed.

John Elderfield, noted Matisse expert and curator emeritus at New York's Museum of Modern Art, told IBD: "His work is transformative. You feel a kind of shadow, a kind of pleasure. You feel that your worldview has been changed. Matisse's art is beautiful, strange and new."

Matisse achieved these expressive images through painstaking effort. His work ethic was notorious, and his letters convey struggles with "this confounded painting." He struck a seemingly effortless note of harmony between colors and shapes, but only by applying concentration and a keen understanding of how colors work together.

Although his art does not provoke the 21st-century viewer to violence, it does elicit astonishment.

Elderfield said: "His works are certainly not in-your-face, but they do ask you to make a move. Part of his aesthetic is to engage you. His art is actually very complex, changing all the time, and you keep coming back to ask more questions."

Matisse himself kept asking questions of art. With Fauvism established as the

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touchstone for subsequent movements, he moved on to new experiments with patterns — whorls and checkerboards and dots.

When vexed by a problem with line or shape, Matisse turned to sculpture to work out the solution. Though he considered himself foremost a painter, he used every means of expression he could; he was a costume designer, book illustrator, building planner and violinist.

Matisse's creative momentum was so strong, he cracked open a new art form on his deathbed.

After an emergency operation in 1941, Matisse was left bedridden and bored. Pining after the out-of-reach white ceiling and walls, he fixed a charcoal to the end of a fishing rod and started to draw.

Too weak to stand, he "painted" by cutting mural-sized shapes from colored paper, which assistants then pinned to the walls. Matisse soon realized that the vivid cutouts epitomized his vision, especially on a room-sized scale. The discovery rejuvenated him, extended his life by more than a decade and led to his final triumphs. "It seems to me that I am in a second life," he wrote.

### Answering The Call

In 1947, one of his former models, now turned nun, asked the artist to help design a chapel for her convent by the French Riviera. The Chapel of the Rosary project harnessed all of the 78-year-old's mastery; he created the interior design, stained-glass windows, crucifix, murals and even the priests' vestments.

"Avant-garde is not necessarily the most cutting edge, but the way a life is lived," said Shell. "He was vigorous even in a wheelchair, always reinventing himself."

Photographs show Matisse in 1954, his last year, working on massive cutouts from bed, pieces that now hang in museums across the world. "What I did before this illness, before this operation," he wrote, "always had the feeling of too much effort; before this, I always lived with my belt tightened. What I created afterward represents me myself: free and detached."

Matisse's aim throughout his 60-year career was to deliver that same feeling to his viewers.

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