

Matisse's second visit to London and his collaboration with the 'Ballets Russes'*

AT the beginning of September 1919 Serge Diaghilev and Igor Stravinsky paid a visit to Matisse at his home in Issy-les-Moulineaux, outside Paris, that was to prove of critical importance, not only to the painter's employment during the succeeding three months but also to the direction subsequently taken by his work. The two Russians had come in order to propose to Matisse that he re-design the sets and costumes for *Le Chant du Rossignol*, a work that Diaghilev had already staged in 1914 in an operatic version by Igor Stravinsky with sets by Alexandre Benois. The idea was to present a new production at the Paris Opéra, set to a purely orchestral score by Stravinsky and with choreography by Léonide Massine. The scale of the challenge to Matisse cannot be overstressed: hitherto almost entirely an easel painter, he was now being offered his first large decorative commission. Its international context, its large budget and the Ballets Russes's close links with developments in contemporary art, all contributed to the significance of the project.

After some hesitation (typical of his prudent approach to critical moments in his career) Matisse decided to accept the challenge: as he told Pierre Courthion many years later: '*J'ai dit non, mollement. Et ils sont partis me laissant bien attendre. L'idée ne me quitta plus. Alors, la première fois que Diaghilev me parla du ballet, j'acceptai en me promettant de n'en faire qu'un seul.*'¹

On 13th September Matisse signed a first contract with Diaghilev: he was to receive ten thousand francs for the décor and costume designs, which were to be executed in Paris and sent to London to be made up.² In the end, however, it seemed essential for Matisse himself to come to London to work with the rest of the team, who had been in residence there since 1918. Having received an extra two thousand francs for this purpose, Matisse travelled to London and spent about three weeks there, between 12th October and the first few days of November.³ London was the city where he had spent his honeymoon in January 1898, his first trip outside France, at a period of great poverty and uncertainty.⁴ Twenty years later his circumstances had changed dramatically: he stayed at the Savoy Hotel, where Diaghilev and



1. *Matthew Stewart Prichard*,
by Henri Matisse. 1914.
Etching, 20 by 15 cm.
(Private collection).

Massine were also installed, and spent most of his time in the workshops of the Empire Theatre, Leicester Square, where the Ballets Russes had established themselves for the 1919 season (29th September to 20th December). This did not prevent him, however, from revisiting the museums, if only to gain inspiration for the work in hand: a few days after his arrival, he wrote to his wife that he was going to the Victoria and Albert Museum, '*une merveille, d'art chinois, persan, et indien*'.⁵ He also took the opportunity to look up Matthew Prichard (Fig 1), the Bergsonian philosopher and Byzantinist with whom he had become friends in Paris in 1909–14, as well as one of Prichard's disciples, William King, for whom he had designed a book plate in 1913.⁶ Inevitably, the weather was foggy and cold and Matisse had constantly to wear his overcoat, while commenting to his wife that it was considered elegant in London not to do so.⁷

*I should like to thank the following for helping to make this article possible: Barbara and Claude Duthuit, Wanda de Guébriant, Richard Shone, Hilary Spurling and Sir Stephen Tumim. Unless stated to the contrary, all the quotations from Matisse's letters, or from letters to Matisse, are from the Archives Matisse, Paris. Reproductions are, © Succession H. Matisse/D.A.C.S. London 'Les Héritiers Matisse'. The article was translated by Caroline Beamish.

¹H. MATISSE, with P. COURTHION: *Bavardages*, unpublished typescript, 1942, with corrections in Matisse's own hand (Archives Matisse, Paris). Diaghilev and Stravinsky's visit was followed, just before rehearsals began, by one from Massine to Matisse in Nice (L. MASSINE: *My Life in Ballet*, London [1986], p.147).

²The contract is in the Archives Matisse, Paris.

³These dates can be inferred from the correspondence between the painter and his wife. The chronology is not absolutely clear, however, because his letters (the envelopes have not survived) are dated only with the day of the week. RICHARD SHONE ('Matisse in England and two English sitters', THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE, CXXXV [July 1993], p.480, note 8) suggests that the artist arrived in London on about 11th October. On 5th November the artist had just returned to Paris (see note 10 below). The dates proposed in this article are based on the contextual information given by Matisse in his letters, and on a few verifiable dates.

⁴'Mon premier voyage en Angleterre a été en 1898, quand je me suis marié. J'étais en voyage de

noces, et j'avais comme but de voir les Turner, dont Pisarro m'avait parlé. C'était au mois de janvier. J'allais dans les musées quand il faisait suffisamment clair' (*Bavardages*, cited at note 1 above).

⁵Letter dated 'Friday' [17th October 1919]. The next day he wrote again of having spent the whole day there, seeing '*des merveilles comme tapis de toutes sortes, cloisonnés, costumes, tapis et faïences*' (letter dated 'Saturday' [18th October 1919]). Visits to 'different museums' are mentioned in passing by the set-painter Vladimir Polunin (v. POLUNIN: *The Continental Method of Scene Painting*, London [1927] p.61).

⁶Letter dated 'Saturday' [18th October 1918]. On Matthew Prichard see P. SCHNEIDER: *Matisse*, Paris [1986] pp.360 and 733–34, and A.H. BARR, JR.: *Matisse. His Art and his Public*, New York [1951] p.105; see also D. SOX: *Bachelors of Art. Edward Perry Warren and the Lewes House Brotherhood*, London [1991], and W.M. WHITEHILL: 'Some Correspondence of Matthew Stewart Prichard and Isabella Gardner', *Fenway Court*, Boston [1974], pp.14–29. Prichard, having spent the four years of the war in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany, was now working for the Government Committee on Prisoners in the House of Lords. William King became a specialist in English porcelain at the Victoria and Albert Museum in the 1920s.

⁷See letter of 18th October, cited above: 'Londres, qui est toujours plus ou moins dans le brouillard, n'est pas chaud. Aussi je mets constamment mon gros pardessus. Mais il est élégant de ne pas ne mettre – tel Prichard et Mr. King, que j'ai vus hier.'



2. The Chamberlain's costume, made by Marie Muelle in the atelier of Paul Poiret after designs by Henri Matisse. Embroidered satinised cotton, with motifs painted in ink and gouache. (Israel Museum, Jerusalem).

During this first stay in London Matisse designed the costumes and a model for the sets to be enlarged by the scene-painter Vladimir Polunin. He began the model on Tuesday 14th October and finished it the following Thursday.⁸ The next week he worked on the costume designs and corrected the colour distortions that had crept in while the set maquette was being enlarged.⁹ By Wednesday 5th November he had returned to Paris and drafted a new contract with Diaghilev in which he agreed to return to London to paint the stage curtain on condition that he be paid a thousand francs per week for the trip.¹⁰ He does not seem to have returned to London until 13th November,¹¹ making a sketch of the curtain design three days later.¹² He then transposed the sketch to full size, while supervising the making of the costumes and accessories.¹³ On 26th or 27th November he left permanently, first returning to Paris and then moving on to Nice. This was the end of his collaboration with the Diaghilev company, apart from a trip he made from Nice to Paris at the end of January 1920 to put the final touches to the costumes in Paul Poiret's workshop, before the ballet opened at the Opéra on 2nd February.¹⁴

In the final event Matisse did far more than his original contract had stipulated: he not only designed the costumes but took part personally in making them, painting some of



3. Study for the Chamberlain's costume, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, pen and ink with water-colour, 27 by 21 cm. (Private collection).

the large designs directly onto the fabric (Figs.3 and 2),¹⁵ he also designed all the accessories (Figs.4, 5 and 6), including the carved wooden pieces of jewellery, made large enough to be visible to the audience and to contribute to the all-over effect, and the make-up 'inspired by traditional Chinese masks';¹⁶ finally, he designed and painted the curtain.

Before describing the ups and downs of this project, we should briefly examine what we know of its results. Of the sets themselves there remain only a few photographs (Fig.9), some contemporary accounts and Matisse's letters and sketches. The over-riding colour was a turquoise-blue (Figs.13, 15 and 26), mentioned in a letter from the painter to his wife: '*L'ensemble est bleu turquoise, quatre colonnes dont les bases sont blanches, plafond blanc, tapis noir*'.¹⁷ Contemporary critics described 'vast panels of a magnificent blue-green, combining with the colours of the costumes – pink, emerald green,

⁸'J'ai commencé la maquette. J'espère que ça ira' (letter dated 'Tuesday' [14th October 1919]). 'Enfin ça y est, le décor est terminé (la maquette) et accepté (enchantés ils sont). Il ne reste plus qu'à le peindre en grand et faire les costumes, mais je crois que le principal est fait et que j'en sortirai proprement... Il y a cependant à faire un lit-estrade et 7 costumes, une boîte à rossignol j'ai fait le trone.' (letter dated 'Friday' [24th October 1919]).

⁹'Je me suis mis hier soir aux costumes' (Letter dated 'Saturday' [25th October 1919]); 'Je voudrais bien avoir fini mais je ne compte pas avant deux semaines' (Letter dated 'Monday' [27th October 1919]).

¹⁰Archives Matisse, Paris. The contract is quoted in full in C. GOERG: 'Un manteau de Matisse pour "Le Chant du Rossignol"', *Musées de Genève*, no.264 [April 1986], p.10.

¹¹See SHONE, loc. cit. at note 3 above, p.479, note 7, and p.480, note 8, quoting a letter from Vanessa Bell to Roger Fry indicating that Matisse was present at the opening night of *Parade*: Massine, Picasso, Satie and Cocteau's production was premiered on Friday 14th November at the Empire Theatre. For his letter to his wife the next day see note 44 below.

¹²See note 21 below.

¹³'Il se peut que demain samedi le rideau soit fini. Alors il y aura encore quelques accessoires à voir

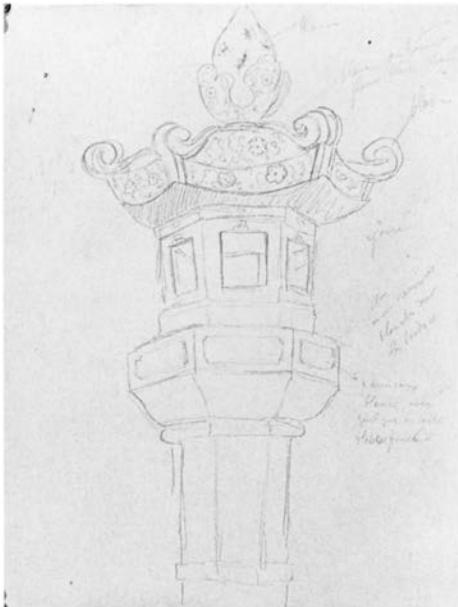
et je retournerai probablement mercredi ou jeudi' (letter dated Friday [21st November 1919], the last surviving letter written by Matisse from London).

¹⁴Matisse does not seem to have returned to London in January 1920, pace J. COWART, in *Henri Matisse. The Early Years in Nice, 1916–1930*, exh. cat., National Gallery, Washington [1986], p.25, and J. ELDERFIELD: *Henri Matisse. A Retrospective*, exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art, New York [1992] p.292.

¹⁵See V. BARKSY: *Matisse at the Ballet: Le Chant du Rossignol*, exh. cat., Israel Museum, Jerusalem [1991], p.XII and note 26, p.XVI and note 32. It seems that a number of other hands were involved in the painting. The artist closely supervised the last stages of the stitching of the costumes in the workshop of the wardrobe mistress Marie Muelle.

¹⁶See C. FAVELIN: 'Matisse décorateur de théâtre. Essai de reconstitution d'une conception scénographique', *Revue d'histoire des arts. L'Ecrit voir*, II [1988], p.58. According to Lydia Sokolova, however, who danced the part of Death, her make-up was devised and applied by Massine (L. SOKOLOVA: *Dancing for Diaghilev*, London [1960], pp.146–47).

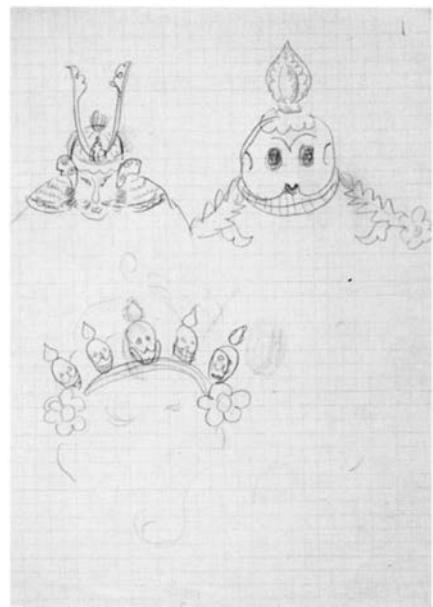
¹⁷Letter dated 'Monday' [27th October 1919].



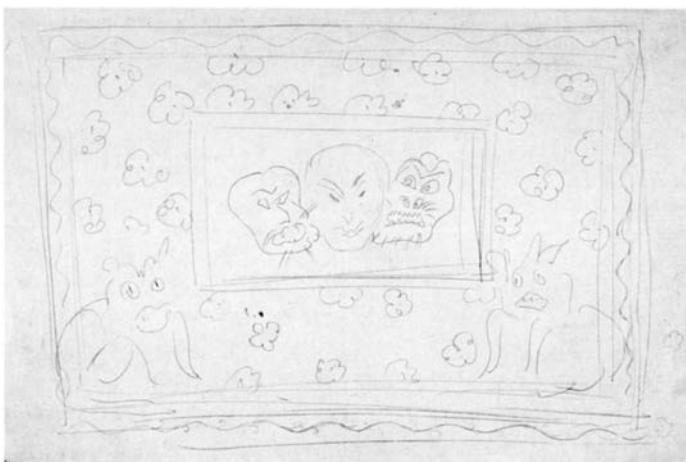
4. Study for a lantern, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, 28 by 22 cm. (Private collection).



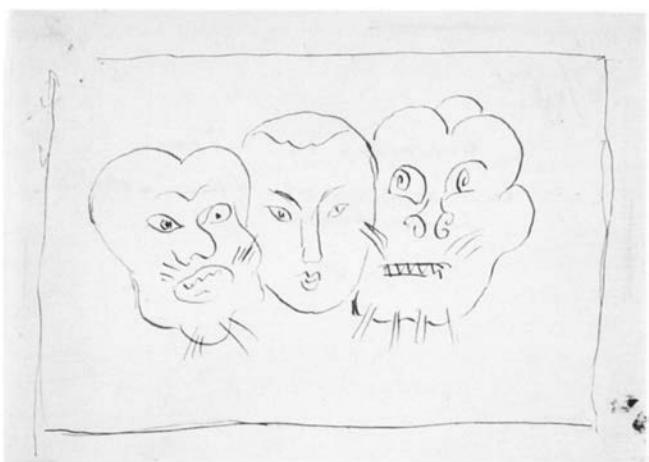
5. Study for the Nightingale, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pen and ink, 14.5 by 11.5 cm. (Private collection).



6. Sketch for jewellery, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil on squared paper, 22 by 17 cm. (Private collection).



7. Study for the front curtain, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, 48 by 31.5 cm. (Private collection).



8. Three masks, study for the central section of the front curtain, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, 10.2 by 15.7 cm. (Private collection).



9. Final scene of *Le Chant du Rossignol*, as performed in the Théâtre de l'Opéra, Paris, in the Spring of 1920. Photograph. (Private collection).



10. Courtesan's costume, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, pen and ink with water-colour, 27 by 21 cm. (Private collection).

yellow, white and blue – to look very Chinese'.¹⁸ The sets themselves were essentially non-representational, 'as stark and simple as Benois's designs for "Le Rossignol", the opera, had been extravagant and fussy', another critic approvingly remarked.¹⁹ The front curtain, on the other hand, of which several sketches survive (Figs.7 and 8), bore two brightly-coloured figures of Chinese griffins on either side of a central motif of three intertwined masks, outlined in black. With hindsight, one can see a structural similarity between this enormous coloured surface with its three stylised faces, drawn in outline, and a gouache cut-out such as the *Grande décoration aux masques* – termed by Matisse in 1952 his 'masterpiece'.²⁰ He wrote to his wife on 18th November 1919:

*Mes griffons ont au moins 3 m. de haut, quoiqu'assis. Ils ont la crinière verte, la poitrine rouge comme la large bordure, le corps jaune ocre. Le rectangle au milieu est blanc et les masques sont dessinés en noir. J'en ai fait une esquisse de 3m. que je rapporterai [i.e à Paris].*²¹

This contrast between flat areas of plain colour and black designs can be found in Coptic fabrics, of which the Victoria and Albert Museum possessed one of the finest collections in Europe.

A number of the costumes have been preserved (Figs.2, 11 and 17), and a set of preparatory drawings also survives. The

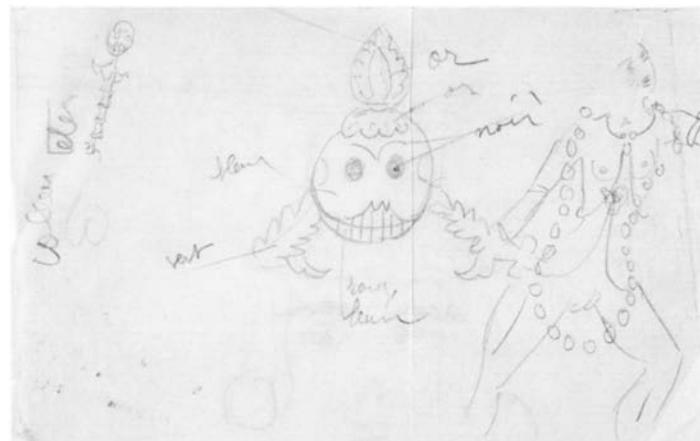
¹⁸H. PRUNIÈRES: *La Revue critique* [10th March 1920], quoted in FAVELIN, *loc. cit.* at note 16 above, p.58. Prunière's text was published in English in *The Chesterian*, IX, London, [September 1920], pp.271–74 (selectively quoted by BARSKY, *op. cit.* at note 15 above, p. X). Massine seems to have been mistaken in stating that the background colour of the set was white (MASSINE, *op. cit.* at note 1 above, p.147).

¹⁹J. BERNIER, in *Comoedia illustré* [15th February 1920], quoted in FAVELIN, *loc. cit.* at note 16 above, pp.58–60.

²⁰See Matisse's letter to his son Pierre of 12th November 1952, quoted by P. SCHNEI-



11. Costume of a mourner, made by Marie Muelle in the atelier of Paul Poiret after designs by Henri Matisse. 1919. Felt and velvet, 160 by 168 cm. (Musée d'art et d'histoire, Genève).



12. Study for the costume and accessories of Death, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, 21 by 13.5 cm. (Private collection).

costumes were organised around the static presence of the Emperor, who reclined throughout, dressed in black, on a bed-throne in the centre of the stage (Figs.13 and 14). Around him moved a shifting population of mandarins, warriors (Fig.16), mourners (Fig.11) and lamp-bearers, as well as the personifications of Death (Fig.12) and the nightingale (Fig.5). At the moment when the Emperor was miraculously restored to life by the nightingale's song, the bed suddenly rose up to a vertical position and an enormous bright red train printed with a golden dragon unrolled to fill the central area of the stage (Fig.9).²²

DER in Matisse, *Visages découverts. 1945–1954*, Paris [1996], pp.48–50. The comparison between the *Rossignol* curtain and the *Grande décoration aux masques* is made by BARSKY, *op. cit.* at note 15 above, p.XII.

²¹Letter from Matisse to his wife, dated 'Tuesday' [18th November 1919]. These were the colours of the preliminary sketch: for the curtain itself, Matisse jettisoned the yellow (see below).

²²MASSINE, *op. cit.* at note 1 above, p.147; see also SOKOLOVA, *op. cit.* at note 16 above, p.148.



13. Study for the Emperor's throne, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, pen and ink with water-colour, 24.5 by 18 cm. (Private collection).

15. Study for the dragon on the central medallion of the back stage curtain (see Fig.9), by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, pen and ink with water-colour on two sheets of stuck down cardboard, 27 by 25.5 cm. (Private collection).



592



14. Study for the Emperor, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, 27.6 by 21.7 cm. (Private collection).

16. Study for a Warrior, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, 22 by 17 cm. (Private collection).





17. Costume of a Mandarin, made by Marie Muelle at the atelier of Paul Poiret after designs by Henri Matisse. Satinised cotton decorated with gilded circles and floral patterns painted in ink. (Israel Museum, Jerusalem).

The costumes as a whole reveal two very different stylistic strands: the first has an anecdotal, orientalising flavour, exemplified by the emperor's large dragon motif (Fig.14), by the warriors, with their exotic patterned armour (Fig.16),²³ by the necklace of skulls worn by Death, based on traditional depictions of the goddess Kali with her necklace of human heads,²⁴ and by the 'Chinese' griffins on the curtain; the second is abstract and formal, as seen in the stylised garb of the mourners, based on the strong contrast between the white background and the sprinkling of Prussian blue geometric shapes (Figs.11 and 18); and in the mandarins' robes, on which startlingly free floral patterns had been painted by Matisse himself (Fig.17).²⁵

This polarity is repeated in the contrast between the purely abstract scenery and the back curtain, with another dragon motif (Fig.15) as well as the front curtain with its griffins and masks. It corresponds to two different modes of reference to the East: one is iconographic and linked to the ballet's subject; the other is formal, analogous to the way in which Matisse's paintings transformed the lessons he had absorbed from oriental art. When the painter explained to his wife that he was off to see the marvels of 'Chinese, Persian and Indian art' at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the adjectives were not chosen at random: Chinese influences (see Figs.22–25)

²³According to MASSINE these costumes were inspired by a Chinese suit of armour they had seen together in the Musée Guimet that autumn (Figs.22 and 23); *ibid.*, p.147, and see also R. BUCKLE: *Diaghilev*, London [1984], p.360. See also Figs.24 and 25.

²⁴SOKOLOVA describes her costume thus: 'I wore scarlet all-over tights, with a very uncomfortable brass waistcoat, suggesting the ribs of a skeleton. On my head was a black wig and a very painful head-dress of brass supporting a china ball on which a skull was painted. Round my neck hung a necklace of *papier-mâché* skulls.' (*op. cit.* at note 16 above, p.146).

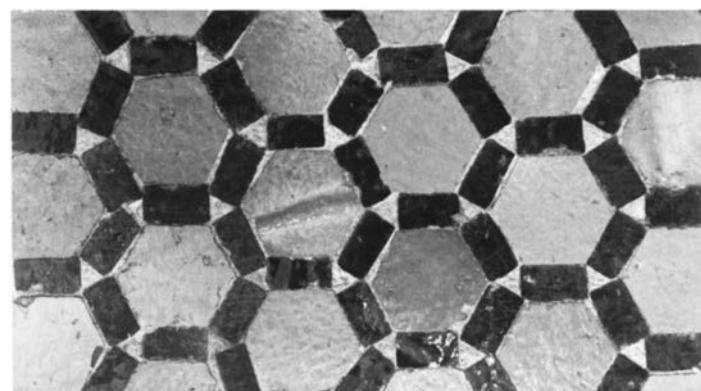
²⁵The costumes of the mourners were made of white felt printed with chevrons and triangles in midnight blue; the emperor was dressed in red velvet decorated with gold dragons. They were all made in the workshops of Paul Poiret (see B. KOCHNO: *Diaghilev et les Ballets Russes*, Paris [1973], pp. 142–43). A male 'mourner' costume is in the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva, donated by Jan and Marie-Anne Krugier (Fig.11; see GOERG, *op. cit.* at note 10 above, pp.7–11). Other costumes are in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem (Figs.2 and 17; see BARSKY, *op. cit.* at note 15 above, p.xx) and in the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.



18. Study for the costume of a mourner, by Henri Matisse. Brush and ink, 27 by 21 cm. (Private collection).



19. Study for a tree (stage prop), by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, 22 by 17 cm. (Private collection).



20. Fragment of ceramic mosaic, covered with turquoise-blue and manganese-purple enamels. From a mosque in Konia, Asia Minor. Turkish, 13th century. 25.4 by 16.5 cm. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London).



21. Study for a warrior for the Opera *Le Rossignol*, by Alexandre Benois. 1914. Pencil, pen and ink with water-colour. (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).



22. Warrior, copy after a Chinese sculpture in the Musée Guimet, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, 22 by 17 cm. (Private collection).



23. *The celestial king (loka pala)*. Central Asia, eighth century. Polychromed wood with gilded arms, 99 by 75 by 32.2 cm. (Musée Guimet, Paris).

pervade the whole concept of *Le Chant du Rossignol*, with its setting at the Chinese Emperor's court. Indian influences can be found in Matisse's sketches for the artificial trees that were originally to be part of the scenery (Fig.19); and in the image of Death/Kali, which inspired not only some anecdotal sketches derived from Indian sculpture, but also some curious variations on the theme of sex and death (Fig.12), extremely unusual in Matisse's work and much closer to Georges Bataille's obsessional writings on the subject ten years later.²⁶ And it is tempting to see reminiscences of Persian and Seljuk pottery (Fig.20) in Matisse's colours, particularly in the juxtaposition of turquoise with the great expanse of Prussian blue floor.

The overall solution, however, was rather tentative, combining some rather conventional elements with others that are astonishingly free and original. As Corine Flavelin has suggested, this may be partly due to the contradictory character of the pre-existing designs for *Le Chant du Rossignol*: Benois's extravagantly oriental décor for the 1914 operatic version (Fig.21), on the one hand, directly descended from Bakst's brilliant designs for *Scheherazade*, *The Firebird*, and *Egyptian Nights*; and, on the other hand, the Futurist designs of Fortunato Depero, who had been approached by Diaghilev in 1916–17 for a first, unrealised project for the ballet. Matisse seems to have opted for a middle course, a 'deliberate simplicity' of overall effect, in which a 'rigorous placing of the colours' prevails, while echoes of pastiche orientalism remain in the accessories and costumes.²⁷ Contemporary criticism reflects this ambiguity, some critics emphasising Matisse's break with Benois's orientalism, a

'renunciation in perfect harmony with the music he is designing for', others reacting strongly to the 'far-Eastern quality of the work' and its 'typically Chinese harmonies'.²⁸

There are, however, more fundamental aspects to these uncertainties and contradictions, and by following the troubled evolution of the project some answers will become apparent.

Initially, the prospect of working for Diaghilev filled Matisse with excitement. Since the first productions of the Ballets Russes in Paris in 1910, he had admired their explosive colour, even if he felt that it was insufficiently structured.²⁹ Here was an opportunity to work with a team with whom he was in aesthetic sympathy, to project his personal ideas about decoration on a large three-dimensional scale and to impose on stage design the same formal rigour he aimed for in his paintings. Matisse wrote revealingly to his wife that he intended to handle the décor 'like one of his paintings': this was in perfect conformity with his aesthetic principles, according to which artistic quality had nothing to do with any hierarchy between fine and applied art, but depended on the artist's work being adequate to its purpose. He wrote of his hopes to equal the success of Derain and Picasso, and of the appreciative kindness of Diaghilev and Massine:

Me voilà en plein travail. Je crois que le ballet sera bien. Aussi bien, j'espère, que celui de Derain qui est tout à fait bien et obtient un très gros succès qui se reproduira sûrement à Paris. Celui de Picasso, quoi [que] plus raffiné, est moins bien établi, beaucoup moins réussi pour l'ensemble.

Je suis à ma maquette que je conduis lentement comme un de mes

²⁶G. BATAILLE: 'Dictionnaire critique: Kali', *Documents*, VI [1930], p.368: 'Kali est la déesse de l'épouvante, de la destruction, de la nuit et du chaos. Elle est la patronne du choléra, des cimetières, des voleurs et des prostituées. Elle est représentée ornée d'un collier de têtes humaines coupées, sa ceinture est faite d'une frange d'avant-bras humains.'

²⁷FAVELIN, loc. cit. at note 16 above, pp.52–54. see also J.H. NEFF: *Matisse Paper Cut-Outs*, exh. cat., Saint Louis and Detroit [1977], pp.84–85.

²⁸BERNIER and PRUNIÈRES, cited at notes 18 and 19 above. R.C. HANSEN (*Scenic and Costume Design for the Ballets Russes*, Ann Arbor [1985], p.122) links the 'simplification in line and colour' in Matisse's work with the 'new classicism' characteristic of the Ballets Russes between 1919 and 1923.

²⁹See his remarks to Gaston Diehl, 1945, in H. MATISSE: *Ecrits et propos sur l'art*, Paris [1986], pp.200 and 205.

tableaux. Diaghilev et Massine sont très gentils pour moi et paraissent m'estimer beaucoup et être touchés par la conscience que j'apporte à mon travail.³⁰

Yet, in spite of these moments of relative euphoria, Matisse's dominant emotions while working on *Le Chant du Rossignol* were distress, anger and dissatisfaction – so extreme that he would be left with a lasting feeling of failure.³¹ Most of the time he could find no words strong enough to express his state of mind, which was dominated first by fear, then by irritation at his inability to impose his views effectively on the team. On his first day in London, he described himself as 'épouvanté', unable to understand why he had accepted the commission.³² The short, staccato sentences of the letters he wrote almost daily to his wife speak for themselves:

*J'ai les foies, depuis que je suis arrivé. Hier, je me souvenais d'un état semblable. C'était en arrivant au Maroc, où il pleuvait depuis un mois. Nous nous y trouvions comme perdus. Je suis ainsi. Tout le monde est gentil pour moi, et attend beaucoup de moi. J'ai la frousse. Aussi tôt que le décor sera décidé – dans quelques jours – je serai à vous. En attendant, je n'ai pas trop de tête pour me sortir du pétin où je suis. Si je n'avais pas pris l'habitude de l'effort, je filerais de l'hôtel à l'anglaise. Mais je veux en sortir autrement, en jurant que jamais plus je ne recommencerais. C'est ce que je dis tous les jours à Diaghilev, à 3 heures, quand conseil [sic] à l'atelier des décors pour décider du ton du décor.*³³

Matisse's anxieties had many causes. Above all there was the need to measure up to some very powerful rivals. Picasso was first on the list, not so much for his most recent designs for the Ballets Russes, *Le Tricorne*, as for his great *succès de scandale* of the immediate post-war period, *Parade*, which was being performed in London for the first time during Matisse's stay. He wrote of it with a hostility that stemmed directly from his own distress:

*Je vois ici les Ballets. Ils sont voués à la mort car le fond est dégoûtant, et les cubistes, Picasso et Derain, n'auront rien fait pour le faire durer, au contraire. Le succès de Parade, qui n'était pas très franc car il y avait beaucoup de claqué amicale, commence à baisser. Les Anglais ne protestent pas mais ne disent rien et ne viennent pas. La salle est moins remplie à chaque nouvelle séance.*³⁴

But there was something more serious at stake than latent rivalries between the stars of the Parisian avant-garde. For Matisse this large task was a test of his fundamental aesthetic principles based on the notion of decoration. Was he capable of producing a multifaceted ensemble – scenery, costumes, accessories – which would retain the pictorial intensity of great art? Was teamwork compatible with the realisation of a coherent and artistically honest piece of work? Could the overall quality of an image, based on an equilibrium between coloured surfaces, be achieved when the painted surfaces

³⁰Letter to his wife, dated 'Friday' [17th October 1919]. Derain's designs were for *La Boutique fantasque* (music by Rossini and choreography by Massine), premiered in London on 5th June 1919. Picasso's designs for *Le Tricorne* (music by Manuel de Falla, choreography by Massine), premiered on 11th July 1919 in London, had very classical sets and costumes, in complete contrast to *Parade* (premiered Paris, May 1917), staged for the first time in London on 14th November 1919.

³¹In his memoirs, Vladimir Polunin mentions 'alternating periods of depression and exultation' (POLUNIN, *op. cit.* at note 5 above, p.61). In Matisse's correspondence depression seems by far the dominant mood.

³²'Me voilà à Londres depuis bientôt 24 heures, et j'en suis épouvanté... Qu'est-ce que j'ai fait en acceptant ces décors? J'ai un cafard noir' (Letter to his wife dated 'Monday' [13th October 1919]).

³³Letter to his wife dated 'Wednesday' [15th October 1919].

³⁴Letter to his wife dated 'Friday' [21st November 1919].



24. Lion, copied after a Chinese sculpture in the Musée Guimet, Paris, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, 27.6 by 21.7 cm. (Private collection).



25. The Salles de la Chine et du Japon in the Musée Guimet before 1924, showing two Chinese lion statues. Photograph. (Musée Guimet, Paris).

were so vast, the overall effect complicated by interaction with moving costumes? The painter was directly and urgently confronted by all these questions. He did not have the freedom he had had in 1909–10 when devising the large decorative paintings, *La Danse* and *La Musique* for the staircase in Sergei Shchukin's palace in Moscow: this time he had to discuss each stage with Diaghilev and Massine, who met every day to inspect the progress of the designs; and he had to adapt his pace of work to the hectic rhythm of the team:

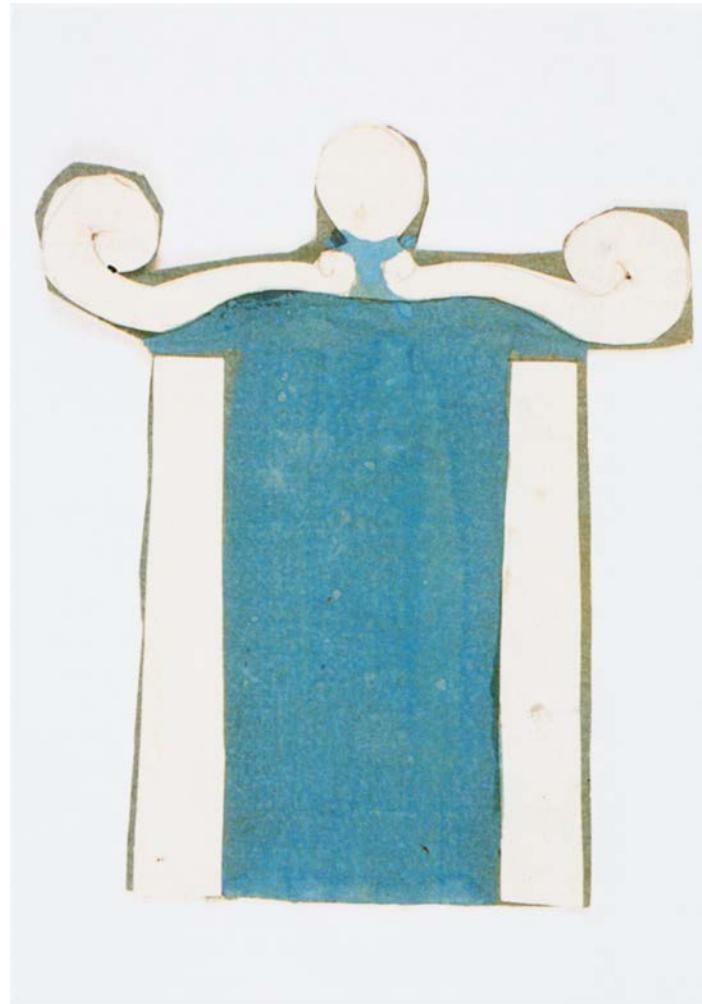
*J'ai commencé ma journée à 9 heures et je la termine à minuit. Cette nuit, à 1 h. $\frac{1}{2}$. Hier soir, on a essayé un fragment de décor au théâtre pour la couleur d'ensemble. Ce qui faisait bien dans ma maquette fait mal au théâtre. Alors on a passé jusqu'à 1 h. $\frac{1}{2}$ du matin à en causer. Vous n'avez pas une idée de ce que c'est que les ballets russes. On n'y rigole pas du tout. C'est une administration où tout le monde ne pense qu'à son travail. Je ne me serais jamais douté de cela.*³⁵

One of the fundamental problems was the definition of the overall chromatic effect. Matisse chose the colours while he was working on his small maquette of 50 cm. wide, which he called his 'petit théâtre' – and in daylight. Probably for the first time in his life, he used a 'cut out' technique, cutting the shapes of his design in sheets of paper already painted in gouache, and then pasted (Fig.26). But the balance of the colours was altered by the transfer to full-sized sets in artificial light, as he observes later in the same letter: '*Ce qui fait bien le jour fait mal la nuit et réciproquement*'. The solution was to install electric light in the model theatre.³⁶

Another difficulty was the interaction between the scenery and the costumes: Matisse was painting in dominant hues of turquoise blue against a black floor; once the turquoise had gone up on the walls, however, the black floor took on a noticeably red tinge, while the painter was determined to reserve red for the Emperor's train unfurling on the stage during the last scene. This led him to change the floor colour from black to Prussian blue, which produced the same impression but with no secondary red effect.³⁷

A more general problem was posed by the intrinsically mobile character of costumes: Matisse had to reconcile a pictorial structure composed '*comme un tableau immobile*' – blocks of fixed colour generating an internal dynamic – with the scenic fluidity arising from the movements of the dancers, the coloured elements of their costumes moving to and fro according to the choreographer's requirements, rather than the painter's.³⁸

Once again the solution to the problem was not entirely satisfactory. Instead of taking this aspect of stage design fully into account, Matisse simply tried to reduce its impact. He insisted on a series of motionless tableaux, particularly around the character of the Emperor who was as much an element of the scenery as of the choreography. Massine agreed to condemn the figure of the Emperor to semi-



26. Study for the back wall in *Chant de Rossignol*, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil and gouache on paper, cut-out and pasted, 16.3 by 13.9 cm. (Private collection).

paralysis throughout the ballet, and to a frontality that blurred any three-dimensional character he might have, reinforcing his function as part of the design. Matisse later acknowledged the sympathetic help he had received from Massine,³⁹ who himself wrote enthusiastically of the collaboration in his memoirs:

Matisse had designed it [the magnificent vermillion lining of the Emperor's mantle] as an integral part of the spectacle. In this formalised Oriental fantasy, in which I tried to imitate the tiny, restrained movements which I had seen on Chinese paintings on silk and on lacquered screens, I worked closely with Matisse to create a fusion of costumes, décor and choreography, and I found this ballet one of my most successful efforts at collaboration with a designer.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the result seems to have lacked the multi-directional dynamism to be expected from a choreographed

³⁵Letters to his wife dated 'Wednesday' [15th October 1919], and 'Tuesday' [28th October 1919], the latter complaining of delays because the man dealing with the costumier was ill.

³⁶'J'avais même mis une petite lampe électrique dans le haut de ma petite maquette, de façon de ne pas avoir imprévu' (*Bavardages*, quoted in SCHNEIDER, *op. cit.* at note 20 above, p.624). See also the letter to his wife dated 'Saturday' [18th October 1919]: 'Je vais en ce moment travailler et assister à la pose de l'électricité dans ma maquette'. The decision to work on a maquette was strongly criticised by Polunin, and attributed by him to Matisse's lack of experience in the theatre (POLUNIN, *op. cit.* at note 5 above, p.61).

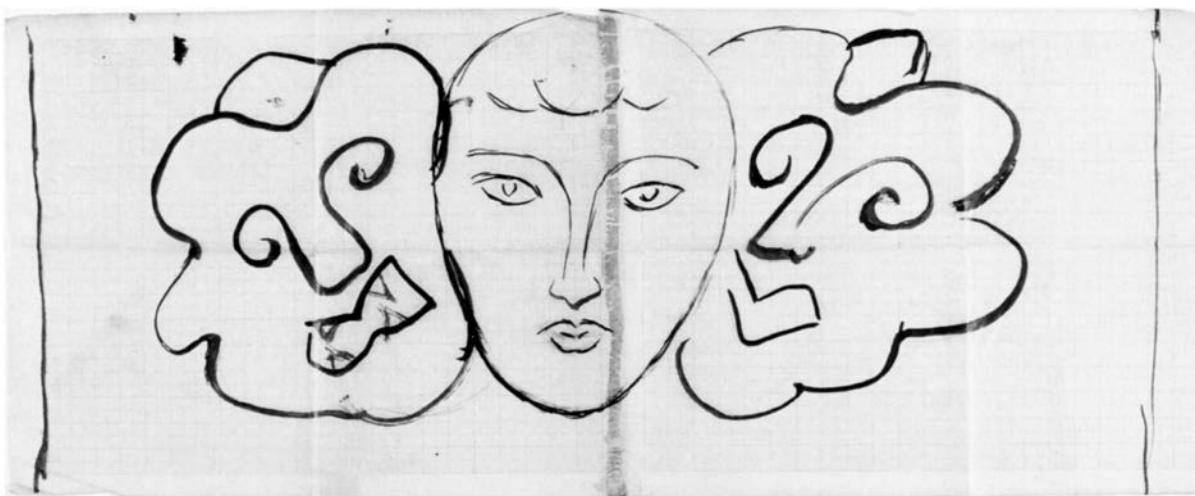
³⁷Prussian blue required aniline which was unobtainable in London, and Matisse had to ask his wife to send him some from Paris: 'Or, il n'y en a pas un grain ici. Ne pourriez-vous pas demander à Desjardin s'il ne connaît pas un chimiste qui pourrait dire où, à Paris, on peu trouver de la ligne d'aniline bleue de Prusse. Je pense qu'elle doit être en poudre, c'est pour peindre

une toile, je vous écrirai dans ma prochaine lettre sous quelle forme il la faut. Demandez toujours à Desjardin. Si on n'en a pas, je serai très ennuié car, dans mon ensemble, le noir fait rouge. Et j'ai besoin [de] ménager ce [rouge] pour le costume de l'empereur'; letter to his wife dated 'Monday' [27th October 1919]. GOERG (*op. cit.* at note 10 above, p.9), and BARSKY (*op. cit.* at note 15 above, p.x and note 22) both mention this point.

³⁸'Un peintre conçoit un décor comme un tableau immobile. Il place une teinte à un point donné parce qu'elle joue d'une façon voulue avec les teintes voisines. Et puis le chorégraphe a vite fait de bouleverser tout cela' (interview with L'Eclaireur de Nice et du Sud-Est, on the subject of the ballet *Rouge et Noir*, 11th May 1939, quoted in FAVELIN, *op. cit.* at note 15 above, p.55).

³⁹'J'ai été très aidé par le chorégraphe, Massine, qui a très bien compris mon idée' (*Bavardages*, cited at note 1 above).

⁴⁰MASSINE, *op. cit.* at note 1 above, pp.147–48.



27. Three masks, study for the central medallion of the front curtain, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Brush and ink on two squared sheets, pasted together, 121 by 47 cm. (Private collection).

work, one which Matisse had been able to capture in his painting *La Danse* of 1910. As Raymond Cogniat was later to observe, the ballet gave a somewhat static impression, presenting a series of *tableaux vivants* to the detriment of any real choreography.⁴¹ According to Boris Kochno, Diaghilev himself attributed the final failure of *Le Chant du Rossignol* to Massine's 'hermetic choreography'.⁴²

Matisse returned to Paris in a state of deep dissatisfaction after his first visit, and it was with great reluctance that he agreed to return to London in mid-November to undertake the curtain design. If he continued against all the odds, it was out of professionalism and social necessity: the comparison with Derain and Picasso was now inevitable, and to abandon the project at this stage would be a serious mark against him;⁴³ but this did not alter his conviction that all this was 'wasted time'. He repeated this to his wife before he had even started on the curtain:

*Me revoilà donc à Londres. Mais bien indécis. Je me suis trouvé hier matin devant mon décor, absolument indifférent, et hier soir, j'étais tout à fait décidé à lâcher . . . Je ne vois pas beaucoup le moyen de m'en sortir, de ce décor. Bien sincèrement, je ferai mieux de lâcher. Le temps perdu est perdu. Mais, pour l'argent, je l'aurai vite rattrapé. Je sais que ce que je vous dis va vous ennuyer, mais [à] qui voulez-vous que j'en parle?*⁴⁴

The following day he resolved to tell Diaghilev that he was quitting the project,⁴⁵ but he had reckoned without the director's negotiating skills. At the right psychological moment, Diaghilev neatly switched the situation to his own advantage, using a well-judged mixture of threats and blandishments:

Diaghilev m'a aidé si bien qu'il va y avoir un rideau qui me dégoûte. Je lui ai déclaré que je ne pouvais plus rien faire – dimanche, comme je l'avais écrit. Il m'a dit que c'était une perte énorme pour lui et qu'il pouvait me demander des dommages-intérêts, que les contrats étaient

*faits avec un ballet décoré par Matisse et qu'il avait montré l'importance de mon nom etc., etc.: qu'il allait me demander 500,000 F. de dommages-intérêts. J'ai ri et je lui ai dit: 'Et vous me payez 10,000 pour cela. C'est honteux'. Il m'a dit: 'C'est impossible de me lâcher. Qu'est-ce qu'il y a qui ne va pas?'. Il m'a donné un crayon, du papier, et nous avons fait le rideau ensemble, et me voilà reparti.*⁴⁶

So Matisse started work on the curtain, making innumerable drawings in his sketchbooks and on various sheets of paper (Figs.27 and 28). In this context the question of choreography and movement did not arise, but the problems of scale and lighting remained. He decided to work to a larger scale than the model he had used for the sets – this time making a sketch three metres wide. He reduced the range of colours in order to limit distortion to a minimum, and resolved to paint the real curtain himself, with Polunin's assistance.⁴⁷ The effort was exhausting, and he was all too aware that the idea of a restricted colour range, in his opinion the only possible solution, would not please Diaghilev.

*Je viens de rentrer de l'atelier bien fatigué. 8 h. de travail debout ou courbé en deux, plutôt. Le rideau est près d'être fini. Je n'ai pas suivi l'esquisse pour les couleurs. Je crains que Diaghilev le trouve insuffisant. Il est très bien dessiné. Mais il ne doit pas y avoir autant de couleurs que Diaghilev en désire. C'est un homme qui ne sent rien, et il a des idées préconçues. Il veut de l'or, il veut faire riche, avec de l'or. Il faut que ça soit Ballet russe. Il a peur qu'on dise à Paris qu'il n'a plus le sou. Il m'a même entrepris hier longuement à ce sujet. Il voudrait commencer la saison par le Rossignol parce que ça sera riche. Le ballet de Picasso est pauvre, celui de Derain est vulgaire (il ne l'a pas dit comme ça) et le mien sera riche. Je suppose qu'il changera d'avis quand il verra ce rideau car il n'y a pas autant de rouge qu'il le voudrait et je crois qu'il n'y aura pas de jaune. Il y aura probablement blanc, noir, vert et rouge.*⁴⁸

Although the work was finally accomplished, Matisse's sec-

⁴¹R. COGNIAT: 'Henri Matisse et le théâtre', *Le Point*, XXXI [July 1939], p.46. FAVELIN (*loc. cit.* at note 16 above, p.54) quotes a contemporary reference to the groupings as forming a 'bloc avec le décor', and SOKOLOVA (*op. cit.* at note 16 above, p.147) remembers the men in 'flat friezes, their bodies . . . packed tight and knitted close together', suggesting 'the grotesque combinations of figures on carved ivory boxes'.

⁴²KOCHNO, *op. cit.* at note 25 above, p.138. Diaghilev reproached Massine for having 'adopté le principe d'imposer à la danse un rythme indépendant de celui de la musique', conveying the impression that the dancers were simply under-rehearsed.

⁴³Conscious competition between Matisse and Derain and Picasso is cited in this context by BARR, *op. cit.* at note 6 above, p.197. Picasso's stage curtain had been one of the most controversial elements in *Parade*.

⁴⁴Letter to his wife dated 'Saturday' [15th November 1919]. Matisse did in fact confide in Prichard, as he says later in the same letter and, for a second visit to him, see letter dated 'Friday' [21st November 1919].

⁴⁵Letter to his wife dated 'Sunday midday' [16th November 1919]: 'Il est entendu qu'ensuite [after lunch], nous allons voir mon décor. C'est là que je vais faire ma déclaration à Diaghilev . . . Je pense que vous approuverez ma façon d'en terminer avec cette affaire qui empêche mon existence.'

⁴⁶Letter to his wife dated 'Monday' [17th November 1919].

⁴⁷POLUNIN, *op. cit.* at note 5 above, p.62.

⁴⁸Letter to his wife dated 'Friday' [21st November 1919].

ond stay in London did nothing to alter his view: he could see no satisfactory outcome to his ordeal and felt that the experience was a failure, which he attributed to the Ballets' lack of professional conscience: '*Il y a un manque de sincérité dans tout cela et ils sont tellement sans conscience qu'ils (les auteurs) ne s'en aperçoivent même pas*', he remarked later in the same letter – a heavy reproach indeed, when we consider how important the concepts of sincerity and critical conscience had always been for him.⁴⁹ This unhappy episode culminated in the final fiasco of the production itself, which was a failure both in 1920,⁵⁰ and when re-choreographed by Balanchine in 1925.⁵¹

In his anger and distress, Matisse cast Diaghilev in the rôle of scapegoat, attributing responsibilities to the impresario which were partly his own. Given his acute critical sensibility, Matisse must have been aware of the limits he himself had reached – all the more so since, while he was working on his sets, an exhibition of his recent paintings was being held at the Leicester Galleries in Leicester Square, very close to the Empire Theatre. His paintings, shown alongside sculpture by Maillol, met with resounding commercial and critical success,⁵² a 'consolation' for his torments that Matisse mentions repeatedly in his letters.⁵³ His bitterness about the Ballets Russes was increased by the fact that neither Diaghilev nor Massine seemed in the least interested in the exhibition, and a week after the opening still had not been to see it.⁵⁴

The *Chant du Rossignol* episode may have played a crucial rôle in directing Matisse towards that 'true painting' for which he was already longing at the beginning of 1918 – the reverse, in his mind, of the grand decorative schemes (with their utopian aspects) of his pre-war period.⁵⁵ While his theatrical misadventure must have dealt a great blow to Matisse's pride, he had happy memories of the success of the small paintings done in 1918–19, and it was these that he now began to develop, shedding the experimental aspects they had possessed at the outset. Henceforth he was to concentrate on paintings of modest size, producing them in abundance,⁵⁶ and thereby distancing himself from some of the ambitions he had entertained in the 1910s, as if these had

been laid under an interdict by his unhappy experience in London.

Nine years later, in 1928, when the fearless Diaghilev invited him to repeat the experience with a newly-designed revival of *Schéhérazade*, the ballet that had launched the Ballets Russes in June 1910, Matisse refused at once, on the grounds that it would 'prevent him from concentrating on his painting'.⁵⁷ The impresario did all he could to promote the 'Matissian' orientalism of the project, describing it in such a way as to suggest a ready-made vehicle for one of his odalisques.

*Commençons par Schéhérazade, ce qui est plus pressé car je veux la donner fin décembre à Londres, ce qui fait que j'ai besoin d'avoir les esquisses vers le 1er novembre . . . Il s'agit donc de l'esquisse du décor qui représente, comme vous le savez, un harem persan. Il est couvert de riches étoffes, il peut y avoir une fenêtre donnant dans le jardin (mais pas obligatoirement). Trois portes, peut-être avec des grilles en or, sont indispensables pour l'entrée des trois groupes de nègres . . . Tout le tableau d'une richesse éclatante de couleurs et éclairé de préférence par la lumière blanche, pour ne pas déranger les couleurs des costumes . . . Je ne puis pas vous exprimer à quel point je suis heureux de parler avec vous de cette question et combien je serai ravi de votre collaboration au ballet russe. Nous vous aimons depuis des années et nous nous considérons au premier rang des admirateurs russes, que vous avez dans un nombre illimité.*⁵⁸

In spite of these blandishments, Matisse did not vacillate for an instant.

It was not until after the success of his large *La Danse*, executed for Barnes between 1931 and 1933, that Matisse reconsidered the possibility of doing more designing for the stage,⁵⁹ with encouragement from Massine, who had visited the artist in his studio and had been impressed by the similarity of the work in progress to the 'vast mural in motion' he himself was planning.⁶⁰ A few years later, in 1937, Matisse started working on his new project, *Rouge et Noir*, later called *L'Etrange Farandole*, choreographed by Massine to a score based on Shostakovich's first symphony.⁶¹ It was for the new

⁴⁹See, for example, his letter of 1898 from Brittany (Kervilahène) to a painter friend called Roux: 'Comme il n'y a aujourd'hui comme de tous les temps que les personnalités qui comptent, c'est surtout à la sincérité qu'il faut viser', and another of 1911 to his wife from Moscow: 'Je vois que le naturel et la sincérité est encore ce qu'il y a de plus éloquent' (letter dated 'Tuesday', Russian postmark of 25th October).

⁵⁰See BUCKLE, *op. cit.* at note 23 above, p.362, and FAVELIN, *loc. cit.* at note 16 above, p.60. Favelin, however, quotes a number of press accounts that are favourable to Matisse's sets and costumes. The painter could also take comfort from a letter written to him by an old painter friend, Albert Huyot: 'Je suis allé hier à l'Opéra et j'ai été absolument emballé par les décors pour le Chant du Rossignol. Je n'ai jamais compris aussi clairement la puissance expressive de la couleur en soi et dans ses rapports. . . J'avoue que la soirée d'hier me fait pénétrer plus profondément l'esprit de tes œuvres et les aimer davantage si possible' (letter of 3rd February 1920).

⁵¹See BUCKLE, *op. cit.* at note 23 above, p.455 and FAVELIN, *loc. cit.* at note 16 above, p.60. According to Alicia Markova, recorded by Buckle, Matisse made a last intervention in 1925, redesigning the costume of the Nightingale as a simple white leotard, decorated with brilliants and feathers. Buckle notes that the absence of a skirt was 'a startling innovation' for the period. Matisse used the same garment for all the costumes in *Rouge et Noir* in 1939 (see below).

⁵²The show (*Exhibition of Paintings by the Famous Artist Henri Matisse together with Sculptures by Maillol*) ran at the Leicester Galleries from 15th November to 15th December 1919. For its success, see SHONE, *loc. cit.* at note 3 above pp.480–81.

⁵³'J'ai été voir la Leicester Gallery, où j'ai appris qu'avant l'ouverture on avait vendu 4 petits paysages de Nice et une figure. J'ai été présenté à un monsieur qui m'a dit: "C'est moi qui ai acheté vos tableaux". Nous avons causé et il a encore acheté devant moi un paysage de Nice et une tête de Lorette . . . La rencontre de ce Mr ce matin m'a fait grand plaisir. Il m'a invité à déjeuner mardi. Il est très simple. J'ai cru me trouver devant quelqu'un de propre . . . Le marchand a été très content des peintures que je lui ai rapporté. Il va les placer seulement dans une semaine pour rafraîchir l'exposition' (letter dated 'Saturday' [15th November 1919]); 'Grand succès à l'exposition. Presque tout est vendu. Au moins 10. Grand succès de presse aussi. 3000 personnes au vernissage. C'est une consolation' (letter dated 'Monday' [17th November 1919]); 'Succès de l'exposition continue. Nouveaux achats. Directeur demande à Mme Vildrac d'envoyer nouveaux tableaux. Articles dans grands journaux très bons, excellents. Presque tout est vendu sauf les deux grands. Les 3 soeurs et n[ature] m[orte] au torse faites dernièrement. Les artistes de théâtre ont une grande considération pour moi. Je suis dans tous les journaux' (letter dated 'Tuesday' [18th November 1919]). See also the memoirs of a partner in the Leicester Galleries at the time, o. BROWN: *Exhibition: The Memoirs of Oliver Brown*, London [1968], p.65.

⁵⁴'Il [Diaghilev] n'a pas encore été voir mon exposition. Massine non plus. Comme je les intéresses, c'est pour mon nom qu'ils me veulent' (letter dated 'Tuesday' [18th November 1919]). 'Ils [Diaghilev and Massine] n'ont pas encore été voir mon exposition qui est ouverte depuis plus d'une semaine. Aussi j'attends Diaghilev quand il va me demander de faire le portrait de Massine. Je voudrais bien être débarrassé de ces cochons-là' (letter dated 'Friday' [21st November 1919]).

⁵⁵Matisse's longing is expressed in a letter of 13th January 1918 to his wife from Nice: 'Je monte la côte. Vous dire à quoi ça ressemblera, je ne puis le dire, car ça n'est pas arrivé, mais mon idée est d'aller davantage vers la vraie peinture.'

⁵⁶JACK FLAM estimates that in 1920 Matisse painted 'not less than sixty paintings' (*Autour d'un chef-d'œuvre de Matisse. Les trois versions de la Danse Barnes (1930–1933)*, Paris [1993], p.24).

⁵⁷KOCHNO, *op. cit.* at note 25 above, p.274; BUCKLE, *op. cit.* at note 23 above, p.516, quoting a telegram sent by Matisse to Diaghilev from Nice on 30th January 1929; L. GARAFOLA: *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, New York and Oxford [1989], p.253.

⁵⁸Letter from Diaghilev to Matisse, 7th September [1928]. The other, less urgent, project that Diaghilev was proposing to Matisse was the design of sets and costumes for *The Prodigal Son*, with music by Prokofiev.

⁵⁹'Ma décision de ne plus faire de ballet fut détruite à cause de la grande décoration que je fis, de 1930 à 1933, pour la Barnes Foundation' (Bavardages, cited at note 1 above).

⁶⁰MASSINE, *op. cit.* at note 1 above, pp.211–12.

⁶¹The ballet was premiered by the Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo, on 11th May 1939 (see G. DETAILLE and G. MULYS: *Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo, 1911–1944*, Paris [1954] pp.230–33). It was then staged at the Metropolitan Opera, New York, on 6th April 1940.

Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, but without Diaghilev, who had died in 1929. Drawing directly on the lessons he had learned from the Barnes *La Danse*, this time Matisse devised sets and costumes that were completely abstract:

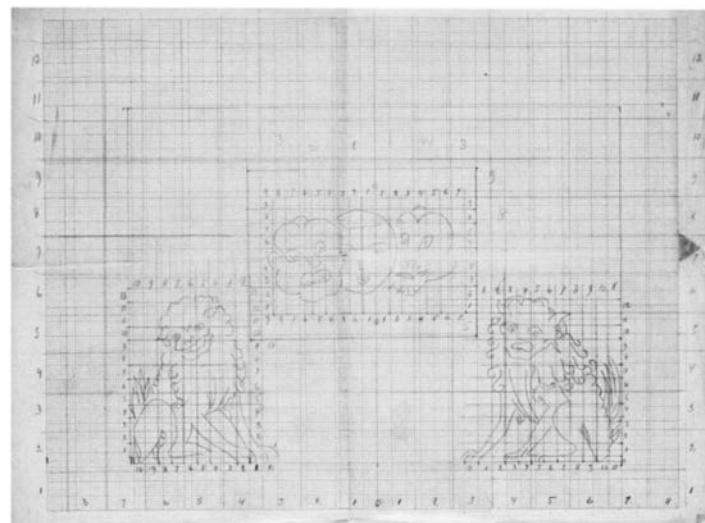
Je commençais donc, selon mon principe du premier décor [Le Chant du Rossignol], une maquette à l'échelle, dans laquelle j'arrangeai les grands arceaux de ma décoration de la Fondation Barnes. J'avais un fond divisé en trois couleurs: bleu, rouge, noir, derrière de grands arceaux blancs et jaunes.

J'habillai mes danseurs des couleurs du décor, avec des maillots bleus, rouges, noirs, jaunes et blancs.⁶²

This design seems to have made up for the failure of *Le Chant du Rossignol* not only in critical terms – Matisse observed with satisfaction that the production was ‘a complete success’⁶³ – but aesthetically too. Assisted by his recent reflections on decoration, the painter directly confronted the central problems of his earlier ballet rather than circling around them. First he excluded any referential motif; next he linked the colours of the scenery to those of the costumes,⁶⁴ and lastly he put on the costumes randomly scattered flame-shaped motifs which appeared and dissolved as the dancers moved about the stage. Now everything continually moved and changed in a mass of colour, whose harmony, Matisse was at pains to emphasise, rested on the fact that the dancers were dressed in the same colours as the set.⁶⁵

Looking back on the earlier episode with Pierre Courthion in 1941, Matisse was far less negative than he had been at the time. He stressed that he had learnt, with Massine’s help: ‘ce que devait être un décor, c’est-à-dire être conçu comme un tableau, avec des couleurs mouvantes qui sont les costumes’. He blotted out the unpleasant aspects of his first attempt, observing that, having made a sketch for the curtain with a bit of pressure from Diaghilev, he was very happy and did not regret having done stage designs, for ‘comme pour la conduite d’une auto, le décor demande de la décision; il oblige à savoir précisément ce que l’on veut et à l’exécuter le plus directement possible pour une date précise’.⁶⁶

As Pierre Schneider has shown, Matisse’s ‘theatrical conquests’ probably played quite an important rôle in the development of his later work, particularly in the methods he devised for his cut-out decorations when he was preparing the Barnes *La Danse* and, even more strikingly, the creation of a ‘ceremonial place’ in the Vence chapel.⁶⁷ What Schneider describes as the ‘close and intimate relationship’ between the chapel and stage design is corroborated by Matisse himself, who recalled his work in London when he was designing the stained glass windows of his chapel: ‘C’est une folie et je décide



28. Study for the front curtain, by Henri Matisse. 1919. Pencil, 47 by 61 cm. (Private collection).

cela. Moi qui n’ai fait que des tableaux, pas grands . . . Heureusement qu’il y a le précédent du rideau de Londres (10 ou 15 m.) exécuté par terre, en allant voir dans la charpente . . .’.⁶⁸

It is impossible not to be struck by the formal similarity between some of the patterns on the costumes for *Le Chant du Rossignol*, the structure of the Barnes *Danse* and some of the late cut-out decorations.⁶⁹ And Matisse’s desire to get rid of the red effects produced by the juxtaposition of black and turquoise blue in the 1920 ballet parallels his desire to retain this effect in the Vence chapel – produced this time by the juxtaposition of yellow and blue throughout the windows – while eliminating all traces of red from the colour scheme (hence the abandonment of the original sketch for the windows, which became *Les Abeilles*).⁷⁰

In 1920 this stage was still far off. Matisse’s other periods of distress and disaster – in 1910 when he had exhibited Shchukin’s decorations at the Salon d’Automne, in 1912 at the beginning of his first visit to Morocco, in 1931–33 with Barnes – had always resolved themselves by his taking a large forward step. *Le Chant du Rossignol*, on the other hand, caused a retreat: rather than reacting with increased ambition, the artist at first swore never to become involved in such work again. Before re-surfacing many years later, as a stimulus to creative effort, the experience had at first an inhibiting effect, ushering in a period of withdrawal. This was a time when Matisse’s main concern was ‘a prudent approach to life’ and ‘the opportunity to work away passionately but unobtrusively, in safety’.⁷¹

⁶²*Bavardages*, cited at note 1 above. This insistence on the abstract nature of the staging came from Matisse himself, if the heading of the interview given by the painter to the *Éclaireur de Nice et du Sud-Est* is to be believed: ‘Dans un atelier de la rue Désiré Niel à Nice, le célèbre peintre Henri Matisse et le chorégraphe Léonide Massine ont conçu un ballet abstrait’ (quoted by FAVELIN, *loc. cit.* at note 16 above, p.61).

⁶³Letter to Simon Bussy of 11th July 1939, quoted in SCHNEIDER, *op. cit.* at note 20 above, p.626.

⁶⁴‘With an unerring sense of decorative values, he designed for it an evocative background of abstract shapes of pure colour, and created tight-fitting costumes in the same colours decorated with black and white curvilinear patterns’ (MASSINE, *op. cit.* at note 1 above, p.212).

⁶⁵The success of *Rouge et Noir* encouraged Matisse to carry on. SCHNEIDER indicates that on the eve of the Second World War he was working on another scheme, based on mythological scenes, which had to be abandoned because of international events (*op. cit.* at note 20 above, p.626).

⁶⁶*Bavardages*, cited at note 1 above.

⁶⁷SCHNEIDER, *op. cit.* at note 20 above, p.624.

⁶⁸Interview with Brother Rayssiguier on 9th January 1949 (in *La Chapelle de Vence*.

Journal d’un création, Paris [1993] p.129). In another interview of 15th November 1948 (*ibid.*, p.101), he said: ‘Je ne fais pas cela pour faire une église, je le fais comme un décor de théâtre. Pour le Rossignol, qui se passe en cour de Chine, j’ai fait quelque chose d’emprunt: il y est entré beaucoup de souvenirs d’église; les gothiques étaient de fameux metteurs en scène’.

⁶⁹The oblique black-and-white bands on the costumes of the mourners resemble the background to the Merion *Danse*, and NEFF remarks on ‘their “cut-form” quality’, not ‘unrelated to the later cut-outs’ (*op. cit.* at note 27 above, p.84); the floral patterns worn by the tree-carrying and lantern-bearing women (especially the latter) foreshadow the patterns in the gouache cut-out paintings of the 1950s. Comparison has already been made above between the general structure of the curtain and *La Grande décoration aux masques* of 1953.

⁷⁰See the interview with Brother Rayssiguier of 17th February 1949 in *La Chapelle de Vence*, cited at note 68 above, p.152. As he had remarked of *Le Rossignol*, here too Matisse said he was treating the work at Vence ‘as if it was one of my paintings’ (*ibid.*, p.131). See also the interview with Gotthard Jedlicka (1952) in D. FOURCADE: ‘Autres propos de Henri Matisse’, *Macula*, I [1976], p.112.

⁷¹Letter to his daughter Marguerite of 20th June 1926.