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# A Study of Henri Matisse's *Dancer and Rocaille Armchair, Black Background*

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## Foreword

In 2021, the Ishibashi Foundation acquired Henri Matisse's 1942 oil painting *Dancer and Rocaille Armchair, Black Background* (fig. 1). Prior to this, the Foundation had acquired a total of 45 works by Matisse, including oil paintings, drawings, and prints (including two prints produced in collaboration with Jacques Villon). Among these, the most recent oil painting was *Woman with Blue Bodice* (1935), and works from the 1940s were limited to drawings and prints. The addition of this piece from the early 1940s to a collection of Matisse oils including works from every decade of his career up until the 1930s, going as far back as the 1899 *Nude in the Studio*, is highly significant.

This paper aims to examine the position of the newly acquired work in Matisse's life and oeuvre, and will begin by verifying, through literature and photographic materials, the circumstances and context in which the work was created.

## 1. Dates of Production

One previous study that goes into detail about the dates of production of *Dancer and Rocaille Armchair, Black Background* is *Henri Matisse: Contre vents et marées: Peinture et livres illustrés de 1939 à 1943*, which is based on written records kept by Lydia Delectorskaya, who served as Matisse's secretary and assistant from 1935 until his death in 1954.<sup>1</sup> As the closest observer of Matisse's late career, Delectorskaya can be called the only person intimately familiar with the reality of his creative process during this time. According to the aforementioned book based on her materials, the work was painted in a room at Hôtel Régina in Nice between September 1 and 6, 1942.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, data provided by the Archives Matisse for the writing of this paper cites the dates as September 1 to 5.<sup>3</sup> The Archives cite dates recorded in the Agenda as the basis for this, and further study would be needed in order to resolve this discrepancy.

What sort of time was early September 1942 for Matisse? The photographer André Ostier took multiple shots of Matisse at work on the painting,<sup>4</sup> in which the artist is seen seated on a daybed and holding a paintbrush (fig. 2). According to the authoritative biography by Hilary Spurling, Matisse had been suffering from liver pain and stomach ailments since the spring of that year, and during the summer he was afflicted with severe and recurrent abdominal spasms. Surgery was considered, and he was evidently in no condition to pick up a paintbrush. However, his symptoms improved thereafter. On August 14 he got out of bed and sat before an easel to attempt

oil painting for the first time in quite a while, which helped him regain his physical and mental strength.<sup>5</sup> Matisse disclosed in a letter to his friend Albert Marquet, a painter he had known since his student days, that his health issues were due to gallstones.<sup>6</sup>

These circumstances placed significant constraints on Matisse's artistic activities, and it appears that from the spring into the summer of 1942 his work was mostly limited to sketches for an illustrated edition of Pierre de Ronsard's book *Les Amours*. Matisse resumed oil painting after his health improved in August, and subsequently painted several interiors comprising a tiled floor, a chair, and a female figure, among them *Dancer and Rocaille Armchair, Black Background*. It can be said that this work is from a period when Matisse was still convalescent.

Indeed, while it is reported that Matisse got out of bed and approached the easel on August 14, he is still seated on a daybed in the photos taken by André Ostier in what is believed to be early September. In these photos a small table straddles the daybed, enabling Matisse to work while sitting up. The canvas is propped on the table at a slightly forward-tilting angle, and we can infer that this arrangement was made to facilitate continuous work while Matisse was on the road to recovery.

In terms of his pace after his mid-August return to painting, evidently he produced works in rapid succession, with each piece taking approximately one or two days to complete: the first, *Dancer with Blue Tutu* (Shimose Art Museum, Hiroshima, fig.3), was produced on August 14 and 15, followed by *Dancer in Armchair (Checkerboard Pattern)* (private collection) started on August 16 and completed on August 20 after a three-day break, then *Dancer in an Interior, Green and Black Tiles* (private collection, fig. 4) on August 21 and 22 and *Venetian Armchair with Fruits* (Musée Matisse, Nice, fig. 5) on August 23.<sup>7</sup>

In a letter to the critic Louis Aragon dated August 24, the day after completing the fourth of these paintings, Matisse wrote, "My health has returned. I even painted in oils from two until six-thirty," while describing the work he had just begun not as a "grand voyage" but rather as "sailing close to shore."<sup>8</sup> On August 24 he started work on *Dancer in Repose*, and it took about a week, longer than its immediate precursors, before it was completed on August 30. Two days later, he embarked on *Dancer and Rocaille Armchair, Black Background*.

In the aforementioned letter to Aragon, Matisse wrote of his recovery, but evidently he was still far from fully healed, despite being able to paint for a certain length of time. In a letter to André Rouveyre dated September 4, while the work was in progress, he revealed that he had been in pain for several days.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Subject Matter and Motifs

When Matisse resumed his work in mid-August 1942, he adopted the theme of an interior containing a chair and a female figure. This theme is ostensibly typical of Matisse's paintings, but it was composed of elements that had newly emerged.

One of these elements was the model, the young Italian countess Carla Avogadro. Princess Nezy-Hamide Chawkat, the great-granddaughter of the last Sultan of Turkey and Matisse's model until that point, was married that summer, and her friends including Avogadro stepped in to serve as replacements.<sup>10</sup> In Matisse's first painting after returning to work, *Dancer with Blue Tutu*, Avogadro makes her debut in Matisse's oeuvre, wearing a green tutu reminiscent of a ballerina. With minor variations, this outfit is consistent across other works, including *Dancer and Rocaille Armchair, Black Background*.

Another element is the Rocaille armchair, rich in curvilinear elements and ornamentation, the first appearance of which is believed to be in the painting executed on August 21–22, *Dancer in an Interior, Green and Black Tiles*. Matisse expressed his excitement upon discovering this chair at an antique shop in a letter to Louis Aragon dated April 20, 1942, four months before the chair appeared in his work:

"I finally found something that I have been hankering after for a year. It is a chair in the Venetian baroque style, silver on enamel. You have probably seen something like it. When I encountered this chair in an antique shop a few weeks ago, I was over the moon. I am enthralled by this splendid object."<sup>11</sup>

In the letter (fig. 6), Matisse's drawing of the chair accompanies the text. The lines describing its richly varied form are buoyantly rhythmic, conveying Matisse's elation. However, as noted earlier, Matisse was already grappling with health issues at this time, making oil painting a challenge. This makes it unsurprising that on August 23, the day after completing *Dancer in an Interior, Green and Black Tiles* in two days, Matisse chose to depict the chair alone in oils.

In *Dancer in an Interior, Green and Black Tiles*, a bouquet of flowers in a vase, and about four fruits appearing to be apples and lemons, are placed on the seat. However, in *Venetian Armchair with Fruits*, where the chair appears by itself, the bouquet and its vase have been removed, and there is only an empty cylindrical bottle. The four fruits remain in their original positions, with one more added. Also, the elaborate ornamentation of the backrest, seat, and legs, which were simply rendered in color planes in the previous work, are now clearly depicted with swift brushstrokes. This suggests an eager gaze as Matisse sought to explore every detail of his beloved chair.

In *Dancer and Rocaille Armchair, Black Background*, painted about a week later, the chair occupies the lower left of the canvas, positioned parallel to the dancer, i.e. Carla Avogadro, seated in another chair of Louis XV-style on the right, as in its first appearance in *Dancer in an Interior, Green and Black Tiles*. However, the flowers in a vase have not been reinstated, the number of fruits has fallen to three, and a cup and saucer have

been added. Also, detailed renderings of the chair's backrest and seat are omitted, and the seat is the only part painted in any detail. The chair is a more vivid yellow, with armrests the same blue as Avogadro's tutu, showcasing a more planar representation with contrasting colors.

After this work, Matisse produced another painting featuring the same model in September 1942, although it is unclear exactly when. The title is *Seated Dancer* (Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris), and like the works it depicts Avogadro seated in August, this time in a Louis XV-style chair with no Rocaille chair visible. The Rocaille chair did not reappear until 1946, after World War II, in works such as *The Rocaille Armchair* (1946, Musée Matisse, Nice, fig. 7), where the intricate, curved form of the chair is portrayed in a more streamlined fashion while referencing *Venetian Armchair with Fruits*. It also appears in *Interior in Yellow and Blue* (1946, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris) and *Small Interior in Blue* (1947, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart). In 1943, Matisse moved from Nice to Villa Le Rêve in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. The Rocaille chair, among other cherished pieces of furniture, moved there with him, as is evident in pictures taken by the photographer Hélène Adant in 1946 (fig. 8). From 1941 onwards, Matisse was often if not always ill, and was transitioning to paper cut-outs, which he could work on in bed, as his main medium. However, he never lost his passion for oil paintings of interiors, and the Rocaille chair became a recurring hallmark of this theme.

Notably, however, Matisse wrote in a letter to Aragon in March 1942, before he discovered the chair: "For several months I have been searching for a new subject. I don't know what it will be, but... I'm looking for something with impact."<sup>12</sup> Among Matisse's furniture and vases are items recurring in multiple works, clearly indicating his particular fondness for them. The "impact" to which Matisse refers likely came from initial encounters with such objects. And not long after he wrote this, he encountered the Rocaille chair, which was indeed a subject that fulfilled his desire. Moreover, around the same time Matisse was in a critical condition, at one point fearing for his life, and had to stay away from the easel for an extended period. The "impact" of the encounter with the chair can be considered a catalyst for his return to painting about four months later.

## 3. Process of Producing the Work

*Dancer and Rocaille Armchair, Black Background* is the third in a sequence of works in which Matisse depicted the Rocaille armchair he acquired in the spring of 1942. While differences between this representation of the Rocaille armchair and those in earlier works have been briefly discussed thus far, here let us reexamine the overall characteristics of this particular painting.

One overall feature of the work is the removal of a sense of three-dimensionality and a progression towards flatness, including in the depiction of the Rocaille armchair. Also, simplification of decorative details and a conscious focus on the composition of color planes can be observed. In *Dancer in an Interior, Green and Black Tiles*, the checkered pattern of the tiles converges as it recedes into the depths of the image, producing a sense of depth. In addition, the two chairs placed side by side, each at an angle, generate their own sense of three-dimensionality. The depiction of Carla Avogadro, seated on the

right-hand chair, further enhances the sense of depth through the contrasting proportions of her full thighs and small head.

In contrast, in *Dancer and Rocaille Armchair, Black Background* the floor tiles are rendered as a grid of white lines on a black background. While a boundary between floor and wall is suggested, the pattern rises vertically as if extending indefinitely, indicating a clear intent to eliminate a sense of depth. The placement of the chairs also contributes to this effect, with the legs of the Rocaille armchair skillfully concealed and the Louis XV-style chair facing almost directly forward. The absence of delineation between the back and seat results in a distorted trapezoidal plane of yellow. As for the model's pose, while the dynamic depiction of her legs remains unchanged, the lines of her shoulders and her outstretched arms on the armrests on either side are also imbued with vigor like that of her lower body. The lower body, with her right leg raised and bent, produces diagonal movement upward and to the left, contrasting with the line formed by the arms and shoulders, which rises diagonally to the right. This contrast makes her upper body appear not to rest against the backrest but to tilt its weight towards the armrest on the left, i.e. towards the center of the painting. This depiction of the body with the upper and lower halves in dynamic equilibrium can also be seen as pursuing a feeling of flatness.

The above-described inclination towards flatness is corroborated by a photograph (fig. 9) documenting the process of producing the work, discovered in a survey by the Archives Matisse after the Ishibashi Foundation had acquired the painting. This photograph shows that the Louis XV-style chair on the right side of the painting was initially depicted similarly to *Dancer in an Interior, Green and Black Tiles*, with a slight suggestion of depth. Also, the Avogadro's shoulders and arms were consolidated into a smaller volume to align with the width of the backrest, giving the impression that the upper body, including the head, was receding into the background compared to the voluminous depiction of the legs with the right knee raised.

Matisse subsequently expanded the width of the backrest by allocating the space between the backrest and the fireplace on the upper left to the chair, and also straightened the left-hand armrest. In line with this, he adjusted the positioning of various parts of the model's body, notably repositioning the bent right arm and leg to ensure they did not extend past the left edge of the backrest. Enclosing the majority of the human figure, with its characteristic shapes, within an area of color preserves the abstract shape of that color plane. This modification appears intended to heighten the contrast of the form with that of the Rocaille chair on the left, in which the same color is applied to both backrest and seat.

When the entire work is examined with respect to interplay between the two distinct areas of yellow formed by the chairs, it becomes evident that each element of the interior has its color or its form determined in relation to others in the painting. For example, as noted earlier, the turquoise adorning the armrest of the Rocaille chair is also used for the model's tutu and the wall at the top, while the armrest and legs of the chair in which she sits are a contrasting red. The same white is employed for the hem of her tutu, her toe shoes, and the teacup on the seat of the Rocaille chair, as if these elements rhyme with one

another. With the exception of the reality-based colors used for Avogadro's skin and the fruits, the only remaining color is the black of the floor, making for an extremely limited color palette.

A sketch (fig. 10) in which Matisse himself identified the colors used in this work has been preserved. It was published along with a reproduction of the painting in the November 1945 issue of *Verve*, which ran a special feature on Matisse. The sketch was evidently created after the painting's completion as a color sample for *Verve's* publishers, as it aligns with the painting's final state. According to the sketch, eight colors were used in total, which Matisse's illustration enumerates as: 1. Ivory black, 2. Lemon yellow, 3. Blue, 4. Flesh tone, 5. Red, 6. Green, 7. Orange, and 8. White.

Regarding forms, it is noteworthy that the zigzagging line from the model's head to her torso and the upper and lower parts of her left leg resonate with the curves of the Rocaille chair, particularly the front of the armrest. The photo documenting the earlier state of the painting shows that her body was not initially rendered with such sculptural lines, and the resonance of forms had not been established. Differences in the placement and curvature of the Rocaille chair's armrest are discernible but not significant. It is likely that the model's form was subsequently altered to correspond with the organic curves of the armrest, which were depicted from the outset.

In this series of works featuring Carla Avogadro as a model, this is the only one in which her facial features do not appear. Like the simplification of the Rocaille chair, this can be attributed to an intention to represent her figure with purer form and color.

From these observations, we can conclude that in this work Matisse, while continuing to depict an interior centered around two chairs and a human figure, aimed for a more purely chromatic and formal composition by eliminating specific features from the subjects. The process of creating the painting undoubtedly began with referencing preceding works, but it is also clear that modifications were made in multiple parts during the ensuing process. With a limited amount of time before the canvas each day, and seated on the daybed in a position that naturally created a certain distance from the subject, unlike his previous practice of working so close to the model that their knees were almost touching, Matisse appears to have continually revised the painting.

## In Closing

As described earlier, the photo documenting *Dancer and Rocaille Armchair, Black Background* at an intermediate stage clearly shows that subsequent alterations were made to the depiction of Carla Avogadro and the position and orientation of the chair she sits on. On the other hand, almost no changes in the position of the Rocaille armchair on the left can be observed. From this it can be inferred that the composition placing two chairs with different forms side by side, and the shape of the Rocaille armchair resonating with that of the model, was solidly in place from the start. Alfred H. Barr Jr., the first director of The Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), described this group of works from the summer of 1942, with their compositions evoking dialogues among the subjects, as "conversation pieces," and cited this painting as one of the

best-known works in the group.<sup>13</sup> If this sort of composition, treating two subjects as equally important, presupposes an overhead perspective, this could arguably be attributed to the circumstances of Matisse working while reclining due to his convalescence. While depicting an interior, a theme that can be considered synonymous with Matisse, the work is the product of new conditions that emerged by chance: the perspective he happened to find while recovering, the chair he had recently bought, and the model he had recently begun portraying.

That being said, the photo documenting the work in progress shows that even at the stage when it was taken, there is evidence of extensive consideration of the position and orientation of the model's head. It is believed that there may be other modifications beyond what can be seen with the naked eye, and these changes and the order in which they were made ought to become clear through optical scanning and other methods. Plans to conduct such an investigation are in place during 2023.

(Curator, Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation)  
(Translated by Christopher Stephens)

#### Notes

1. Lydia Delectorskaya, *Henri Matisse: Contre vents et marées: Peinture et livres illustrés de 1939 à 1943*, Paris: Éditions Irus et Vincent Hansma, 1996.
2. Delectorskaya, op. cit., p. 384.
3. In research for this paper, I was enormously assisted by Georges Matisse and Anne Théry of the Archives Matisse. I would like to express my deepest gratitude.
4. Research for this paper identified a total of five photographs, presumably taken on the same day and at the same time.
5. Hilary Spurling, *Matisse: The Life*, Penguin Books, 2009, pp. 484–488.
6. Letter to Albert Marquet dated August 24, 1942. *Henri Matisse: Écrits et propos sur l'art, Texte, notes et index établis par Dominique Fourcade*, Paris: Hermann, pp. 288–289.
7. Delectorskaya, op. cit., pp. 367–385.
8. Letter to Louis Aragon dated August 24, 1942. *Louis Aragon, Henri Matisse, roman, tome 1*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971, pp. 177–178.
9. Letter to André Rouveyre dated September 4, 1942. *Henri Matisse: Écrits et propos sur l'art*, p. 289.
10. Spurling, op. cit., p. 488.
11. Aragon, op. cit., pp. 211–212.
12. *Henri Matisse: Écrits et propos sur l'art*, p. 246.
13. *Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse* exh. cat., New York: William S. Lieberman, 1975, p. 102.

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