Henri Matisse (1869-1954) is revered as a master of color and form. Along with Pablo Picasso, he is considered one of the two foremost artists of the first half of the 20th century. Matisse was born in Le Cateau-Cambrésis in northern France on December 31, 1869. The son of middle-class parents, he practiced law as a young man, but took up painting while recovering from appendicitis in 1890. Two years later, after much deliberation, Matisse gave up his law career and moved to Paris to study art.

Matisse first studied with the academic painter Adolphe-William Bouguereau and then at the École des Beaux-Arts with Gustave Moreau, where he met many other young painters who later gained prominence with him in the Fauvist movement. Early in his career, Matisse copied Old Master paintings at the Louvre and studied contemporary art, especially the Impressionists. In 1899, he was drawn to the work of post-Impressionists Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Cézanne, whom he called a “god of painting.” Later Matisse became influenced by the pointillism of Paul Signac and Georges Seurat. As time went by, Matisse began to experiment with form and color, earning a reputation as a rebellious member of his studio classes.

While visiting the Mediterranean coastal village of Collioure in 1905, Matisse began using pure primary color as a significant structural element. During that same year, he exhibited at the Salon d’Automne with his artist companions André Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck. Together, the group exploded onto the art scene and was dubbed les fauves (literally, “the wild beasts”) because of their use of vivid colors and distorted shapes, and their evocative, sensual approach. While he was regarded as a leader of the radical Fauvist movement, Matisse began to gain the approval of a number of influential critics and collectors, including the American expatriate writers Gertrude and Leo Stein and their friends Claribel Cone and Etta Cone, and Russian collectors Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov. Following the demise of Fauvism, Matisse continued to use color to communicate his emotions in bold patterns and striking decorations. He experimented with expressive abstraction and bold distortions, but rejected cubism in order to develop his own ideas.

In the winter of 1917, Matisse traveled to Nice, a city on the French Riviera, and became enchanted by the unique light and atmosphere of the location. Though he continued to travel throughout Europe, northern Africa, and Tahiti, the artist remained on the Riviera for most of his life, painting a series of odalisques and interior subjects then later abandoning conventional forms in favor of dramatically simplified areas of pure color, flat shape, and strong patterns. The Cone Collection’s great strength focuses on this remarkably prolific period of Matisse’s career.

In addition to being an accomplished painter, Matisse worked across different media to further explore his complex ideas about form. His early sculpture reveals an interest in Antoine-Louis Barye, Auguste Rodin, and African art. Matisse also designed costumes and sets for the ballet, and illustrated books for writers Stéphane Mallarmé (1932) and Charles Baudelaire (1944), among many others. When he was nearly 80, Matisse volunteered to decorate the Dominican nuns' chapel at Vence, France.

In 1941, Matisse was diagnosed with cancer and became permanently confined to a wheelchair. It was in this condition that he completed the magnificent Chapel of the Rosary in Vence. Often bedridden during his last years, he occupied himself with decoupage, creating works of brilliantly colored paper cutouts arranged on a canvas surface. Matisse died in Nice in November 1954. Unlike many artists, he was internationally popular during his lifetime, enjoying the favor of collectors, art critics, and the younger generation of artists. The largest collections of Matisse's works are in The Baltimore Museum of Art; Musée Matisse in Nice, France; Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia.

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