# Matisse finally gets some respect as a heavyweight

## *Critic re-evaluates 'The Man and His Art'*

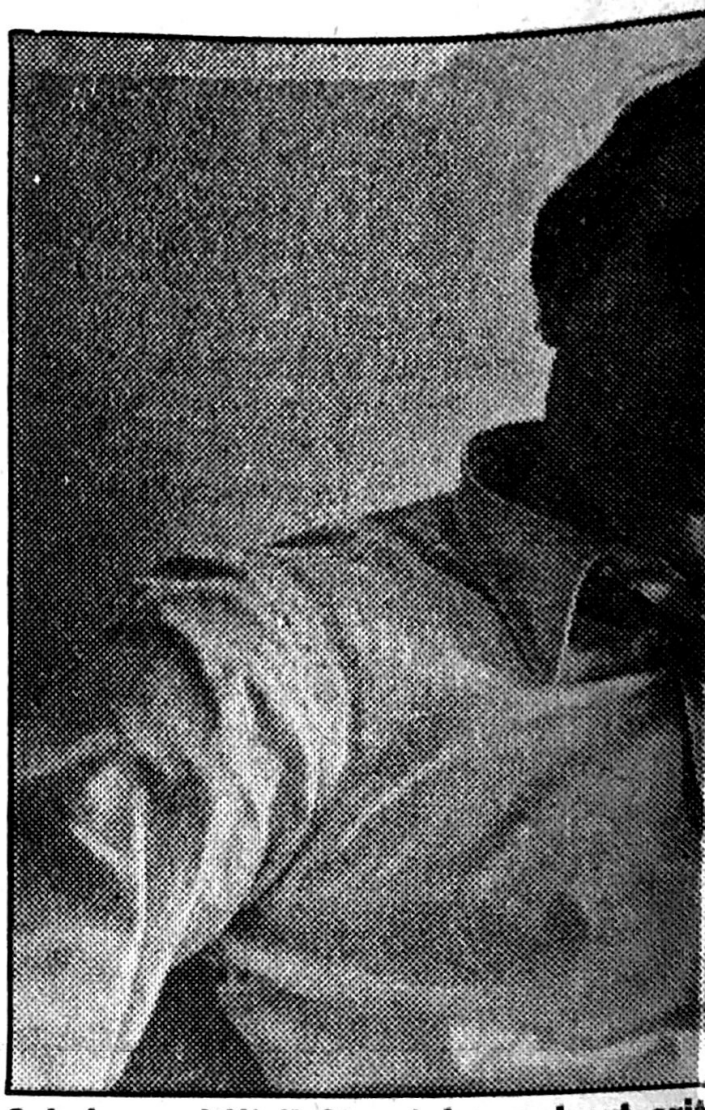
**By Hunter Drohojowska**

Received wisdom is the bane of the art historian. In this relatively young discipline, amorphous theories often color an artist's *oeuvre* and falsely enhance or detract from his reputation. The mission of each generation of art historians is to clear away the old myths and assumptions to see the art freshly and present it anew to us.

With all of the dozens of coffee table books around, it might seem that Henri Matisse and his art had been analyzed and reviewed beyond any further interest. Thus, it is all the more astonishing that Matisse scholar and Wall Street Journal art critic Jack Flam has come up with a book that not only corrects a surprising number of historical inaccuracies but presents an entirely bright and radical reinterpretation of the overstuffed armchair that many of us had considered Matisse to be. "Matisse: The Man and His Art, 1869-1918" (Cornell University Press, 512 pages, $75), will be available in bookstores this month.

If we accept many of the conventional notions about Matisse, we think of his art as decorative, pretty and pleasant, but not as challenging, as autobiographical, or as *outre* as the art of his salient rival Pablo Picasso. As Flam succinctly explains, "Most of the writing about Matisse is superficial because he was never considered a heavyweight."

In this book, which covers the first half of Matisse's life, Flam makes a convincing case for the artist's use of decorative motifs as formal breakthroughs toward abstraction that predate and influence Picasso. (It is only after the fever for Cubism began to subside, in 1914, that Matisse allowed himself to be influenced.) Through Flam's evocative descriptions, Matisse's symbolism emerges as a metaphorical matrix more advanced yet more subtle than that of his contemporaries. Flam presents Matisse as an artist who integrated spiritual values, a profound awe of nature and the power of invisible cosmic forces in his art, in the manner of his mentor and greatest influence, Cezanne.

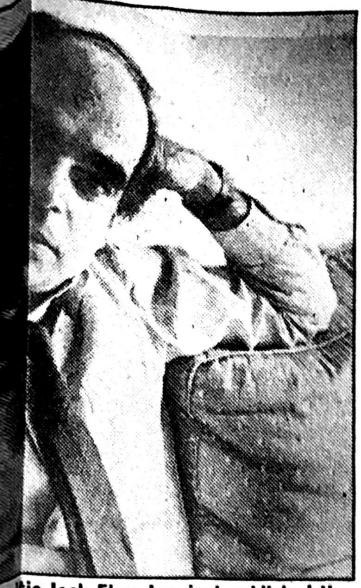


**Scholar and Wall Street Journal art crit first volume of his work on Matisse, wh**

Flam quotes from the contemporary critics who first dubbed Matisse the king of the Fauves, only to exile him from his position in the avant-garde and then reinstate him, all within a tumultuous decade. Flam sees this dialogue with the "friendly" critics as influential on the evolution of Matisse's work. Although Flam concentrates on a picture by picture, sculpture by sculpture, exegesis of Matisse's art, we come away with an oddly complete notion of the man's personality, his motivations, his fears and inspirations. In the end, we appreciate Matisse's fundamentally conservative, dogged and methodical determination to press the boundaries of what was visually acceptable as art in the early 20th century.

The author's dogged determination is impressive as well. Flam, 46, began the book seven years ago, but has been studying the work of Matisse since 1961, when he graduated with an art history degree from Rutgers University. What imbues this book with its unusual sense of life, however, is Flam's origins as a painter and writer of fiction and poetry.

In an interview in his Manhattan office, the author explained that this is the first complete biography of Matisse since the classic 1951 text by Alfred Barr, "Matisse, His Art



**ritic Jack Flam has just published the which covers the years 1869 to 1918.**

and His Public."

Flam used Barr's "wonderful book" as a paradigm but noted that much of that received wisdom had to be re-evaluated. "Back then, most thought that to compare Matisse and Picasso was ridiculous. Now, most who follow painting would be willing to say that Matisse was as great a painter as Picasso. But in '51, Matisse was considered a lightweight. (Scholar Bernard) Berenson says Matisse wound up as an 'also ran.' Since Barr's book, all sorts of documentary material has come up. For example, Barr couldn't have seen the Russian paintings in color." During the writing of this biography, Flam traveled to the Soviet Union, Scandinavia and France to gather fresh source material.

Flam cites another restriction familiar to any biographer. "Matisse and his family were alive when Barr was writing. Much of his communication with Matisse came from his estranged wife and daughter who wanted Matisse to come across as a respectable person."

Because Barr was dealing directly with the artist, Flam believes he could be timid about interpretation of the art. "Matisse would say, 'No, that's not what it's about,' and be adverse to interpretation." Flam adds, "In addition, Barr was interested in the American response to Matisse. I wanted a sense of the French response, the running dialogue with the artists and critics of his time."

Flam admits that he could not have foreseen himself as one of the foremost Matisse authorities when he was a painting student at Rutgers. One of his teachers had the students working in the styles of certain masters and Flam copied Matisse's "White Plumes." "My reaction was originally the cliched attraction to color and sensuality of line," he recalls. Flam's first meaningful encounter with Matisse was at the Museum of Modern Art where he saw "The Piano Lesson" (1916).

Flam's description of that painting is one of the most revealing and moving in his book: Matisse's son Pierre is practicing the piano. Matisse had been urging Pierre to take up the piano and the son was rejecting the suggestion, just as Matisse had resisted the business-oriented ideas of his own shopowner father. (And the author had rebelled against the reservations of *his* own father about going into art!)

Flam notes that the boy (another of the artist's creations) is placed between a nude, sensuous bronze sculpture of a woman from 1908 and the severe, synthetic painting, "Woman on a High Stool" from 1914, thus spanning the concerns of his art up to that time. Atop the piano, the metronome is a "traditional symbol of measure, geometry, logic — intellectual process — while the brass candlestick stands for inspiration," writes Flam. "The highly abstract window view, which translates his own garden into an ideogram, completes this concise autobiography. ... It may be taken to represent the concept of painting itself as a symbolic abstraction. The world is conceived as a succession of developing perceptions and ideas, only incompletely arrested and condensed in the final painted image."

As Flam entered graduate school at Columbia, he still considered himself a painter with an interest in literature and art history. He painted in order to deal with the world in a way other than words. "It's ironical I've come full circle now, writing words about painting," he laughs. During his master's studies, when he wrote his thesis on Celtic manuscripts, he concentrated on early medieval and primitive art that coincides with Matisse's fascination with Byzantine, medieval art and African sculpture.

"One of the historical aspirations of decorative painting is to translate certain elements of cosmic energy and order into pictorial form," says Flam. "The thing that was so extraordinary about Matisse was not his consistency of style, but his consistency of intensity and the level of quality. You sense the religious awe he had for life, but he was a laconic man who didn't want to talk about it. You find Matisse in his paintings. The events of his life are oddly uninteresting."

As Flam entered the New York University in 1963 to work on a doctorate, he was still painting, but had switched his major to modern art history. He wrote his doctoral thesis on the topic of Matisse and metaphor. After delivering a series of papers and lectures on the subject and a stint of teaching, Flam went to Paris in 1970. While there he translated the artist's writings, "Matisse on Art," which was published in 1973. (Flam had stopped painting but started writing fiction, publishing two novels, "Bread and Butter" and "Zoltan Gorency.") In 1975, he returned to New York and took up his current position teaching at Brooklyn College and at the Graduate School of the City University of New York.

"I still didn't think there was an adequate book on Matisse," he goes on to explain. With a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation, he set out to do an interpretive study. "I found the Matisse literature to be in a state of chaos, where factual information and dating of paintings was just plain wrong. At that point, I decided to do a full scale complete biography. As I wrote, I found more errors, more inaccuracies. Then I realized, the book had to be two volumes, though this one stands by itself."

*"I find it irritating to be a Matisse scholar."*

**Jack Flam**

This task was complicated by the fact that during this early period, Matisse worked in a variety of styles and subjects, often switching back and forth. "There are so many different Matisses, yet there is always the simple spirit and intelligence." Vol. 1 terminates logically in 1918, after World War I, when a call to order brought a return to classicism among most of the modern artists.

Will Flam's next book be Vol. 2 on Matisse? The author roles his eyes in exasperation. "I find it irritating to be a Matisse scholar," he insists. "To write about Matisse in depth with any meaningfulness, well, he's not an artist you can get in and out of quickly."

Flam's biography fundamentally excites in what it reveals of Matisse's art. While this may seem self-evident, it is actually a astonishingly uncommon approach. "A lot of art historians forget that the works of art are primary documents, not the literature," acknowledges Flam. "Ideally, the person who reads this book will be dying to go to a museum that has Matisses and look at them and see Matisse, not the way I saw them, but see them freshly, for themselves. As personal and idiosyncratic as readings of paintings can be, not dogmatic but articulate and open-ended.

"Most people don't look too carefully at paintings anyway. The important aspect of art writing is to make people see for themselves."

*Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.*