

Reviews

Matisse and Decoration

John Klein

Yale University Press, 2018, £45 hb

In the last 20 years of his life, Henri Matisse (1869–1954) undertook many decorative projects, including mural paintings, stained glass, ceramic tiles, lead crystal pieces, carpets, tapestries and fashion fabrics. This book is the first comprehensive academic study of these works, as opposed to the ‘easel paintings’ on which Matisse’s reputation as an artist rests. The author is Professor of the History of Art at Washington University in St Louis, and has previously written about Matisse’s portraits.

The first two chapters examine how the decorative projects which occupied Matisse increasingly from 1935 onwards were foreshadowed by some of his earlier works and also reflected his lifelong

philosophy as an artist. From the outset of his career, Matisse made clear his view that the purpose of art is essentially decorative: to enhance life, not to tell a story or convey a political message. The decorative quality of Matisse’s paintings has always been acknowledged as part of their appeal.

The main body of the book examines the development of Matisse’s ‘off-easel’ career, beginning in 1930 with a commission for a mural in the museum that Alfred Barnes, an avid collector of Matisse’s paintings, was establishing in Philadelphia. Just as his works on canvas had been eagerly acquired by wealthy Americans in the 1920s, so the United States was a significant market for the luxury decorative arts that Matisse was now being encouraged to produce. As well as murals and other works commissioned by magnates such as Nelson Rockefeller, Matisse also took on more commercial projects, designing items to be sold (normally in limited editions) on the open market.

Matisse’s decorative projects were necessarily executed by others, craftsmen in a variety of media in which he himself had no training. He dealt with the inherent difficulties by adapting his designs so that the finished work reflected his original concept as closely as possible – or by modifying his concept to take account of the limitations of the medium. He famously used coloured paper cut-outs as a design tool for his larger wall decorations: he would pin up the different shapes and move them around until he was satisfied with the composition. The cut-outs are now generally regarded as artworks in their own right rather than mere designs for works in other media (not just a philosophical distinction, as designs often attracted a higher rate of import duty than original artwork).

This is a scholarly book. Professor Klein’s prose style is highly literate and, though there is much to interest the general reader, non-specialists might find some of the more academic passages a little dense, an effect reinforced by the small typeface. The illustrations are of high quality and adequate in number, but few of them are full-page, emphasising that, despite its beguiling title, this is a publication for the reference library rather than the coffee table.

Roger Jones

Call for Papers

Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 44 (2020)

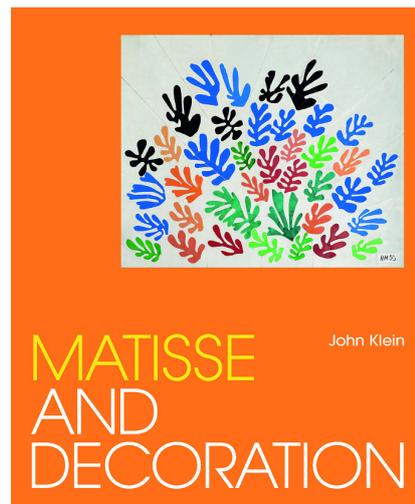
The DAS journal for 2020 will feature decorative design and craft of the 20th century. The journal welcomes contributions on innovative, if lesser-known designers as well as new research on better-known figures.

The Society’s remit is 1850 to the present day, and typical journal articles take an object-focused rather than a theoretical approach. The journal audience is knowledgeable and well-informed, but not necessarily academic.

Authors are invited to submit proposals of around 500–1,000 words no later than 1 September 2019. Proposals will be given careful consideration by the DAS Editorial Committee.

Completed articles of 2,500 to 6,000 words, plus notes, illustrations (cleared for copyright) and captions to be submitted by 1 April 2020.

Proposals should be sent to the Editor, Stella Beddoe, at stellabeddoe@gmail.com



During the Second World War, Matisse became regarded as something of a French national treasure. In 1946, he was commissioned by the government to design tapestries for the Gobelins workshops in Paris under the aegis of the Mobilier National. In 1947, he commenced work on the decorative project for which he is best known, the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, to which a chapter of the book is devoted. Here, his aim was the complete integration of art and architecture and he master-minded the whole project. He designed stained-glass windows, ceramic murals, internal woodwork and vestments, as well as being very much in control of the architectural design of the building.

The Livery Halls of the City of London

Anya Lucas & Henry Russell

Merrell, 2018, £45 hb

Given the constantly-changing skyline of the City of London, punctuated by an ever-taller phalanx of oddly-shaped steel and glass towers, it is heart-warming to applaud a new book celebrating one of the City’s longest-established traditions.

The Livery Halls of the City of London are, alongside Wren’s churches, its finest architectural inheritance, but rarely accessible to the general public. This sumptuous book, beautifully designed and copiously illustrated with specially-commissioned colour photographs by Andreas von Einsiedel, is the first comprehensive account of the livery company halls since Englefield’s volume of nearly 40 years ago, with its quaint line drawings. For those who live outside the circles of the livery companies,