

Henri Matisse's stained-glass window 'La Rosace' (1954)

by REBECCA DANIELS

IN 1954, a few months before his death, Henri Matisse was commissioned to create a stained-glass window in memory of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller in the Union Church, Pocantico Hills, Tarrytown, New York (Fig.26). *La Rosace*, the maquette for the window, was Matisse's last work. The extraordinary history of the commission is explored here, principally through the substantial correspondence that has survived between Matisse, Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller and Alfred Barr Jr.¹

During her lifetime, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (1874–1948) had been a dynamic promoter of modern art, eventually becoming one of the founding members of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.² Her passion for art was inherited by her son, Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller (1908–79), who, alongside his prominent political career, became an important collector and patron of the arts. Throughout the twentieth century, the Rockefeller family maintained a close interest in MoMA, with Abby and Nelson holding several key official roles.³

Abby Rockefeller was a great admirer of Matisse's art, and had purchased one of his small paintings of an *Odalisque*, a drawing, some prints and a sculpture.⁴ It seems she wanted to expand her collection to include more significant works, but her husband, John D. Rockefeller Jr, intensely disliked contemporary art. Despite this, Abby sat him next to Matisse during coffee at a dinner party she hosted in honour of Matisse's visit to the United States in December 1930.⁵ While this may have seemed socially unwise, the Rockefellers and Matisse shared one passion at least – Far Eastern fine and decorative art. Referring to the staggering collection of Asian porcelain displayed around them in the Rockefellers' house, Matisse tried to 'convert' John D. Rockefeller Jr to modern art by using the example of Chinese potters. Matisse argued that in his art he was trying to achieve the same aesthetic goals as the makers of Chinese porcelain.⁶ While Matisse was unsuccessful in converting Rockefeller that night, he revealed how important Chinese porcelain had been to his work.⁷

Like his mother, Nelson Rockefeller embraced Matisse's art. Initially he tried, but failed, to commission Matisse to create a mural for the Rockefeller Center in New York.⁸ However, in



26. Union Church, Pocantico Hills, Tarrytown, New York, by Ludwig W. Eisinger. 1922. (Photograph by the author).

1938, Matisse agreed to paint *La Poésie*, a small, but strikingly designed mural incorporating large-scale female figures, for one of the two fireplaces in the living room of his New York apartment.⁹ It seemed Matisse referred back to the Rockefellers' Chinese porcelain collection by painting the mural using greens, blacks and yellows, the colours of the Kangxi porcelain he had seen displayed in their house.¹⁰

When Abby Rockefeller died suddenly in 1948, Matisse was an obvious choice to undertake the commission for a memorial window to her.¹¹ Nelson Rockefeller's enthusiasm for his work undoubtedly ensured that his mother finally obtained her major Matisse, not just as a work of art but, more symbolically, a personal memorial: 'I can't tell you how happy I am about this possibility – nothing would have pleased mother more', he wrote to Alfred Barr Jr in 1954.¹²

Barr was well qualified to act as the liaison between Matisse and Nelson Rockefeller. Not only was he the Director of

¹ The Nelson A. Rockefeller personal activities papers, principally III.4.A Box 156/1718, are housed in the Rockefeller Archive Center, New York (Family Papers, cited hereafter as RAC). A small number of letters relating to the commissioning of *La Rosace* are held in the Alfred H. Barr Jr Papers at the archive of the Museum of Modern Art, New York (AHB 18.III.A.1). The blueprint for the window is also housed in MoMA's archive, but the work is too fragile for it to be reproduced. Nelson Rockefeller had the letters of Henri Matisse and Marguerite Duthuit translated and these are kept with the originals. I have used these translations in the text as they would have been the versions that were relied on throughout the commission.

² Letter from Alfred Barr to Henri Matisse, 31st March 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

³ Undated MoMA press release, c.1939, announcing appointment of Nelson Rockefeller as President, MoMA 39508-17; retrieved from www.moma.org on 7th June 2013.

⁴ M. Smith and L.H. Barstow: *Matisse and Chagall at the Union Church of Pocantico Hills*, Tarrytown 1999, p.13.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ P. Johnson, A. Proser et al.: *A Passion for Asia: the Rockefeller Legacy*, New York 2006, p.74.

⁷ *Ibid.* Frank Crowninshield, one of the first Trustees of MoMA, recorded the conversation between Matisse and John D. Rockefeller which demonstrates Matisse's forceful, albeit slightly tongue-in-cheek, argument; see M. Wheeler: *Twentieth Century Art from the Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller Collection*, New York 1969, p.20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁹ Smith and Barstow, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp.13–14; and Wheeler, *op. cit.* (note 7), p.20.

¹⁰ Johnson, Proser et al., *op. cit.* (note 6), p.74.

¹¹ Wheeler, *op. cit.* (note 7), p.21.

¹² Letter from Nelson Rockefeller to Alfred Barr, 12th April 1954, RAC. N.A.

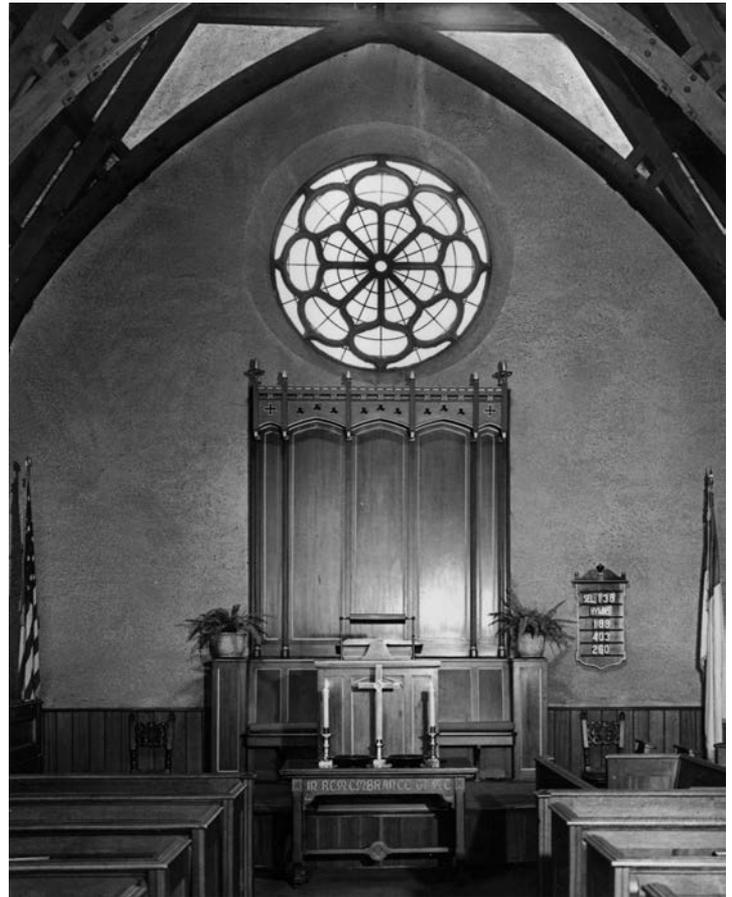
Collections at MoMA at the time of the commission but he was also the author of the seminal monograph *Matisse: His Art and his Public* (1951) and, in addition, had organised Matisse's first major retrospective exhibition in the United States in 1931. Nelson Rockefeller admired and respected Barr and, in 1963, donated Matisse's masterpiece *Dance (I)* (1909) to MoMA in Barr's honour.¹³

The Rockefellers were an extremely devout Baptist family and so the Union Church in the hamlet of Pocantico Hills was central to their worship.¹⁴ The style of the church is hybrid, combining Neo-gothic with elements of vernacular Arts and Crafts style. The tracery of the window Matisse was asked to design, however, is Neo-gothic with overtones of Art Nouveau. 'The window is circular in shape', Barr wrote to Matisse, 'a rose window with flamboyant mullions of good, though traditional, design [. . .] Because of the style of the church, Mr Rockefeller hopes that you might be willing to design the glass to fit within the existing mullions – a problem which would seem to me to offer a most interesting challenge' (Fig.27).¹⁵

Barr warned Rockefeller that the restriction of freedom imposed by a pre-existing framework might discourage Matisse from accepting the commission,¹⁶ but Matisse was in fact excited by the challenge it posed. As the frame of the wooden window had been cut by hand it meant that all twenty-five lights slightly varied in size, so that each piece was unique. This complication perfectly suited Matisse's cut-out technique, the process he used to create the maquette for the window (Fig.28).

Matisse accorded equal status to his cut-outs and his paintings, stating that 'there is no discontinuity between my former paintings and my cut-outs'.¹⁷ Technically, he knew how to use scissors as expertly as a brush and he commented that they were 'as sensitive as pencil, pen or charcoal – maybe even more sensitive'.¹⁸ He said: 'When I am doing the cut-outs, you cannot imagine to what degree the sensation of flight which comes to me helps me better to adjust my hand as it guides the path of my scissors'.¹⁹ This 'sensation of flight' must have been additionally exhilarating considering Matisse was by then wheelchair-bound and often confined to his bed, even during the day.

Part of this sense of freedom was due to his practice, from the early 1940s, of having his studio assistants brush Linel gouache paints onto sheets of white paper and then dry them.²⁰ Consequently, when Matisse selected the pre-coloured paper to cut, the choice of materials and colour was being made in 'complete synthesis', a goal he had worked towards for many years: ' . . . drawing with scissors on sheets of paper coloured in advance, one movement linking line with colour, contour with surface [. . .] the cut-out paper allows me to draw in colour. It is a



27. Photograph of the interior of the Union Church showing the window prior to Matisse's commission. (Rockefeller Archive Center, New York).

simplification'.²¹ Photographs of Matisse in his studio surrounded by off-cuts of paper on the floor give a sense of the speed and agility he achieved using large dressmaker's scissors.

John Elderfield has described Matisse's cut-outs as 'virtually unique to Matisse'.²² Gilles Néret believed they were a 'new way of painting [. . .] that could not be related to any that had come before'.²³ 'It cannot be categorized. It is neither cubist (Picasso) nor abstract (Kandinsky) nor Dadaist (Arp)'.²⁴ While their observations may be true of Western art, they overlook the precedent of Chinese papercuts,²⁵ and their remarkable similarities to the technique Matisse used for his cut-outs. Although there is no direct evidence that Matisse knew of them, as an avid collector of Chinese paintings, textiles, rugs and objets d'art, it is inconceivable that he would not have been exposed to them, so central are they to Chinese culture.²⁶

Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

¹³ Information retrieved from www.moma.org on 31st October 2011.

¹⁴ Smith and Barstow, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.12.

¹⁵ Document cited at note 2 above.

¹⁶ Letter from Alfred Barr to Nelson Rockefeller, 1st April 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

¹⁷ G. Néret: *Henri Matisse Cut Outs*, Cologne 2006, p.12.

¹⁸ H. Spurling: 'Material World: Matisse, His Art and his Textiles', in *idem et al.*: exh. cat. *Matisse. His Art and His Textiles: The Fabric of Dreams*, London (Royal Academy of Arts) 2004, p.17.

¹⁹ J. Cowart *et al.*: *Henri Matisse. Paper Cut-Outs*, New York 1977, p.17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

²¹ J. Elderfield: *The Cut-Outs of Henri Matisse*, London 1978, p.22.

²² *Ibid.*, p.10.

²³ Néret, *op. cit.* (note 17), p.12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.13.

²⁵ While many authors acknowledge that Matisse was influenced by Chinese art, they rarely analyse the types of Chinese art in which he was interested. For example, Roger Fry, in his *First Post-Impressionist Exhibition (1910)* catalogue wrote: 'In opposition to Picasso, who is predominantly plastic, Matisse aims at convincing us of the reality of his forms by the continuity and flow of his rhythmic line, by the logic of his space relations, and above all, by an entirely new use of colour [. . .] In this [. . .] he approaches more than any other European to the ideals of Chinese art'; quoted in A.H. Barr: *Matisse His Art and His Public*, New York 1951, p.149. Although it has not been possible to consult every source on Matisse, the extensive literature that relates to his paper cut-outs does not seem to address the Chinese papercuts as a possible influence.

²⁶ These objects are visible in display cabinets and on the walls in the many photographs of Matisse's houses and studios.



28. *La Rosace*, maquette for the stained-glass window in the Union Church, Pocantico Hills, Tarrytown, New York, by Henri Matisse. 1954. Gouache, pencil and paper cut-out on paper, 109 by 109.4 cm. (Private collection, London).

In 1919 Matisse had been approached by Serge Diaghilev to redesign the costumes for the Ballets Russes's forthcoming production of *Le Chant du Rossignol*, a work first staged in 1914. Matisse travelled to London in October in order to work with Diaghilev on the ballet, the setting of which was a Chinese Emperor's Court. Matisse visited Matthew Prichard, a friend from his early Paris days, who was a connoisseur of Byzantine and Chinese art.²⁷ Extensive research by Rémi Labrusse suggests that Prichard advised Matisse to visit London's great collections of Asian art. Shortly after his arrival, Matisse wrote to his wife saying that he was going to the Victoria and Albert Museum 'to marvel at the Chinese, Persian and Indian art'.²⁸ He also visited the British Museum with Prichard and his friend William King, a connoisseur of porcelain. Hilary Spurling suggests that their guide was probably the famous Sinologist and translator Arthur Waley, who was a close friend of King.²⁹

Labrusse also states that it was during this three-week visit to London that Matisse created his first cut-out (incidentally, on paper previously painted in gouache), which was used as a maquette for the stage set.³⁰ The coincidence of having been looking at Chinese art, working on a Chinese-themed production and adopting a cut-out for his maquette suggests that Matisse had probably seen examples of Chinese papercuts during his stay.

Chinese papercuts, 剪纸 (jiǎnzǐ), which literally translates as scissor-cut paper, were first used in China as maquettes for embroidery, lacquer-ware and architectural detailing.³¹ The earliest extant papercut (Fig.29) originates from Sinkiang in Guangxi Province and was discovered on an archaeological site dating to 386–581 AD.³² Coincidentally, it is in the form of a sophisticated rosette motif probably used for a window design.³³ Papercuts, usually in auspicious red, are central to Chinese Spring Festival celebrations and are used ceremonially to decorate windows, which were traditionally made of white paper.³⁴ Matisse's practice echoed this since he often adhered his cut-outs onto a white ground. He told his friend André Verdet that in his cut-out *The parakeet and the mermaid* the white background created a 'white-atmosphere a rare and impalpable quality'.³⁵

Matisse's technique of pre-colouring the paper also has a Chinese precedent. During a visit to a cottage factory producing papercuts in Nanjing, the Sinologist Josef Hejzlar observed that the craftsmen would pre-dye the paper themselves in advance of cutting, which meant 'each new idea is formed while the artist is cutting and even the most complicated designs need no previous sketch'.³⁶ Matisse was said to have practised *le dessin de mémoire* and thus often created his cut-outs spontaneously.³⁷

The construction of Matisse's cut-out compositions was also influenced, as Roger Fry observed, by the use of space in Chinese art.³⁸ Around 1942, when Matisse adopted the cut-out in earnest, he had written to his friend André Rouveyre 'that in the work of the Orientals the drawing of the empty spaces left around the leaves counted as much as the drawing of the leaves themselves'.³⁹ It was probably to these 'aesthetic goals' that he was referring during his discussion over dinner with John D. Rockefeller Jr, as this observation could equally be applied to Chinese porcelain. Matisse had gone so far as to say that he had tried 'to imitate the Chinese' in his art.⁴⁰ This would account for the dramatic change in the use of space from Matisse's oil paintings, where the compositions can often be claustrophobic – the entire picture surface saturated with colour, fabric and wallpaper – to the extreme simplification of the cut-outs, which rely on the juxtaposition of positive and negative space for their effect. It is significant, however, that Matisse told an interviewer as early as 1909 that 'he relied on Oriental art to help him express abstract ideas through the simplification of form and colour'.⁴¹ He considered his cut-outs to be the medium in which he achieved this goal, and from 1950 to 1954 Matisse's *œuvre* consists almost exclusively of cut-outs. The only other substantial body of work is a group of brush drawings using Chinese ink, the effect of which also depended on the use of positive and negative space.

After initial advances from Barr, communication regarding the Rockefeller commission was slow. On 3rd May 1954, Matisse wrote to Barr apologising that he 'must wait for several days

²⁷ R. Labrusse: 'Matisse's Second Visit to London and His Collaboration with the Ballets Russes', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 139 (1997), p.588.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.593.

²⁹ H. Spurling: *Matisse The Master: A Life of Henri Matisse: Volume Two, 1909–1954*, London 2005, p.230.

³⁰ Labrusse, *op. cit.* (note 27), p.596, where the author identifies this cut-out as being Matisse's first.

³¹ J. Hejzlar: *Chinese Paper Cut-Outs*, London 1960, p.10.

³² J. Warner: *Chinese Papercuts*, Hong Kong 1978, p.8.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Hejzlar, *op. cit.* (note 31), p.10.

³⁵ Elderfield, *op. cit.* (note 21), p.31.

³⁶ Hejzlar, *op. cit.* (note 31), p.25.

³⁷ Cowart *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 19), pp.14 and 17.

³⁸ For Fry's observations, see Barr, *op. cit.* (note 25), p.149.

³⁹ Cowart *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 19), p.51.

⁴⁰ J. Leymarie *et al.*: exh. cat. *Henri Matisse*, Los Angeles (UCLA Art Galleries), Chicago (Art Institute) and Boston (Museum of Fine Arts) 1966, p.17.

⁴¹ C.H. Caffin: 'Henri Matisse and Isadora Duncan', *Camera Work* 25 (January 1909), quoted in Spurling, *op. cit.* (note 29), pp.47 and 472.

⁴² Letter from Henri Matisse to Alfred Barr, 3rd May 1954; RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

before I can give you a definite answer regarding the stained-glass window' as he, in turn, was awaiting a reply from his glazier.⁴² Barr, no doubt in an attempt to please Rockefeller, overstated Matisse's response by telling Rockefeller that 'he appeared willing to accept' subject to the response from the glazier.⁴³ It therefore came as a 'dash of cold water' when Barr received news that Matisse had rejected the commission because he was too frail to travel to Pocantico Hills to see the church.⁴⁴ Matisse felt it was of crucial importance to visit the site of his commissions in order to ensure his work fitted in with the ambiance of the building. Matisse expressed genuine regret at declining the commission 'because it prevents an expression of my warm feeling towards Mrs John D. Rockefeller Junior, of whom I have preserved a vivid memory'.⁴⁵

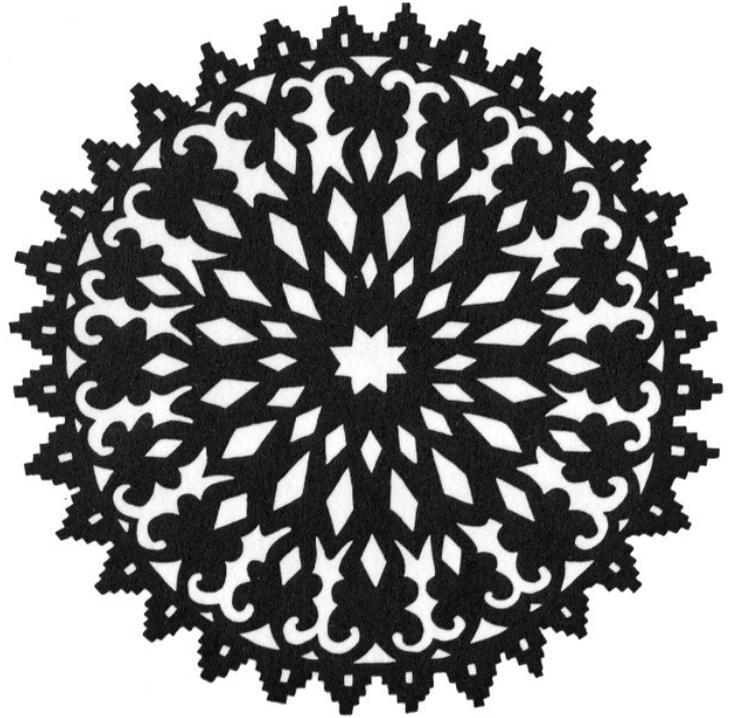
Barr sought to persuade Matisse to change his mind. However, it was Marga Barr, Alfred's wife and a fellow art historian, who came up with the helpful idea of providing Matisse with more visual material. Thus Alfred arranged to send some high-quality photographs of the interior and exterior of the Union Church, along with a full-scale 1:1 drawing of the window so that Matisse could pin it to his studio wall and study it.⁴⁶ 'Perhaps it would give you some sense of the actuality of the window and may lead you to experiment with a design', Barr suggested.⁴⁷ But this Matisse failed to do.

The following month Barr sent René d'Harnoncourt, the Director of MoMA, to Matisse's studio in Nice armed with photographs of the church. When d'Harnoncourt arrived he hung the full-scale drawing on the wall and Matisse immediately became interested in the commission.⁴⁸ D'Harnoncourt recorded in his diary: 'Alfred's guess that Matisse would not be able to withstand the temptation of seeing life-size drawings of the window before him was entirely correct [. . .] We fastened the full-scale drawing on the wall of Matisse's bedroom on Monday, and Tuesday afternoon more than half of it was filled with colour'.⁴⁹

Barr's perseverance was finally rewarded when, on 23rd August 1954, he received confirmation from Matisse that he would undertake the commission:

I have installed the latter [full-scale drawing] on the wall of my studio and have lived daily in sympathy with them. Thanks to this experience, the composition has appeared today possible, and I have commenced researches in harmony with the subject. Being fatigued at the beginning of summer, I have spent some weeks in rest before giving you this news that I felt my spirit caught by this project.⁵⁰

In a letter dated 17th September 1954, Barr gave Matisse more detailed instructions about the project in order to prevent any unnecessary delays (an important aspect, given Matisse's ill-health). Barr informed the artist that he was sending a more accurate drawing of full-scale sections of the window so that he could



29. Chinese papercut in the form of a rosette. Sinkiang, c.386–581 AD. From J. Warner: *Chinese Papercuts*, Hong Kong 1978, p.11.

'understand the depth of the shadows which may be cast on the window, which faces east'. Barr also discussed the content, stressing to Matisse that the subject of the window must be appropriate to the Rockefellers' devout worship:

[. . .] naturally, Mr Rockefeller does not wish to control your design in any way, but since the window is to go in a protestant chapel, he would like to know before the design is completed, what, if any, symbolic motifs you intend to use. There would, of course, be no question about leaf forms or geometric forms.⁵¹

Matisse misunderstood these instructions probably due to Barr's use of the confusing 'no question' (*pas question*), which in English expresses the affirmative, while in French translates as absolutely not. When the maquette was at the point of completion, Matisse replied to Barr telling him that 'in order not to disturb in any way the spirit of this protestant chapel I have avoided employing any symbol of any kind, I have not used geometrical forms and leaves, just as Mr Rockefeller desired'.⁵² When Rockefeller received Matisse's letter it must have put Barr in an awkward position as he would have had to explain why his instructions were so restrictive. Barr was quick to suggest, albeit downplayed in a postscript, that the original letter had been misinterpreted,

⁴³ Letter from Alfred Barr to Nelson Rockefeller, 7th May 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁴⁴ Letter from Henri Matisse to Alfred Barr, 11th May 1954 and letter from Alfred Barr to Nelson Rockefeller, 21st May 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁴⁵ Translation dated 11th May 1954, RAC.

⁴⁶ Letter from Alfred Barr to Henri Matisse, 15th June 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714. It was not entirely accurate, perhaps because of the speed with which they commissioned the full-scale drawing.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Letter from René d'Harnoncourt to Alfred Barr, undated [marked as received 6th July 1954], RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁴⁹ Smith and Barstow, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*; Smith and Barstow quote this letter but the translation I have used comes from the original letter in RAC.

⁵¹ It is not known whether Rockefeller had asked Barr to raise the question of the content of the design with Matisse or whether Barr had mentioned it of his own accord.

⁵² Letter from Henri Matisse to Alfred Barr, 28th October 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.



30. Detail of an Egyptian hanging. Nineteenth century. Cotton, 25.5 by 14.4 cm. (Private collection).



31. Photograph of Henri Matisse sitting in front of his Egyptian hanging in his villa at Vence, by Henri Cartier-Bresson. 1943–44. (Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paris).

adding optimistically ‘this misunderstanding may well have added to the freshness and originality of design’.⁵³

This makes the maquette for *La Rosace* one of Matisse’s few completely abstract compositions.⁵⁴ Yet, like most of the cut-outs, it retains a strong naturalistic feel, particularly in the sections of green glass and the motifs of the central rose. Matisse discussed how abstraction and nature were, to him, closely linked: ‘It is always when I am in direct accord with my sensations of nature that I feel I have the right to depart from them, the better to render what I feel. Experience has always proved me right [. . .] For me nature is always present’.⁵⁵

Matisse’s design of the motifs in *La Rosace* was inspired by a nineteenth-century Egyptian hanging that formed part of his extensive collection of textiles (Fig. 30). As is well-known, Matisse had grown up in the textile-producing area of France, and his family had been associated with the industry for generations.⁵⁶

He had begun collecting textiles, which he called ‘my working library’, from an early age and he used them to form backgrounds or decorative surfaces in his paintings.⁵⁷ An extant photograph taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson shows Matisse sitting in front of this Egyptian hanging in his villa in Vence in 1943–44 (Fig. 31).⁵⁸ In 1948 Matisse had used it to form the background of his painting *Interior with an Egyptian curtain* (Phillips Collection, Washington).⁵⁹ It is not known where the hanging was located when Matisse executed *La Rosace*, but he clearly had access to it as the similarity in the design testifies.

Despite repeated requests from Matisse, Barr neglected to send accurate drawings of the window which he felt necessary to the fulfilment of the commission. On 23rd September 1954, Lydia Delectorskaya, Matisse’s secretary and model, frustrated by Barr’s delays, wrote a blunt letter to him emphasising the importance of receiving the correct measurements of the

⁵³ Letter from Alfred Barr to Nelson Rockefeller, 6th November 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁵⁴ Some of Matisse’s paintings of interiors made during the First World War are abstract, but the titles place them firmly in the interior of a room; for example, see *Composition, the yellow curtain* (1915) and *Open window, Collioure* (1914).

⁵⁵ L. Gowing, ed.: exh. cat. *Matisse 1869–1954: A Retrospective*, London (Hayward Gallery) 1968, p.42.

⁵⁶ Spurling, *op. cit.* (note 18), p.15.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, fig.48.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.193. John Hallmark Neff noted the influence of Matisse’s textiles on his art and cited, among the various examples, ‘an Egyptian curtain’. However, he gave no specific details of works in which Matisse had used the curtain; J.H. Neff: ‘Matisse: His Cut-Outs and the Ultimate Methods’, in Cowart *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 19), p.31.

⁶⁰ P. Schneider: *Matisse*, London 1984, p.682.

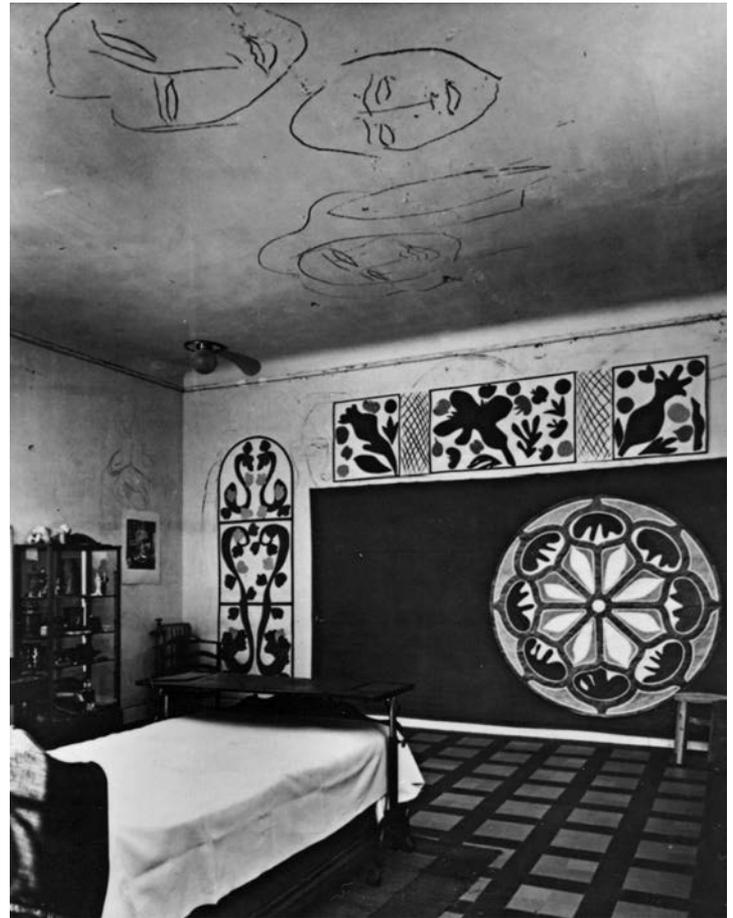
⁶¹ Letter from Lydia Delectorskaya to Alfred Barr, 23rd September 1954, RAC. N.A.

window. Delectorskaya's sensitivity to this may have been the result of Matisse's experience with his commission for the Chapel of the Rosary at Vence where, for reasons mainly related to the architectural design, he had to redesign the windows for the Chapel three times.⁶⁰ Given Matisse's precarious health, such delays over the commission for *La Rosace* could have easily compromised its completion. In the letter to Barr, Delectorskaya mentioned that Matisse had noticed that the large-scale drawings, received earlier, were inaccurate. She stipulated that 'my request for absolute precision may seem excessive to you, but it is necessary for two reasons, both essential; first of all for Mr. Matisse's composition, and then for the execution by the master-glazier'. She informed Barr that if Matisse were to use the scale drawings previously sent to him, some sections of the glass would require recutting, a situation that, to Delectorskaya, was 'inadmissible'.⁶¹ She finally made an urgent request for somebody to 'make on tracing paper the outline of each of the 25 openings separately, number them and establish the corresponding numbers on a small sketch showing their location from top to bottom'.⁶² Barr finally grasped the point, replying by cable on 27th September: 'SENDING EXACT GABARITS. REGARDS'.⁶³

On Wednesday 3rd November 1954, Barr received a long letter from Matisse dated 28th October 1954. The tone was optimistic: the design was progressing well after Matisse had finally received the accurate drawings which revealed 'a far greater beauty of form than the preceding scheme that was first sent to me'.⁶⁴ He added that 'I should, upon conclusion of the project (this means when I've really finished) send the maquette for Mr N. R.'s approval'.⁶⁵

On the following morning Barr woke up and turned on the 6 am radio news. He was 'shocked' to hear that Matisse had died the afternoon before. Matisse's reference to being so close to the 'conclusion of the project' took on a poignant yet ambiguous tone as Barr wondered how to ascertain whether the commission could be saved. The radio news added further uncertainty as it reported that Matisse 'had been working on a stained glass window at the time of his death', causing Barr to express grave doubts to Nelson Rockefeller: 'You can imagine my misgivings as to whether the design had been carried forward far enough to be executed in glass'.⁶⁶ Barr stayed at home that day in order to arrange for flowers and letters of condolence to be sent to Matisse's family.

The following morning he returned to his office at MoMA to discover, somewhat eerily, a second letter from Matisse, this dated 1st November 1954. The news could not have been better; Matisse thanked Barr for a blueprint that enabled him to 'finish satisfactorily the work I have been doing on the spaces, as you will see on the sketch I am going to send you'.⁶⁷ The project's completion now seemed a real possibility. In fact, according to Marguerite Duthuit, Matisse's daughter: 'On October 15 he



32. Photograph of Matisse's bedroom with the maquette for *La Rosace* pinned to the wall. 1954. (Rockefeller Archive Center, New York).

had the model for the rose that was to be placed in Mrs Nelson Rockefeller's chapel laid out, and would continue making adjustments to it right up until the moment of his death'.⁶⁸ A photograph of Matisse's bedroom taken shortly after his death shows the maquette still pinned to the wall facing the end of his bed (Fig. 32).

The last minute circumstances surrounding the commission (Fig. 34) were not lost on Barr, who wrote to Nelson Rockefeller on 6th November 1954:

Altogether the completion of the design was, I feel, a dramatic and moving affair. Let's hope that you will be pleased with the design. I suspect it may be one of the most original by Matisse. It is reassuring and exciting to read between the lines how stimulated he seems to have been by a problem which I have feared might have discouraged him or simply bored him.⁶⁹

Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁶² *Ibid.* (request underlined in the original letter).

⁶³ Cable from Alfred Barr to Lydia Delectorskaya, 27th September 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁶⁴ Letter from Henri Matisse to Alfred Barr, 28th October 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Letter from Alfred Barr to Nelson Rockefeller, 6th November 1954, RAC. N.A.

Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁶⁷ Letter from Henri Matisse to Alfred Barr, 1st November 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁶⁸ In 'Marguerite Matisse: les drames de mon père', interview with G. Ganne: *Les Nouvelles littéraires* (23rd April 1970), p.D17-18; quoted in Schneider, *op. cit.* (note 60), p.740.

⁶⁹ Letter from Alfred Barr to Nelson Rockefeller, 6th November 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

For Rockefeller, the window became imbued with emotional significance, not only for his mother but also for Matisse. He replied to Barr on 13th November 1954:

I can't tell you how excited I am about the Matisse Memorial Stained Glass window. Your letter and the enclosures from Matisse – his last letters – were really moving. Mother would have been so thrilled.

To have this window the last thing that Matisse did and to have him feel as he did about it, both because it was for Mother and because of his sensitivity to the challenge which it presented him, combine to make something far more wonderful and beautiful than we could have hoped for.⁷⁰

For his own part, Matisse had expressed genuine respect for Mrs Rockefeller and the project. He had written earlier to André Rouveyre: 'I am working on a commission for a rosace in glass which is destined for a small church in America as a memorial for Madame Rockefeller, who was very devout in her life. It is a job that is filling me with pleasure'.⁷¹

Following Matisse's death, there was, understandably, no word from his family for nearly a month. Marguerite Duthuit finally contacted Barr on 25th November 1955, telling him that her father had been 'very happy about the design' which he had finished.⁷² The maquette was then sent to New York for Rockefeller's approval, arriving sometime around 11th February 1955.⁷³

At this point, the focus of the commission shifted from the design to the manufacture of the window. Barr was uncertain how to proceed: he contemplated having the window made in America and the architect, Philip Johnson, agreed, suggesting that sheets of uncut glass should be sent to the United States.⁷⁴ However, Matisse had a history of collaborating on his stained-glass projects with the master-glazier Paul Bony. In his *Stained Glass: art or anti-art*, John Piper argued that the 'great windows of modern times are all the work of artists working with collaborative craftsman'.⁷⁵ For Piper, at a time when support for stained glass was at a low point, Matisse was a rare ray of hope,⁷⁶ an artist who was true to the medium:

The windows by Matisse at Vence are the pure expression of a painter who thought deeply about the stained glass medium and used it for his own entirely honest ends. They are a kind of free adaptation of his very original late *papiers collés*, and are cut from clear-coloured glass without any painted design or modification added, they are thought of as light-transmitting from the beginning.⁷⁷

Piper's incisive mind linked Matisse's paper cut-outs to his stained-glass windows. This is not an immediately obvious perception, considering one is opaque, the other transparent; one is stuck on to paper, the other embedded into leads. However,



33. Vase. Chinese, Qing Dynasty, Kangxi period, late seveneenth–early eighteenth century. Porcelain painted in over-glaze with enamels and gilt, 45.7 cm. high. (John D. Rockefeller Jr bequest, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

Matisse himself had linked the two media, and in a discussion of his Vence windows he referred to *Jazz* (1947), his famous book of cut-outs for Tériade: 'Those are stained glass colours. I cut the gouached paper as one cuts glass; it is just that, there, the colours are arranged to reflect light, whereas for the stained-glass they must be arranged so that the light comes through them'.⁷⁸ Matisse was naturally fastidious about the choice of colour for his glass and involved himself closely in the process of selecting the glass – always using glass blown at the works at St Just-sur-Loire.⁷⁹

After her father's death, Marguerite Duthuit took over the commission, partly to ensure the window was manufactured in France (see Appendix below). Matisse had thought it 'imperative' that Paul Bony make the window because he was 'trained to respect my designs'.⁸⁰ In December 1954, Duthuit revealed to Barr that 'my father had made the selection of colours of the type of glass for this rose window, and therefore its execution can be begun very quickly after Mr. Rockefeller replies'.⁸¹ A month later, she was still waiting for the exact price of the manufacture of the window as Bony had to obtain some undisclosed 'information concerning the white opaque and blue glass' before he could finalise the amount.⁸² Considering opaque white glass was not common in mid-twentieth century stained glass, it seems

⁷⁰ Letter from Nelson Rockefeller to Alfred Barr, 13th November 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁷¹ H. Finsen: *Matisse Rouveyre Correspondance*, Paris 2001, p.648, letter 1182.

⁷² Letter from Marguerite Duthuit to Alfred Barr, 25th November 1955, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁷³ Letter from Alfred Barr to Marguerite Duthuit, 11th February 1955; 'the maquette has arrived safely and is at present stored in our museum'.

⁷⁴ Letter from Alfred Barr to Nelson A. Rockefeller, 21st September 1954, RAC, N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁷⁵ J. Piper: *Stained Glass: art or anti-art*, London 1968, p.39.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.40.

⁷⁸ Néret, *op. cit.* (note 17), p.53.

⁷⁹ Smith and Barstow, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.17.

⁸⁰ Document cited at note 64 above.

⁸¹ Letter from Marguerite Duthuit to Alfred Barr, 13th December 1954, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁸² Letter from Marguerite Duthuit to Alfred Barr, 16th January 1955, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714; she is also keen to find out what Rockefeller thinks of her father's 'last design'.

⁸³ My thanks to Martin Harrison for his advice about the use of opaque white in twentieth-century stained glass.

probable that Matisse had requested very specific tones, thus causing the delay in pricing the window.⁸³ The milky opaque white of the glass that forms the ground colour in the *Rosace* window is reminiscent of porcelain. In fact, the palette that Matisse used again very specifically relates to the Kangxi porcelain that the Rockefellers collected (Fig.33). The Kangxi period was particularly noted for five colours used to decorate porcelain: blue, yellow (often verging on an orange hue), aubergine purple, green and black.⁸⁴ The *Rosace* window contains three of these colours and also the white ground that appears on many examples of Chinese porcelain. In fact, the beautiful white 'eggshell' (in the sense of translucence when the light shines through it) was the effect the Kangxi potters were trying to achieve and this has obvious links with the way Matisse used this colour in his window. The snakeskin green hue was particularly sought after in the Kangxi period because the potters were trying to imitate enamel, a glassy translucent colour/glaze that Matisse has clearly adopted, with brilliant luminosity, in his window.⁸⁵ It is also possible that the dark wooden mullions of the window, when seen from the ground, were intended to represent the black. The choice of these colours was a clever homage by Matisse to ensure his patrons were happy because he knew that both Nelson and John D. Rockefeller Jr had first to approve the design before the manufacture could commence.

On 6th June 1955, Paul Bony's wife, Adeline, sent Duthuit the final quotation for the glass.⁸⁶ This was more than anticipated owing to each light being of a slightly different size, which meant it was more time consuming to embed each piece of glass into the lead. This is particularly apparent in the 'limbs' of the snakeskin green forms, which are so small and delicate that they were encased in tiny, separate leads. Bony's extraordinary craftsmanship is demonstrated in the skilled judgments he made where one small piece of glass could be placed in one single section of lead, whereas another, only a fraction larger, required reinforcement.⁸⁷

For Matisse's daughter the project was an extremely emotional affair and she frequently refers to it as the last work of her father.⁸⁸ No doubt as a result of this she took extra care to ensure the manufacturing process was as close to Matisse's wishes as possible. When the resultant tones in some of the glass from the first firing were inaccurate, she took the decision to cease production and delay the window,⁸⁹ and insisted on a second firing. The glass was manufactured by 14th December 1955, but the window was not unveiled in the Chapel until 13th May in the following year.⁹⁰

The Trustees of the Union Church, at the suggestion of Nelson Rockefeller, eventually decided to plant a pine tree behind the church and in front of Matisse's window. Rockefeller instigated this in order to prevent the sun shining too powerfully through the window, thus ensuring that it gave 'the kind of light



34. Photograph of *La Rosace*, stained-glass window by Henri Matisse and Paul Bony. Union Church, Pocantico Hills, Tarrytown, New York. (Rockefeller Archive Center, New York).

originally planned by Matisse'.⁹¹ When the tree matured it could be seen swaying against the glass, casting beautiful shadows,⁹² an interaction between nature and art that Matisse might well have appreciated.

The *Rosace* window has received little critical attention largely due to the nature of the commission being misunderstood. While prejudice towards the decorative arts had at one time seen Matisse's cut-outs dismissed by N eret as 'the last hobby of a crippled old man',⁹³ the maquette for *La Rosace* suffered further from having been one of the only designs that Matisse made for a pre-existing framework. For the English critic Robert Melville, who was clearly not aware of the origin of the commission, and who could not comprehend the window's Art Nouveau overtones, it 'had the look of incipient nostalgia'.⁹⁴ For Pierre Schneider, '*La Rosace* with its calculated, still stylized composition contrasting with the boundless space of the 1952–53 decorative works, reflects the state of exhaustion of the artist [. . .] who died only a few days after its completion'.⁹⁵ Certainly the confines of the mullion window meant the use of space is distinct from Matisse's other late cut-outs and this, coupled with its position as Matisse's last work, have led to its being largely, but unjustly, excluded from Matisse's canon and not having received the critical attention it deserves.⁹⁶

⁸⁴ W. Speiser: *Chinese Art*, London 1964, p.66.

⁸⁵ M. Sullivan: *The Arts of China*, Berkeley 1984, p.241.

⁸⁶ Letter from Adeline Bony to Marguerite Duthuit, 6th June 1955, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1715.

⁸⁷ My thanks to Brian Clarke for drawing my attention to these technical points.

⁸⁸ Letter from Marguerite Duthuit to Alfred Barr, 16th January 1955, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1715.

⁸⁹ Letter from Marguerite Duthuit to Nelson Rockefeller, 25th November 1955, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1714.

⁹⁰ Letter from Richard Hanson, Pastor of the Union Church, to Nelson Rockefeller, 9th May 1955, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A.

Box 156/1716.

⁹¹ Letter from Nelson Rockefeller to Roy O. Johnson, 27th December 1956, RAC. N.A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities. III.4.A. Box 156/1717.

⁹² The tree died three years ago and is in the process of being replaced, as explained to the present writer by a guide at the church.

⁹³ Noted by N eret, *op. cit.* (note 17), p.7.

⁹⁴ R. Melville: 'Isis and her Sacred Cows', Gallery Section, *Architectural Review* (October 1964), p.285.

⁹⁵ Schneider, *op. cit.* (note 60), p.706.

⁹⁶ An exhibition devoted to Matisse's cut-outs will be held at Tate Modern, London, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2014–15.

Appendix

'Notes on the conception exacted by Mr. Matisse for the realisation of his maquettes for stained glass', a document prepared by Marguerite Duthuit as guidance notes for the installation of *La Rosace*. (New York, Rockefeller Archive Center. Nelson A. Rockefeller, Personal Activities, III.4.A Box 156/1718).

1. To employ at all times the smallest and least lead possible.

As with all of the precedent stained glass windows of Mr. Matisse, we have employed the smallest lead possible, safeguarding, at the same time the resistance.

2. The design must be respected to the utmost degree.

The design of the 'Rosace' has been respected to the maximum, and always in the spirit previously indicated by the artist, that is, that the lead is always absorbed within the contour of the deepest coloured volumes.

3. The necessary 'cuts' or cutting of a form or motif are to be always vertical or horizontal.

The direction of the 'cuts', necessitated by the technic [sic] and indispensable to the solidity, has been established parallel and at angles of 45° in relation to each section and its axis, this axis being the radius passing through the center of the panel.

Remarks to aid in the placing of the windows:

After the plan which was given to us the rabbit into which the window sections are to be placed seems to have 13 millimeters, the lead employed having only 10m/m, the perimeter of the circumference of the windows has hence been reduced voluntarily 1m/m, 5 to facilitate the setting.

The mastic may fill the remaining follow of the rabbit, cover the lead, but never touch the glass.

Fill the rabbits with a small quantity of a supple and unctuous mastic, then set in the glass section, holding it by the lead. Due to the fact that the interior surface of the windows is often ground glass which is marked by the slightest contact of even the fingers, always handle and hold the sections by the lead, taking care, however, on the outer edges to exert pressure only at the solder points to avoid breakage.

If it happens, despite precautions, that a glass may be spotted with fingerprints or mastic, clean only with a rag imbued with oil, avoiding any contact with the leads, which would cause new spots.

A reconsideration of Roger Hilton's 'September 1963 (Figure and bird)'

by TIMOTHY BOND

IN THE LATTER part of 1963 Roger Hilton painted three of the most exhilarating pictures of his career: *September 1963 (Figure and bird)*, *December 1963 (Oi yoi yoi)* and *December 1963 (Dancing woman)*.¹ Their animation and powerful presence have ensured their status as his most popular works.² The subject of each is an imposing female nude that dominates the canvas. *Oi yoi yoi* and *Dancing woman* are twins, in a manner of speaking; Hilton was pleased with what he had achieved in the first one and wanted to paint it again in different colours. *Figure and bird* is the only one of the three in a landscape format and remained alone as a definitive statement of the theme. It has not received as much positive critical comment as the other two works.³ The joyous energy of the leaping nude in the December paintings can certainly be linked to what Norbert Lynton described as 'the great tradition of wild women, maenads or bacchantes, participants in Bacchus's orgies, along with satyrs and tigers',⁴ but the inclusion of the drawing of the bird in the September picture not only opens up the work to various analogies with earlier

paintings but also complicates it psychologically. This last fact has led to some critical misunderstandings.

Figure and bird (Fig. 35), the largest of the three works, is painted in a limited number of boldly juxtaposed colours, most of them apparently impetuously applied. The body of the nude, as in the other two works, is a negative form (partly unpainted primed canvas), with the difference that this one is partly overlaid by the picture's dominant area of vivid red. The fact that the head has been excluded is a more extreme version of the idea in the two December paintings of omitting facial features so as to remove the possibility of any sentimental reading of the figure. The bird's head we do see. Like many other depictions by Hilton, this bird is not only a splendid representation of its kind but also acts as a surrogate human presence.

It is perhaps at this stage that allusions begin to register. The bird is either looking at the lower part of the torso that we can see, or at the other side of it (the ambiguity comes from Hilton's principled and consistent adherence in the works of

¹ The paintings are respectively in the Southampton City Art Gallery, in the Tate, London, and at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh. (Regarding the titles, Hilton oil paintings from 1953 onwards would be described only by their date or dates of execution, for that is how he inscribed them, sometimes with subtitles added in brackets. In written form the descriptions should always begin with the date, to reflect Hilton's emphasis on the abstraction of these works. The subject of this article bears on the reverse only the simple inscription 'Hilton / Sept '63 / 46 x 70'; the subtitle *Figure and bird* came to be associated with it subsequently.)

² That is, insofar as the public has had a chance to see them. *Figure and bird* made a strong impact in the rotunda of Tate St Ives in 2006, as part of a small but impressive Hilton exhibition curated by Chris Stephens. It has also sometimes been on show at Southampton (the City Art Gallery owns an impressive group of Hiltons bequeathed by the former Tate Gallery curator David Brown), and it is scheduled to be included with other works by Hilton in a two-person exhibition there (together with Larry Wakefield) from January to March 2014. The other two paintings were shown at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, in 2008, and at Tate St Ives (both of them in 2006, *Oi yoi*