



Ambassador's Activities

2014

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Speech by HE Bernard Emié,
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the inauguration of the exhibition
“Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs” at the Tate Modern

14 April 2014

Cher Lord Browne,

Cher Nick Serota,

Cher Chris Dercon,

Distinguished guests,

It's a privilege to be with you for the inauguration of this exhibition, and I thank you for it.

It's such a major event for the French Embassy that I chose this exhibition's showcase image to illustrate the Embassy's greetings card for 2014!

With your help, London is paying homage to the only artist Picasso feared, the man who many believe shares with him the title of "father of modern art".

Matisse's stature could scarcely be increased, when one considers that even during his own lifetime, the Fauvist artist enjoyed a retrospective in New York as early as 1929 and a museum created for his work in Le Cateau-Cambrésis in 1952.

The Tate Modern has chosen to highlight what Matisse called his "second life", his final decade, which saw the emergence of a new style, a new medium and a radicalism that turned Picasso himself green with envy!

Approaching an artist's work from the angle of the "late style" is a tempting and a risky move: the Tate Liverpool took up the challenge a year and a half ago by bringing together the mature works of Monet, Turner and Twombly.

It brings out the unprecedented inventiveness of such artists' later works, resulting from physical constraints which led directly to abstraction and to the eclipse of drawing by the pure expression of colour and emotion.

There's a great deal of that in the exhibition you're offering today. It's easy to understand why Matisse's collages, which are among his most audacious works, directly influenced geniuses of abstraction like Pollock and Rothko.

But this exhibition reveals something else.

Whereas maturity is often accompanied by gravity, melancholy and existential doubt, you show very clearly that Matisse's response was an explosion of joy.

The years you cover here, from 1943 to 1954, were marked by war, family tragedy and persistent illness. And yet Matisse's answer was, and I quote: "You can't avoid growing old, but you can avoid living like an old person"!

He found his medium: "Colour... even more than drawing, is a means of liberation," he said. That's the Matisse recognized by great British artists like Bridget Riley – here this evening – and David Hockney. I thank you for organizing a programme of talks at the Tate which are a kind of "dialogue" with the French master.

My heartfelt thanks go to Nick Serota for his personal involvement as curator of this magnificent exhibition. Since I arrived in London, I've had the opportunity, on behalf of the French Republic, to decorate Nick Serota, Chris Dercon and, very recently, Penelope Curtis

for their exceptional contributions to promoting our greatest artists. Allow me to reiterate to them my gratitude and admiration for their intimate knowledge of the great French artists – both those of the past and those still emerging today – and for their infectious enthusiasm for this work shared with France, its museums, its artists and its curators.

I congratulate all the curators from the Tate, the Met and the MoMA who have lent their talents to this exhibition. I thank them above all for the close links they continue to maintain with our museums, without which none of what we've seen today would have been possible. I'm thinking of the Matisse family, the Matisse museums in Nice and Le Cateau-Cambrésis, the Centre Pompidou and the Musée d'Orsay – all willing and crucial partners that I'd like to thank warmly.

I haven't forgotten the sponsors, principally the Bank of America, which enabled this exhibition to reach the banks of the Thames.

Dear friends,

The choice of Matisse deeply touches us. The period you've chosen is, in a way, a return to Matisse's origins: northern France, the textile industry, the colours his mother painted on porcelain, the housepaints sold in his father's shop. All these factors helped make him the great artist he became.

I wish all the visitors who come here as much pleasure as I've had admiring these works.

Thank you./.