

Pinning Butterflies

BY JEAN CHARLOT

IT IS refreshing to find a book on Matisse* that expresses an honest opinion, not a blurb rehashed from the enthusiastic prophecies of those who discovered Matisse when he was a young man.

One can readily agree with Dr. Barnes' estimate that the artist is "great enough to sustain comparison with all but the greatest masters" (p. 210), but how he arrived at such a conclusion is something his book does not make clear. Perhaps he and his methods have grasped in Matisse's *œuvre* all that science can grasp — which is amazingly little. The descriptions of pictures which fill four-fifths of the book are as painstakingly accurate as the anatomical charts, followed by measurements in inches, intended to

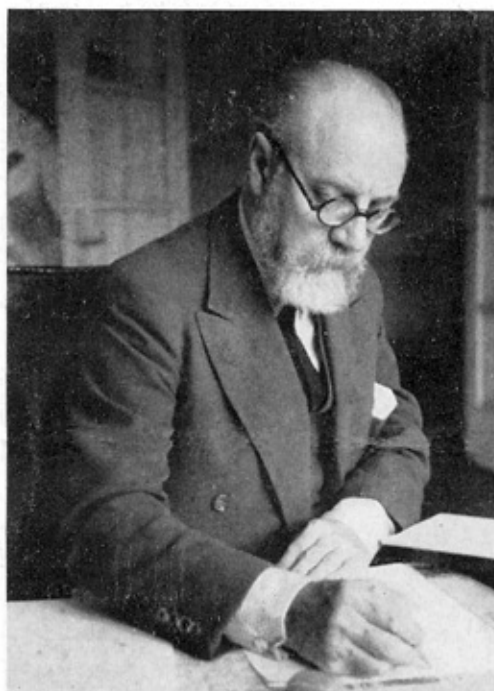
describe beauty-contest winners and prize-fighters, but the essence of beauty, or of strength, must lie in more hidden springs, since it remains undetected by such mathematical sleuthing.

Science can readily measure the size and grain of a canvas or the direction and breadth

of a brush stroke, but a painting in a dark room retains its distinct physical existence—yet cannot be said to function as a painting. Its true existence is optical, it lives only as an image created in the brain of the onlooker.

This optical and, so to speak, spiritual entity is already less open to scientific investigation, since much depends on the personality of the witness. A dog will connect only with the pigment as it lies on the canvas. An untrained human eye may go so far as to perceive the subject matter and the degree of faithfulness to the model. A pedant will go hunting for stylistic influences, while for the trained eye and sensitive brain the same work of art may open vistas of simple delight.

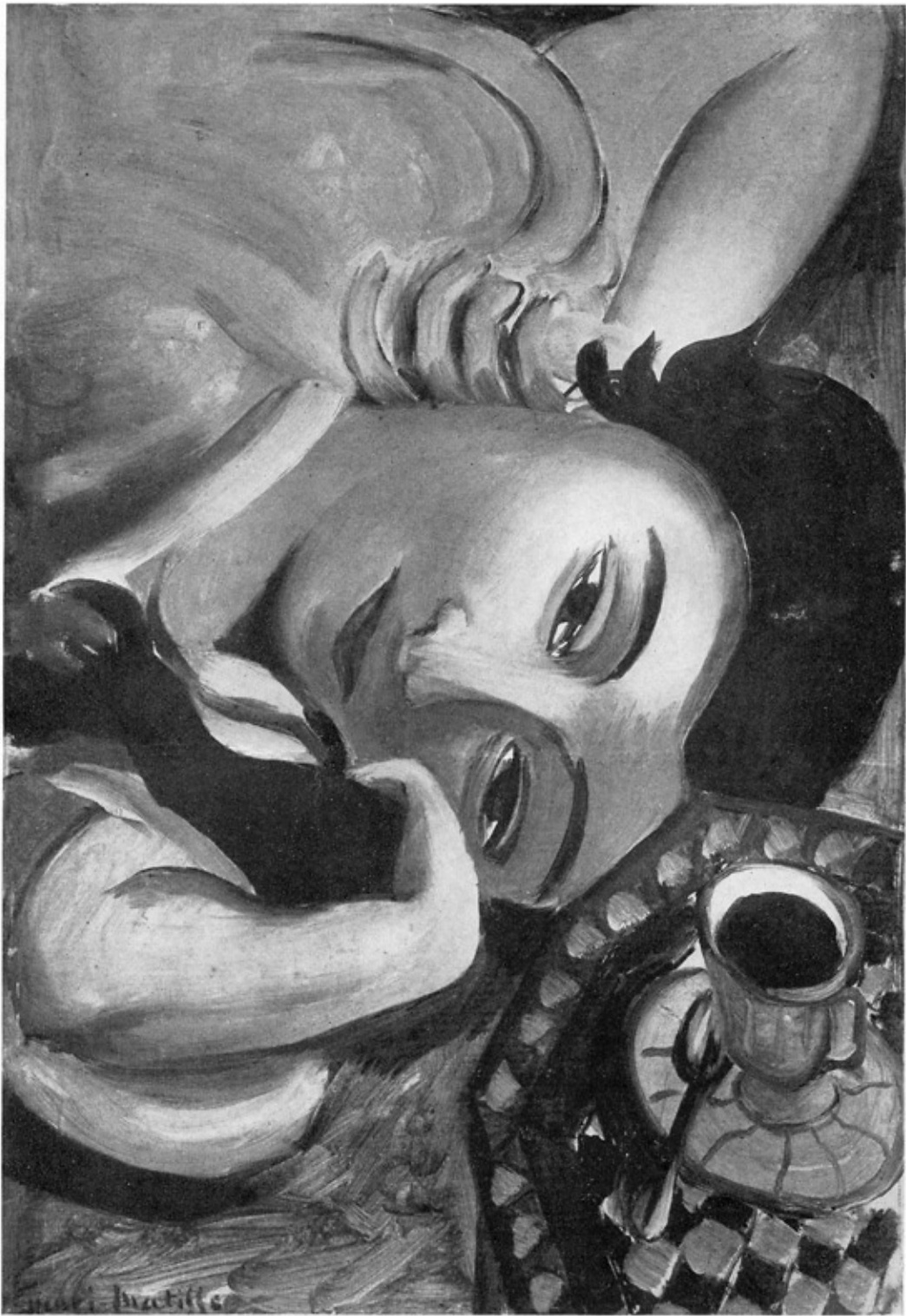
There is much in this book about pigment and much concerning the history of art but, whether from shyness to indulge in what he calls "gusts of irrelevant emotions" or from plain toughness of the eye, the author says little that could make us commune with the peace and plenty that Matisse's masterpieces suggest. In spite of its imposing array of archaeological references and its home-made terminology, it becomes evident that the



Photograph by Pierre Matisse

Henri-Matisse

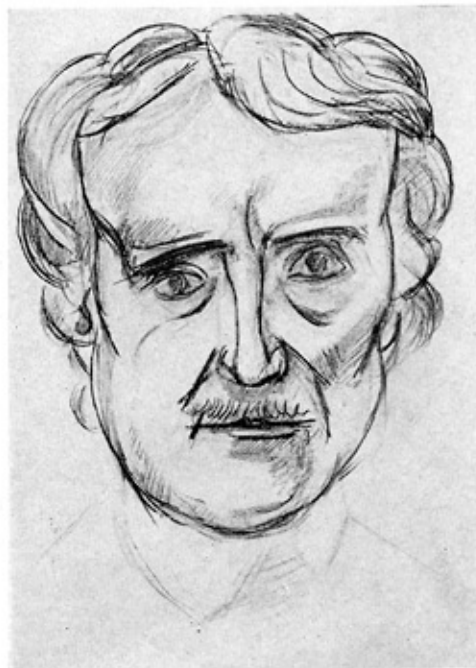
**The Art of Henri-Matisse*. By Albert C. Barnes and Violette de Mazia. Scribner. \$5.



Courtesy of the Marie Harriman Gallery

From a private collection

La Tasse de Café, by Henri-Matisse



Marie Harriman Gallery

*Preliminary sketch and drawing by Henri-Matisse to illustrate
"Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe," by Mallarmé*

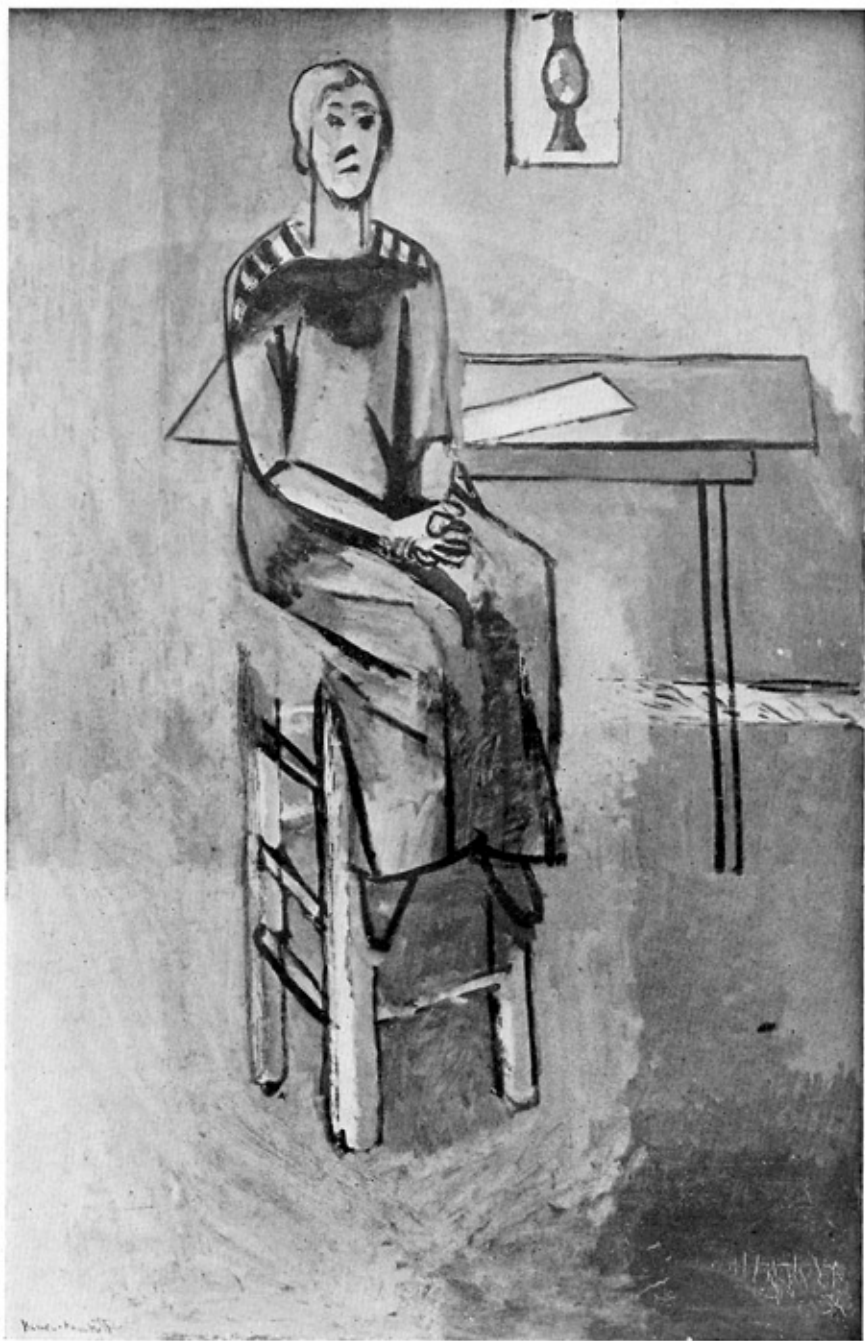
scientific method of Dr. Barnes cannot perceive further than Dr. Barnes' eye.

We can well believe the author when he reminds us that Matisse is a man of the nineteenth century, that he shares the creeds of the men of the 'nineties, is influenced by Japanese prints, then in their prime, trails somewhat behind the symbolist group of Pont-Aven and, of course, bridges the century over Cézanne. But when we are told that Matisse is possessed of an "avid intellectual curiosity which makes him explore ALL the traditions of art of ALL periods" (p. 19), it is time to prick up our ears. Dr. Barnes refers specifically to Byzantine mosaics, Persian tiles and miniatures, Egyptian fabrics, Chinese frescoes, early Greek drawings, Negro sculpture, Egypto-Roman portraits, and to the work of fourteen painters which Matisse artfully plundered. Such a pragmatic knowledge of history and geography in a Frenchman—and, at that, a painter—is

hardly credible, especially after rereading what Matisse himself wrote, that the artist "must sincerely believe that he has only painted what he has seen."

It may be that Dr. Barnes belittles the imposing influence of Nature in a painter's formation. Neither Byzantines nor Coptics nor Negroes were willful stylists. Nature struck them in such of her aspects as are most akin to their gifts. This same objective world is the treasure chest from which Matisse extracts his own forms. This and the repetitions of technique are enough to account for many resemblances.

Perhaps the most dangerous affirmation concerning the artist in question is the oft-repeated one that his interests are primarily decorative. To emphasize this decorative quality, the book suggests that he weakens or even suppresses the spatial values of his model so that "flatness is the rule in the great majority of



Museum of Modern Art

Woman on a High Stool, by Henri-Matisse (1913)



Valentine Gallery

Tête de Femme, by Matisse (1916)

Matisse's designs" (p. 126). The pictures thus duly flattened, Dr. Barnes proceeds to divide them into types according to their resemblances to flags, posters, cretonnes, tapestries, geographical maps, the fabric of gowns or of upholstery. It is true that Matisse uses but sparingly of those more obvious means of creating volume and space, chiaroscuro and the atmospheric degradation of tone, yet space is the all-dominant factor of his paintings which definitely distinguishes them from the objects listed above. In his own plastic vocabulary, the slightest modification of a color, even a change in the direction of a brush stroke, does round convincingly a fruit or a shoulder. The bands and stripes that are his most obvious theme, if they were taken at their face value, would make his pictures little more than the flag or the poster to which Dr. Barnes alludes, but he uses them only as a means to create space and light. In his hands they become surveyor's stakes which emphasize the three dimensions of his painted space and co-ordinate the objects in

the box-like formation that most of his pictures present.

So literally physical is Dr. Barnes' approach to painting that it seems at times as if food were his theme. He revels in the "juicy" impasto of Soutine and shrinks before the "dry, dull, arid, unappealing" surface quality of Matisse's paint, although such a surface fits eminently the kind of metaphysical balance that characterizes the best of his work.

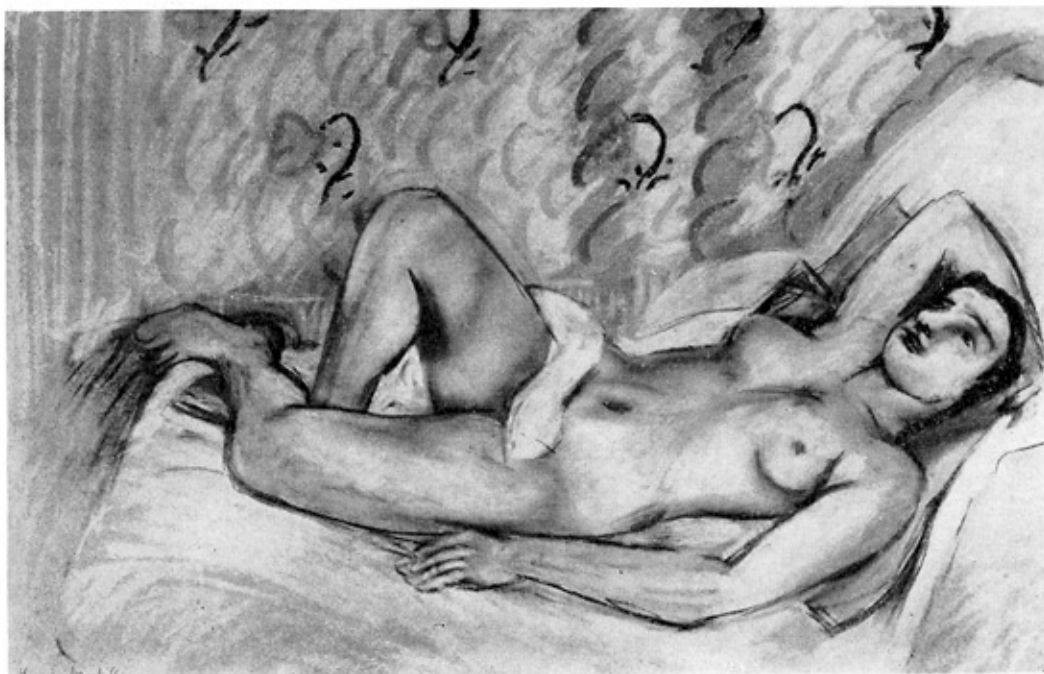
In his drawings, as in his sculpture, Matisse bares the deep human emotion that in the Nice oils he so politely dilutes. But their lack of analyzable props and, moreover, their psychological flavor make them difficult for Dr. Barnes to label, and it is with relief that he comes back to the bands and stripes and rosettes that for him seem the essential Matisse.

To think "Matisse" in the abstract, as we may think "Ingres" or "Delacroix," brings to most minds a mental, rather than a physical,



John Becker Gallery

Etching by Henri-Matisse



Pierre Matisse Gallery

Nu Couché, pastel by Henri-Matisse

image. Nor does it conjure quite as clear a mood as those two names do; rather does it suggest a dual personality. In the heroic pictures of the fauve period, in which he perhaps reached his loftiest climax, the sobriety and monumentality strike a monastic note not far removed from Giotto (*cf. Matisse's Woman on a High Stool, p. 357*).

Then occurred a breach, a relaxation of the inner tension, which transformed Matisse-the-Fauve into the supple and wellbred Matisse of the Nice period. In those pictures the bourgeois and *intime* feeling masquerades lightly under the trappings of Oriental bric-a-brac so dear to the heart of the Frenchman, who likes to travel at home, an Orient of the same brand

as Molière's *turqueries*. Those two notes, the heroic and the *intime*, sum up Matisse. Of the first one, the book does not speak, while the second, apart from its historical connotations, is alluded to in a footnote on page 205, very curtly, probably because the author felt he was here skirting the taboo subject of spirituality.

It may be that the book, much against its author's aim, builds up a case FOR the literary critics. Knowing the limitations of each medium, they do not attempt the wearisome task of duplicating in words the art object. "Scientific" criticism, on the other hand, in its concern with pigment and canvas, misses the spiritual quantity of which pigment and canvas are merely the hieroglyphics.