

GALLEY

June 7, 1966

Excerpts from a letter by Henri Matisse to Henry Clifford

Vence February 14, 1948

Dear Mr. Clifford:

I have always tried to hide my own efforts and wished my works to have the lightness and joyousness of a springtime which never lets anyone suspect the labors it has cost. So I am afraid that the young, seeing in my work only the apparent facility and negligence in the drawing, will use this as an excuse for dispensing with certain efforts which I believe necessary.

The few exhibitions which I have had the opportunity of seeing during the last years make me fear that the young painters are avoiding the slow and painful preparation which is necessary for the education of any contemporary painter who claims to construct by color alone.

This slow and painful work is indispensable. Indeed, if gardens were not dug over at the proper time, they would soon be good for nothing. Do we not first have to clear, and then cultivate, the ground at each season of the year?

When an artist has not known how to prepare his flowering period, by work which bears little resemblance to the final result, he has a short future before him; or when an artist who has "arrived" no longer feels the necessity of getting back to earth from time to time, he begins to go round in circles repeating himself, until by the very repetition, his curiosity is extinguished.

The future painter must feel what is useful for his development -- drawing or even sculpture -- everything that will let him become one with nature, identify himself with her, by entering into the things -- which is what I call nature -- that arouse his feelings. I believe study by means of drawing is most essential. If drawing is of the spirit and color of the sense, you must draw first, to cultivate the spirit and to be able to lead color into spiritual paths. That is what I want to cry aloud, when I see the work of the young men for whom painting is no longer an adventure, and whose only goal is the impending first one-man show which will first start them on the road to fame. It is only after years of preparation that the young artist should touch color -- not color as description, that is, but as a means of intimate expression. Then he can hope that all the images, even all the symbols, which he uses, will be the reflection of his love for things, a reflection in which he can have confidence if he has been able to carry out his education, with purity, and without lying to himself. Then he will employ color with discernment. He will place it in accordance with a natural design, unformulated and completely concealed, that will spring directly from his feelings; this is what allowed Toulouse-Lautrec, at the end of his life, to exclaim, "At last, I do not know how to draw anymore."

The painter who is just beginning thinks that he paints from his heart; the artist who has completed his development also thinks that he paints from his heart. Only the latter is right, because his training and discipline allow him to accept impulses that he can, at least partially, conceal.

I do not claim to teach; I only want my exhibition not to suggest false interpretations to those who have their own ways to make. I should like people to know that they cannot approach color as if coming into a barn door ("entrer au moulin"); that one must go through a severe preparation to be worthy of it. But first of all, it is clear that one must have a gift for color as a singer must have a voice. Without this gift one can get nowhere, and not everyone can declare like Correggio, "Anch'io son pittore." A colorist makes his presence known even in a simple charcoal drawing.

Yours, gratefully,  
Henri Matisse

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