



Matisse, as Curated by Ellsworth Kelly, Presents Unique Perspective at Katonah Museum of Art

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by Susan Hodara

KATONAH, N.Y. — Shortly before his death in December 2015, Ellsworth Kelly received an enticing offer. The renowned American minimalist painter and sculptor was invited to curate an exhibition of drawings by Henri Matisse, whom Kelly considered a significant inspiration dating back to his years as a young artist living in Paris. “Picasso made me want to paint,” he said, “but Matisse drawings made me want to draw.”

So Kelly, then almost 90, pored through 450 images from throughout [Matisse’s](#) career and whittled his selection to 45 works, some undated, the rest from 1930 to 1951. He then proceeded to apply his discerning eye to specify every detail of their installation.

The result, “Matisse Drawings: Curated by [Ellsworth Kelly](#) from The [Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation](#) Collection,” is currently on view at the [Katonah Museum of Art](#), about an hour north of Manhattan in Westchester County. The show offers visitors the opportunity to witness Matisse’s agility as a draughtsman and to examine up close the dynamism of his lines. It also provides a unique perspective on Matisse’s work as considered through Kelly’s aesthetics.

“It shows the precision of Kelly’s artistic vision translated into curating and installation,” Elizabeth Rooklidge, the Katonah Museum’s Associate Curator, said. “An artist’s insight into process is one that a curator or an art historian can’t always provide.”

The drawings, all identically matted and framed in blond wood, are spaced evenly in a horizontal row that traverses the museum’s two main exhibition galleries. There are no labels (a brochure identifying each piece is available at the entrance).

Many of the works are portraits, mostly of women. There are sketches and studies alongside finished drawings. Several are made with charcoal; some are done with pencil, their marks delicate and faint. Others feature bold brushstrokes of black ink, or lines that shift from thin to thicker, conjuring the pressure of the artist’s hand. All are black and white except for a still life of a fruit bowl and a vase of flowers set against a backdrop of exuberant yellow stripes.



“Study of a Woman” by Henri Matisse, n.d. Pencil on paper, 9 13/16 x 12

13/16 inches. © 2016 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy American Federation of Arts and Katonah Museum of Art.

The exhibition opens with two drawings of [Louis Aragon](#), created in 1943 when the French poet and Dadaist was visiting Matisse at his home in Nice. Aragon had intended to spend just a few days, but once Matisse began sketching, the stay turned into three weeks and a series of 30 portraits. Aragon's initial response was that the drawings didn't look like him. But the more he studied them, the more he recognized himself. "He said, 'Matisse has captured 30 of my different sides,'" Rooklidge said.



"Aragon" by Henri Matisse, 1943. Ink on paper, 20 7/8 x 15 15/16 inches. © 2016 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Courtesy American Federation of Arts and Katonah Museum of Art.

Matisse combined two sides of himself in his 1937 *Large Self-Portrait* (Grand autoportrait), one shadowing the other in smoky charcoal. "You can see his process in a single drawing," Rooklidge said of the work. While Matisse gazes beyond the frame, a bold diagonal on the left side suggests the artist's easel in front of him: a "meta gesture," Rooklidge called it.

Across the gallery, two ink drawings of a dancer from 1949 exemplify Matisse's ability to depict weight, movement and energy with deceptive simplicity and the most economical of lines. In *Dance movement, Christiane* (Mouvement de danse, Christiane), a few strokes form an outstretched leg, a leaning torso and a planted foot. A smudge on the page is a magical reminder of Matisse's presence. "You can feel his hand there," Rooklidge said.

Organized by the American Federation of Arts and the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in collaboration with The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation, "Matisse Drawings" includes a separate area hung with Kelly's botanical drawings. "Plant Lithographs by Ellsworth Kelly, 1964-1966" presents nine large black-and-white lithographs: flowering plants, assorted leaves and citrus fruits portrayed with spare, occasionally abstracted lines.



"Leaves (Feuilles)" by Ellsworth Kelly, 1964-65. Lithograph on Rives BFK Paper, 35 3/8 x 25 inches. Collection of the

artist. Courtesy Katonah Museum of Art.

The similarities between the two artists' drawings are undeniable: the clarity of the mark, the rhythm of the composition, the emphasis on contour. And both used drawings as studies for other works.

But there are differences. In the drawings on view, Kelly's marks are concise and deliberate, evoking a sense of quietude. In contrast, Matisse's lines are at times scribbly, frenetic, surprising. In his *Themes and variations VI* (Thèmes et variations VI) from 1942, the line of a forearm turns into a loopy bracelet. In many of his faces, a continuous line forms the arc of an eyebrow and swoops down to become the outline of a nose. Some of his figures extend beyond the edge of the page, one cropped right through the eyes.



"Nude with a bracelet" by Henri Matisse, n.d. Ink on paper, 12 5/8 x 9 1/4 inches. © 2016 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy American Federation of Arts and Katonah Museum of Art.

In an interview with John R. Stomberg, who was the director of the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum when "Matisse Drawings" debuted there, and who had asked Kelly to curate the show, Kelly distinguished his drawings from Matisse's. "Matisse evoked space," Kelly said. "... he would leave openings." In Kelly's own drawings, the lines connect: "... the forms are closed," he said.



"Lemon (Citron)" by Ellsworth Kelly, 1965-66. Lithograph in black ink on handmade Arches paper, 35 1/4 x 24 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Katonah Museum of Art.

Museumgoers surrounded by Matisse's work might feel a delight similar to what Kelly felt when he was assembling the exhibition. Of the drawings, he told Stomberg, "... each one has something to hit on - something that you land on, and it's exciting. ... He doesn't, he can't, make a mark without it being Matisse."

BASIC FACTS: “Matisse Drawings: Curated by Ellsworth Kelly” is on view from October 23, 2016 to January 29, 2017 at the Katonah Museum of Art, 134 Jay Street—Rte. 22, Katonah, NY 10536. Guided tours Tuesday through Sunday, 2:30 p.m. www.katonahmuseum.org

While There: Two monumental sculptures by Mark di Suvero are on view on the museum’s grounds. *Yoga* stands 29 feet tall on the South Lawn; *Rust Angel* graces the Marilyn M. Simpson Sculpture Garden. Both remain on view through autumn 2017.

Museum Insider: Katonah Museum of Art is re-launching “[WeI DIRECTED](#),” its series of talks devoted to leadership in the arts, with an evening featuring Adam Weinberg, the Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, in conversation with Katonah Museum of Art Executive Director Darsie Alexander. The event will take place on February 16, 2017 at the NYC home of collectors Denise and Andrew Saul. Seating is limited. For tickets and details, contact the museum’s Development Associate Cara Nolan at cnolan@katonahmuseum.org, call 914-767-2968, or visit the [KMA website](#).

Susan Hodara is a journalist who has written more than 350 articles about artists and the arts for *The New York Times*, *Communication Arts* and other publications. She is also an educator who teaches at the Hudson Valley Writers Center and the International Center of Photography, where her workshop helps artists write about their work. She is co-author of the collaborative memoir “Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance With Our Mothers” (Big Table Publishing, 2013). More at www.susanhodara.com.

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