

# HENRI MATISSE: Writers on Paper

*Selected Drawings and Prints from  
The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation*

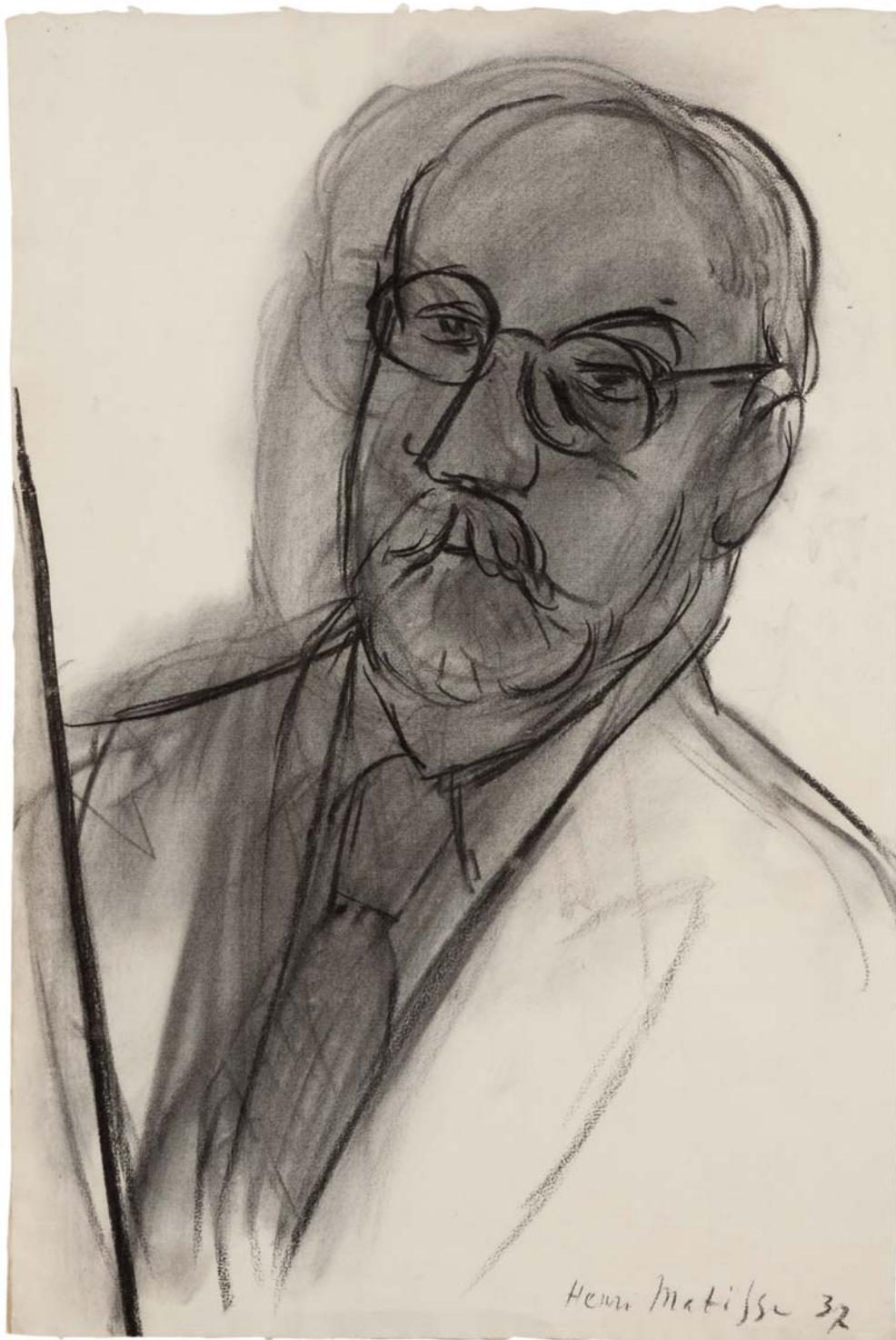


Cover:

Portrait d'homme de profil (Roger Bernard), 1946 (cat. no. 6)

Back cover:

Aragon, 1943 (cat. no. 15)



Grand autoportrait, 1937 (cat. no. 1)

We honor Henri Matisse as the twentieth century's greatest colorist, yet there is no separating his luminous palette from his line—that infinitely resourceful arabesque—and his drawings and prints often dispense with color altogether. The works in this exhibition are all black-on-white, save for two linogravure images of the poet and resistance fighter Roger Bernard. In these prints, Matisse sends white lines curving with sinuous grandeur across fields of velvety black.

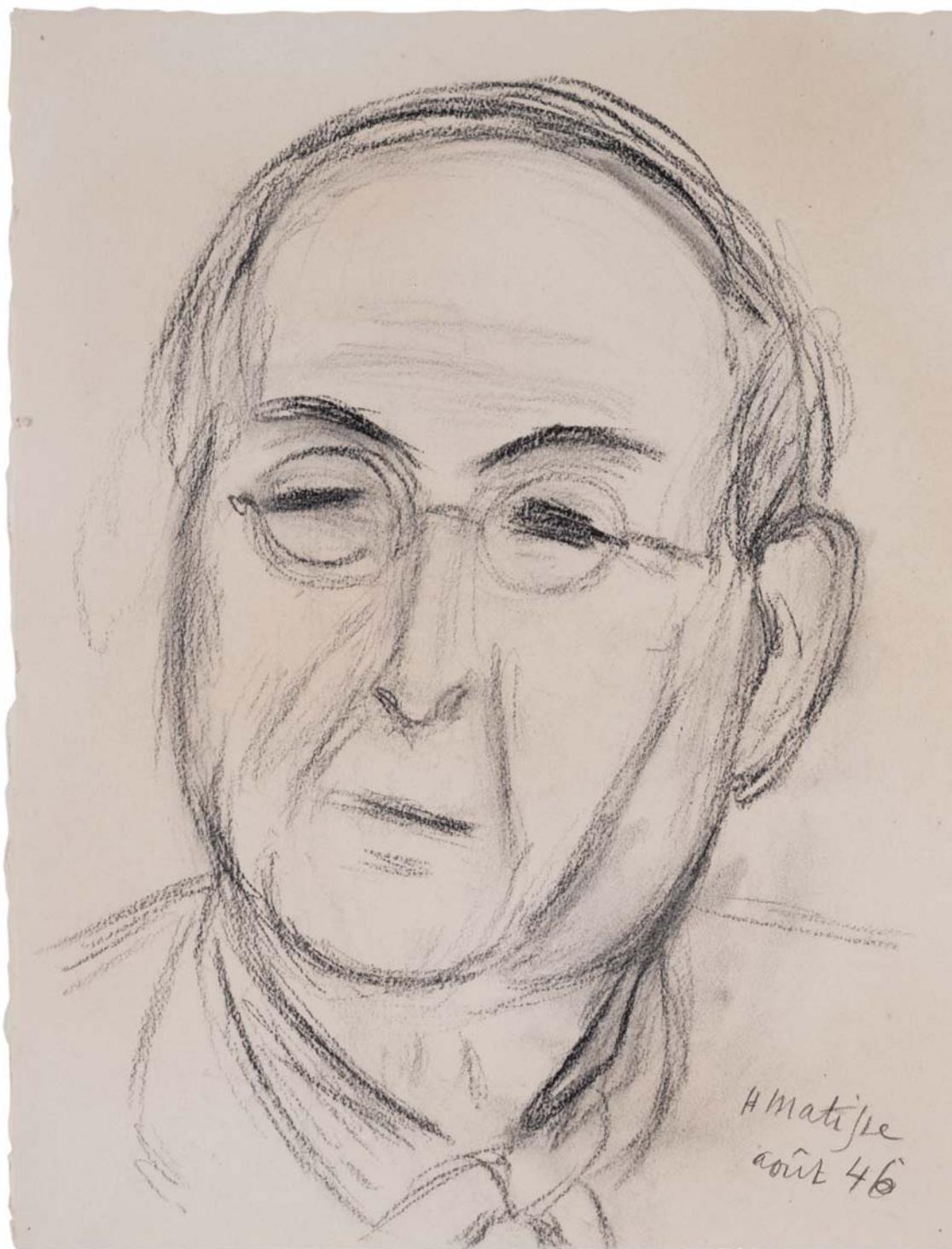
Throughout the show, one thinks of the black and white of the printed page, for the subjects on view are all writers. With the exception of Bernard, they were friends of Matisse or, at the very least, acquaintances. Soon after the Second World War, the artist was asked to make a portrait of a critic and essayist named Paul Léautaud, for inclusion in an edition of the writer's work. One of these drawings is a model of straightforward concision. Two others show Matisse at play, revising his sitter's features to match the flicker of a mood—amusement in one instance, pensiveness in another. Léautaud was baffled, saying that he couldn't find his face anywhere in Matisse's images. The artist had questioned the assumption that a portrait is a likeness. Moreover, he had challenged one of his own pronouncements.

In “Notes of a Painter” (1908), Matisse describes Impressionism as an art of “fleeting sensations” and goes on to say that he prefers the “greater stability” delivered by a focus on a subject's “essential character.” But where is the stability in his pictures of Léautaud? And what essence of Louis Aragon do we see in the seven drawings of the Surrealist poet included in this exhibition? Each could be seen as a likeness of an individual with, at most, a cousinly resemblance to the ones portrayed by the six other drawings. Nothing persists across this array of images but the salience of whichever cheekbone—left or right—is thrown into silhouette by a three-quarters view. And not even this physiognomic landmark is visible in all seven portraits. So much for art as the capture of essences.

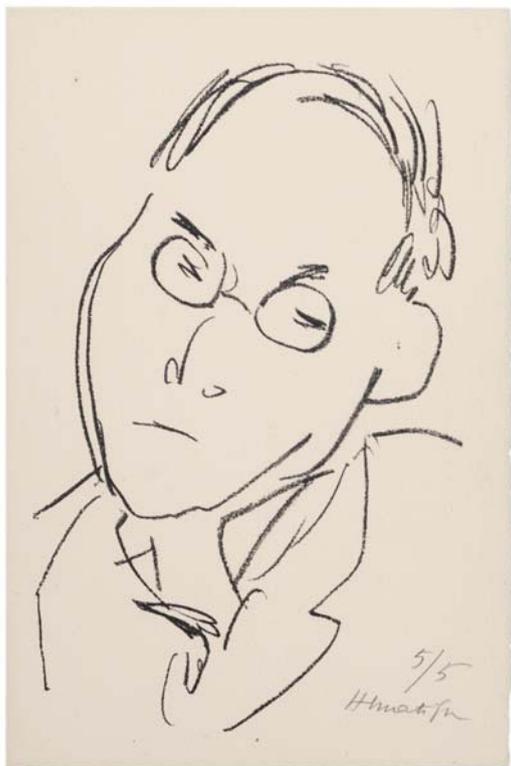
Or it may be that, for Matisse, an essence was not simple and unchanging but, rather, a manifold of possibilities that reveal themselves from moment to moment. If so, there would be no point in looking for a stable set of features in his portraits of Aragon. What we see in these drawings is a mutable personality making itself known through facial features that change with changes in mood and yet remain recognizable. For all their differences, the Aragon portraits gravitate toward one another. They orbit around the artist's idea of a certain, distinctive individual, and it is very unlikely that we would admit into their company a portrait of another sitter—say, Franz Thomassin, the avant-garde writer who published under the pseudonym Franz Villier. This exhibition's six lithographic images of Thomassin all present a domed forehead and full yet precisely shaped lips. There is also a characteristic tilt of the chin. Every other feature is subject to extreme modulation. Nonetheless, we learn to recognize the subject of these disparate images. We learn, as well—or once again, for this is not a new thought—that Matisse did not see art as a mirror. He was not a replicator of appearances. And if we accept his claim that he was, instead, a seeker of essences, we might add that he didn't discover the essential so much as invent it.

Angled views of Thomassin, Aragon, and other sitters gave Matisse the opportunity to imply plane and contour with astonishing subtlety. Profiles encouraged bluntness, as in the portraits of Henri de Montherlant, the dramatist whose Pasiphaé the artist illustrated in 1944. Two years earlier, Matisse made several lithographic portraits of Montherlant. The starkest of these render him in a single, magisterially meandering line, with just a few additions, to indicate eye, eyebrow, and nostril. In 1946, Matisse drew Roger Bernard in profile, and this portrait is also a study in statuesque clarity. The artist worked from a photograph, for Bernard had died two years earlier, shot by German soldiers who captured him during a reconnaissance mission. In the two white-on-black linogravure profiles of the young resistance fighter, his features recall those of emperors and heroes on ancient coins. Matisse gives him a monumental presence. Yet even in these portraits we see variations, especially in the shape of the nose. Even here, we see the exercise of freedom.

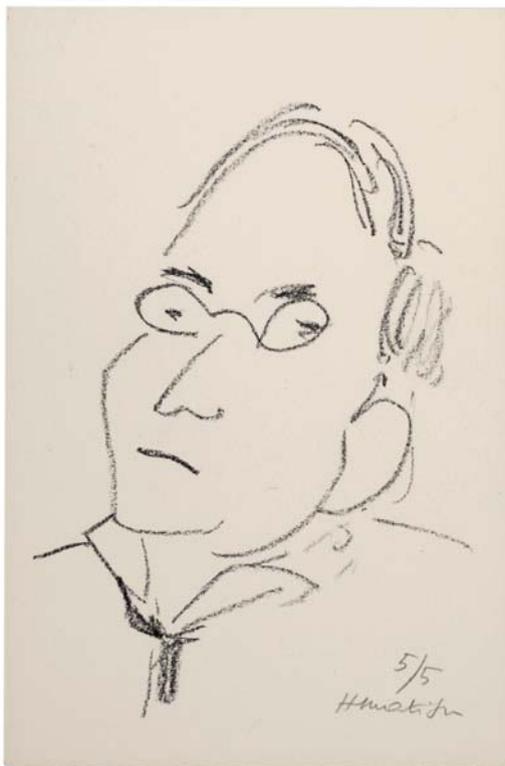
Carter Ratcliff



Portrait aux lunettes ( Paul Léautaud ), 1946 (cat. no. 2)



Paul Léautaud, 1946 (cat. no. 3)



Paul Léautaud, 1946 (cat. no. 4)



Paul Léautaud, 1946 (cat. no. 5)

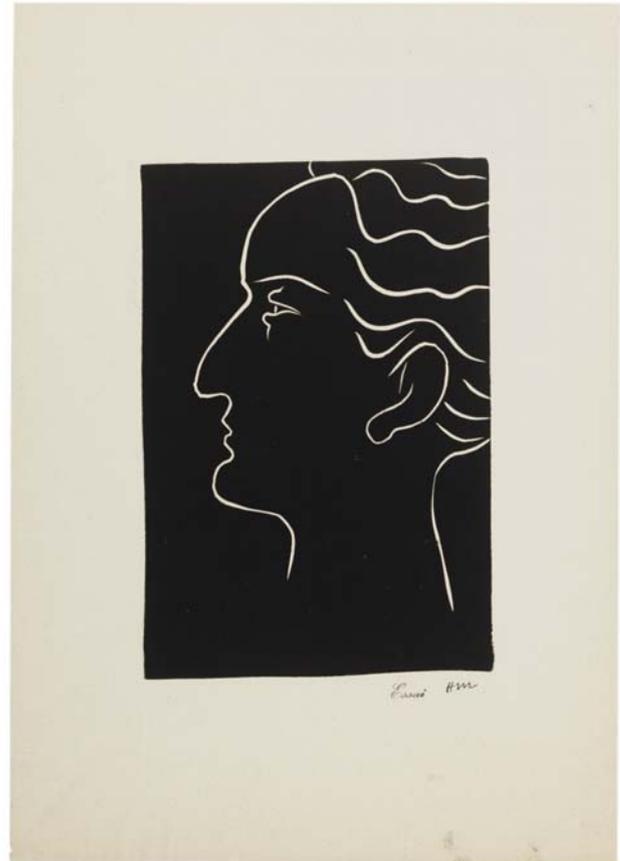
### Paul Léautaud (1872-1956)

A self-styled recluse and misanthrope, disdainful of wealth, Paul Léautaud received much notoriety in the years after World War II as an especially colorful witness to modern French literature and theater. Starting in 1907, he served as the regular drama critic for several prestigious if somewhat conservative French periodicals. Léautaud's private *Journal*, a rich record of the people and issues of the first half of the twentieth century, was published in nineteen volumes, beginning in 1954. His bedroom was eventually recreated as a display at the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, alongside those of his fellow writers, Anna de Noailles and Marcel Proust.

The editor of *Choix de pages de Paul Léautaud* (1946) was Matisse's old friend André Rouveyre (1879-1962), who met Matisse in 1896 in an art class taught by Gustave Moreau. When Rouveyre at first requested a portrait frontispiece for his anthology of writings by Léautaud, Matisse refused. But in 1945, he was introduced to Léautaud in Paris and executed five portrait drawings in charcoal and then a dozen lithographs, from which the frontispiece was selected. True to character, Léautaud noted in his *Journal* that he could not recognize himself in the portraits by Matisse.



Roger Bernard, 1946 (cat. no. 7)



Roger Bernard, 1946 (cat. no. 8)

### **Roger Bernard (1921-1944)**

Roger Bernard was eighteen when the Second World War erupted. He and his wife Lucienne joined the maquis (Resistance guerillas) in the Calavon valley in Provence. The leader of this particular band, under the alias Capitaine Alexandre, was the poet René Char (1907-1988). Between sabotage missions, Bernard read his poems to Char, who encouraged his literary aspirations.

Returning from a mission on June 22, 1944, Bernard was captured by German soldiers, who shot him by the side of the road after he swallowed the message he was carrying. A peasant later recounted the scene to Char: "He was standing upright, unwavering, and obstinately silent."

Char wrote a preface to the collection of Bernard's poems *Ma faim noire déjà*. He arranged to have it published as a pamphlet immediately after the war's end by *Cahiers d'art*, including a photograph of the hero in profile. Matisse received a copy and wrote with excitement to Char on January 13, 1946, asking for more photographs of Bernard in order to undertake an illustrated edition of his poems. His letter indicates that he intended to include portraits of Bernard's widow and their son, Alain. Matisse sent money to Lucienne Bernard, who came to Vence to pose in May, 1946. Unfortunately, this book project was never completed.



Aragon, 1943 (cat. no. 9)



Aragon de profil, 1943 (cat. no. 10)

### **Louis Aragon (1897- 1982)**

Co-founder with André Breton and Philippe Soupault of *Littérature*, in 1919, Louis Aragon devoted himself after World War I to the advocacy of radical change in art and society. He championed dada, surrealism, and international exchange while establishing himself, by the late 1920's, as a leading art journalist, poet, and novelist. Along with his fellow poet, Paul Éluard, Aragon committed himself, in 1927, to the utopian ideals of the French Communist Party. His fervor was shared by the acclaimed Russian émigré writer, Elsa Triolet (1896-1970). Aragon and Triolet eventually wed in 1939. They were tireless activists on behalf of the Spanish Republican cause in the late 1930's and then of the French Resistance throughout the Second World War.

In September, 1941, Matisse invited Aragon and Triolet to visit him in Nice. Aragon agreed to write a preface to a book illustrating the sequences of master drawings made by the bed-ridden Matisse as he recuperated from surgery for intestinal cancer. The artist made some three dozen similar drawings of the writer as a record of their conversations during the following months. Notwithstanding the political misgivings of his art dealer, Martin Fabiani, *Thèmes et Variations* appeared in 1943. It included Aragon's observations about Matisse as an Old Master, extending the greatest traditions of world culture, with no thought of surrender in the face of brutal military aggression and political repression. Aragon and Triolet had been obliged to go underground before the book's publication, and were hidden by courageous sympathizers. The project created a bond between artist and writer. It endured despite Matisse's insistence on showing his recent designs for a Dominican chapel at Vence at an exhibition of his work, organized in 1950 with Aragon's participation, at the Maison de la Pensée Française, a partisan Communist, and thus anti-clerical, venue. Aragon's devotion continued long after Matisse's death in 1954, culminating in an extraordinary two-volume homage and memoir, *Henri Matisse, roman*. Published in 1971, it featured reproductions of the full series of portrait drawings made in the early months of 1942.



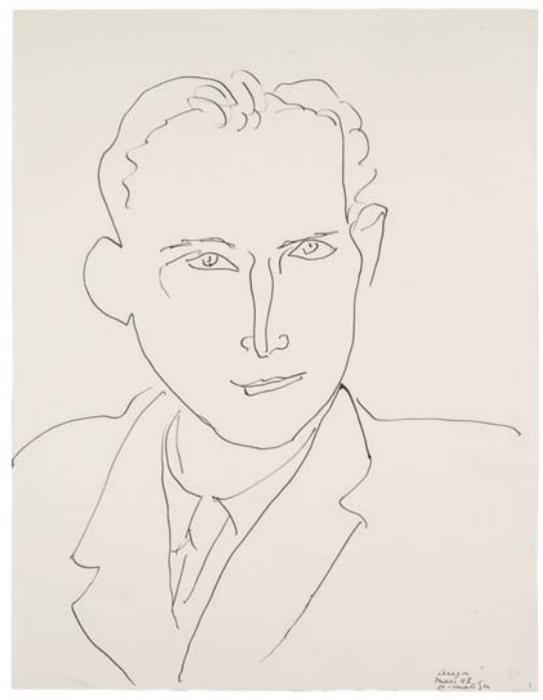
Aragon, 1943 (cat. no. 11)



Aragon, 1943 (cat. no. 12)



Aragon, 1943 (cat. no. 13)



Aragon, 1943 (cat. no. 14)



Portrait de Thomassin, 1946 (cat. no. 16)



Portrait de Thomassin, 1946 (cat. no. 17)

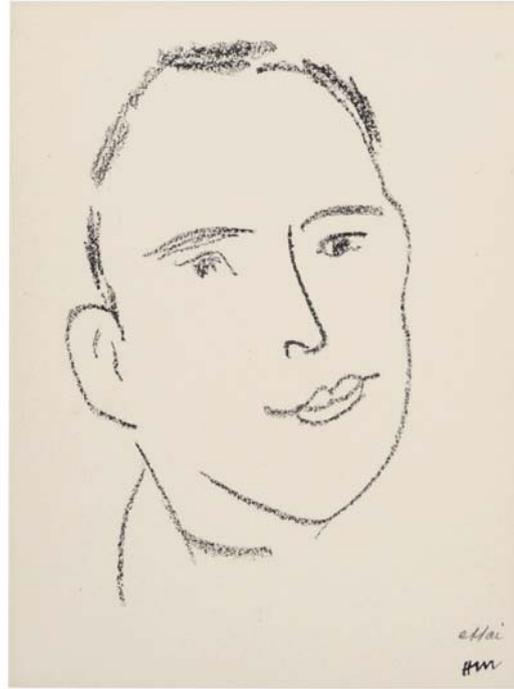
## Franz Villier

When Matisse moved to Vence in June, 1943, to avoid the threat of Allied bombing raids on Nice, one of his new neighbors was Franz Thomassin, a mysterious figure about whom almost no information is available (not even his dates of birth and death), only that he was connected with the Resistance. Thomassin was likely fascinated with the series of ambitious illustrated book projects that absorbed Matisse in Vence. These included Matisse's own *Jazz*, Montherlant's *Pasiphaé*, and Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. Not surprisingly, Thomassin requested a prestigious Matisse illustration to adorn his own book, written under the pseudonym Franz Villier, *Vie et mort de Richard Winslow* (1947). A review by the now celebrated filmmaker Chris Marker in the April, 1947 issue of the leftist Catholic journal *Esprit*, provides no information or opinion about the work other than how readers might assume that the imaginary protagonist was an Englishman.

With his insatiable graphic curiosity, Matisse made three charcoal drawings of Thomassin, and then fifteen lithographs, in preparation for the relatively simple author portrait frontispiece. It is not known how the men selected the image that would finally appear in the book.



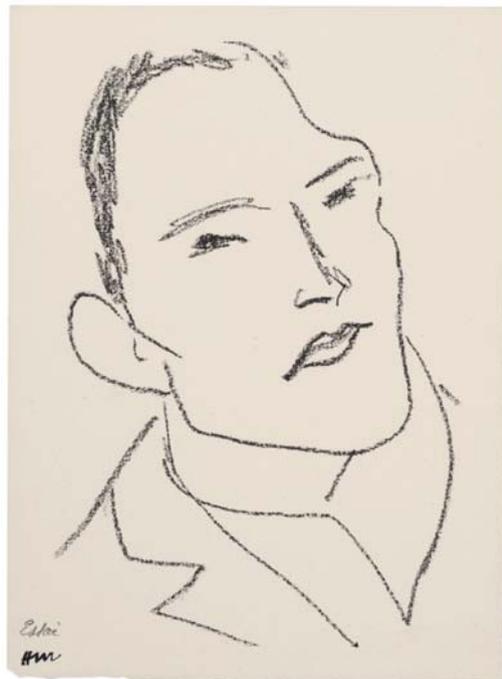
Portrait de Thomassin, 1946 (cat. no. 18)



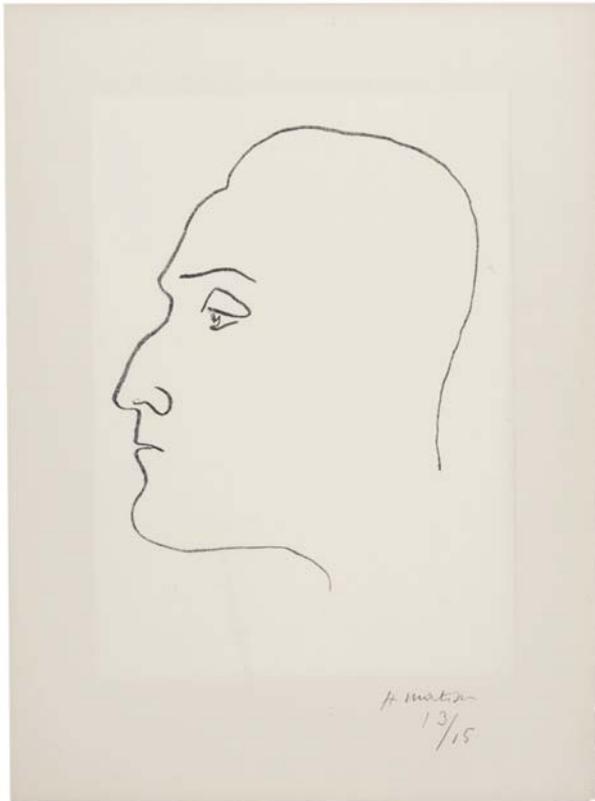
Portrait de Thomassin, 1946 (cat. no. 19)



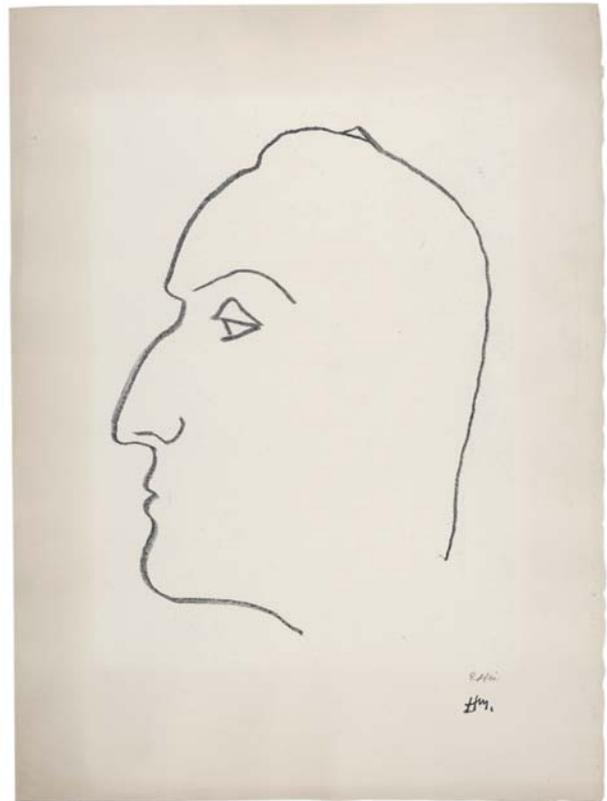
Portrait de Thomassin, 1946 (cat. no. 20)



Portrait de Thomassin, 1946 (cat. no. 21)



Henry de Montherlant, 1942 (cat. no. 22)



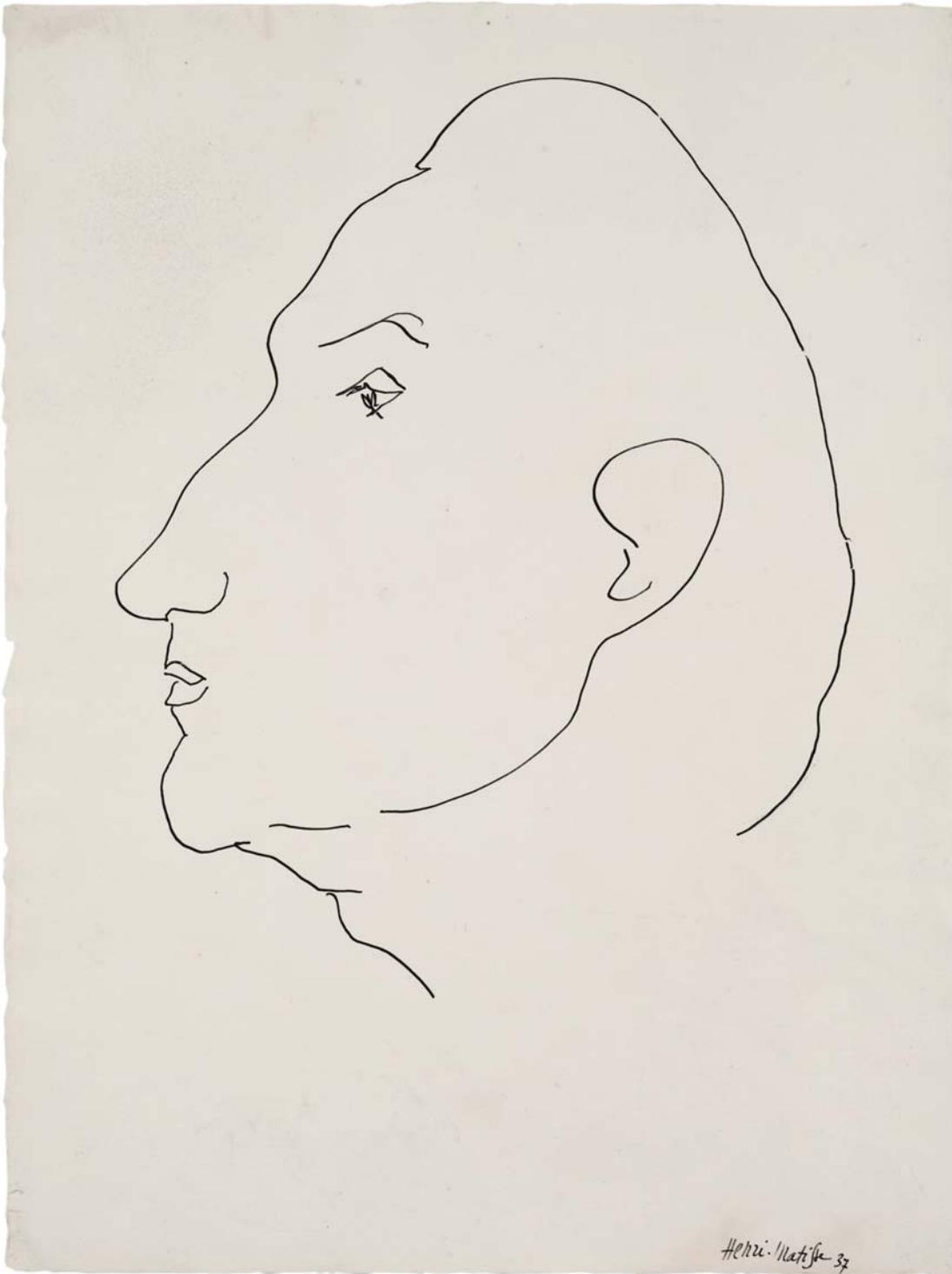
Henry de Montherlant, 1942 (cat. no. 23)

### Henry de Montherlant (1895- 1972)

A celebrated playwright and prolific, best-selling author before World War II, Montherlant was elected in 1960 to the prestigious Académie Française. He first approached Matisse in 1935 or 1936, hoping for illustrations to accompany his recent text, *Rose de Sable*, about his experiences in North Africa. This project was declined by the publisher, but in the months that followed Matisse made no less than eighteen portraits of the writer. As he explained to an arts journalist at the time: “At the eighth session, it was impossible for me to see anything at all in Montherlant...I couldn't grasp him.”

When Matisse made the additional lithographic portraits of Montherlant shown here is not known for certain. Presumably, he made them in preparation for his 1943 project to illustrate Montherlant's play *Pasiphaé* (1936). His final decision to use only linocuts for this book, including exquisite floral border motifs and elaborate capital letters to begin each line, resulted in one of the greatest of his many illustration projects.

Montherlant committed suicide in 1972, his reputation tarnished from charges that he was a misogynist and a pederast, and that he insufficiently opposed German viewpoints during the war.



Homme de profil (H. de Montherlant), 1937 (cat. no. 24)

- 1 **Grand autoportrait**, 1937, Charcoal, 24  $\frac{3}{16}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.
- 2 **Portrait aux lunettes ( Paul Léautaud )**, 1946, Charcoal, 16  $\frac{9}{16}$  x 12  $\frac{5}{8}$  in.
- 3 **Paul Léautaud**, 1946, Transfer lithograph, Image: 8  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 5  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. Sheet: 9  $\frac{13}{16}$  x 6  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (D596)
- 4 **Paul Léautaud**, 1946, Transfer lithograph, Image: 8 x 5  $\frac{11}{16}$  in. Sheet: 9  $\frac{13}{16}$  x 6  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (D597)
- 5 **Paul Léautaud**, 1946, Transfer lithograph, Image: 7  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 5  $\frac{1}{16}$  in. Sheet: 9  $\frac{13}{16}$  x 6  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (D603)
- 6 **Portrait d'homme de profil (Roger Bernard)**, 1946, Charcoal, 15  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 11  $\frac{7}{16}$  in. (front cover)
- 7 **Roger Bernard**, 1946, Linoleum cut, Image: 7 x 4  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. Sheet: 12  $\frac{13}{16}$  x 9  $\frac{13}{16}$  in. (D753)
- 8 **Roger Bernard**, 1946, Linoleum cut, Image: 7  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 4  $\frac{13}{16}$  in. Sheet: 12  $\frac{13}{16}$  x 9  $\frac{13}{16}$  in. (D751)
- 9 **Aragon**, 1943, Pen and ink, 20  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{15}{16}$  in.
- 10 **Aragon de profil**, 1943, Pen and ink, 20  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{15}{16}$  in.
- 11 **Aragon**, 1943, Pen and ink, 20  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.
- 12 **Aragon**, 1943, Pen and ink, 20  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.
- 13 **Aragon**, 1943, Pen and ink, 20  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{15}{16}$  in.
- 14 **Aragon**, 1943, Pen and ink, 20  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.
- 15 **Aragon**, 1943, Pen and ink, 20  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (back cover)
- 16 **Portrait de Thomassin**, 1946, Transfer lithograph, Image: 6  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 3  $\frac{15}{16}$  in. Sheet: 7  $\frac{7}{16}$  x 5  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (D614)
- 17 **Portrait de Thomassin**, 1946, Transfer lithograph, Image: 6 x 4  $\frac{7}{16}$  in. Sheet: 7  $\frac{7}{16}$  x 5  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (D611)
- 18 **Portrait de Thomassin**, 1946, Transfer lithograph, Image: 6 x 3  $\frac{7}{8}$  in., Sheet 7  $\frac{7}{16}$  x 5  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (D605)
- 19 **Portrait de Thomassin**, 1946, Transfer lithograph, Image: 6  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 3  $\frac{14}{16}$  in. Sheet: 7  $\frac{7}{16}$  x 5  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (D612)
- 20 **Portrait de Thomassin**, 1946, Transfer lithograph, Image: 6  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. Sheet: 7  $\frac{7}{16}$  x 5  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (D609)
- 21 **Portrait de Thomassin**, 1946, Transfer lithograph, Image: 6  $\frac{14}{16}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. Outer: 7  $\frac{7}{16}$  x 5  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (D607)
- 22 **Henry de Montherlant**, 1942, Transfer lithograph, Image: 8  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 6  $\frac{13}{16}$  in. Sheet: 14  $\frac{15}{16}$  x 11 in. (D539)
- 23 **Henry de Montherlant**, 1942, Transfer lithograph, Image: 9  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 7  $\frac{1}{16}$  in. Sheet: 14  $\frac{15}{16}$  x 11 in. (D538)
- 24 **Homme de profil (H. de Montherlant)**, 1937, Pen and ink, 20  $\frac{1}{16}$  x 14  $\frac{15}{16}$  in.



From left to right:

Paul Léautaud, Roger Bernard, Louis Aragon, Henry de Montherlant. We were unable to find a photo of Franz Thomassin.

Printed on the occasion of the exhibition:

**Henri Matisse: Writers on Paper** *Selected Drawings and Prints from The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation*

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