

## Nice and the Côte d'Azur, August 2015

With the financial support of the Marjorie Countess of Warwick Travelling Bursary, I set out in August 2015 to discover an area of France that I had never visited before, the Côte d'Azur. Although the area is now rivalled by many luxurious holiday destinations around the globe, the French Riviera retains its considerable appeal for the holidaymaker, with its connotations of expansive beaches, clear waters and timeless glamour. However, it was not on the trail of the wealthy and fashionable that I travelled, but rather the many artists that made the resort their home and their atelier during their lifetimes. I decided to stay in Nice for the duration of my stay, and make the most of the opportunity to test out the rail network along the coast.

The first museum I visited was the Musée Matisse, which lies in a seventeenth-century ochre villa in the Cimiez neighbourhood of Nice. An exhibition on the subject of 'Promenades intérieures' explored the relation between the hotel rooms or studio apartments in which many of Matisse's paintings of the era are set, and the ever-appealing light and sea of the Nice exteriors that lie beyond their windows. The museum's permanent collections were organised so as to show the broad strokes of the artist's development, starting with his very first painting, *Nature morte aux livres* (1890), in an almost unrecognisably dark and realist style. Matisse journeyed in France and North Africa, eventually settling in Nice, and the collection charted these journeys and his discovery of the Mediterranean light. The importance of the Riviera light for Matisse was highlighted with a number of quotations from the artist: '*Vous souvenez-vous de la lumière qu'on avait à travers les persiennes ? Elle venait d'en dessous comme d'une rampe de théâtre. Tout était faux, absurde, épatant, délicieux.*' Works showing the development of the cut-out technique were complemented by a donation from the artist's family of 400 unused cut-out shapes, and the museum also boasted a ceramic realisation of the artist's *La Piscine*. This work of stunning lightness and fluidity exemplifies for me Matisse's mastery of shape and space.

I was particularly delighted to find in the Musée Matisse a room showing the artist's preparations for the Chapelle du Rosaire in the inland town of Vence, and the next day I set out to discover the chapel for myself. The building is inconspicuous, with its simple white exterior and location on the hillside below road level. Its interior comprises both vibrant colour and monochrome simplicity: the left wall of the chapel, including the nuns' alcove, and the wall above the altar are dominated by stained glass windows with strong yellows, blues and greens in distinctive leafy shapes. The location of the stained glass on the south-facing walls of the chapel allows their colourful light to stream through onto the right and back walls, on which feature three large designs made up of simple black lines on white tiles: St Dominic, the Virgin and Child, and the stations of the cross. Having seen sketches of the stations in Nice, I had wondered how Matisse would have rendered them in the final work: I was intrigued to discover that he had simplified them even further, and judged that they were more powerful for it. Matisse designed everything that appears in the Chapelle, from the candlesticks in the shape of flowers to the colourful selection of vestments in the room next door.

Returning from Vence, I stopped to explore the walled hilltop village of St-Paul-de-Vence, an artistic haven and home for many years to Marc Chagall, who is buried in its interfaith graveyard. Its winding streets with cafés and panoramic views make the village's appeal easily understood. I also visited the nearby Fondation Maeght, bursting with modern art. I particularly enjoyed installations such as the Miró Labyrinth of sculptures, a Miró stained glass window, the Giacometti courtyard and Chagall's *La Vie*. Perhaps one of the most

enjoyable aspects of this trip was to feel so very immersed in the complex and intense web of artists, their lives and their work in different media, including painting, stained glass and ceramics.

The next museum I visited was the Musée Picasso in Antibes. It is located in the Château Grimaldi where Picasso worked for several months in 1946. A great number of photographs of Picasso and his second wife Jacqueline show the artist at work and at rest, often conveying a sense of playful humour. Famous paintings such as *La Chèvre* are presented along with works from the Antibes period, which often contain distinctive motifs: sea urchins (such as in my favourite painting of the museum, *Le Gobeur d'Oursins*), lemons, octopuses and owls, for example. The museum also contains a large number of ceramic works by the artist, especially a collection of plates depicting faces or textured ceramic food. A bus ride away in Vallauris is the Musée National Picasso La Guerre et la Paix. It contains the two murals of the same name, painted on the walls of the chapel where Picasso's own 70<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations were held. *La Guerre* features on the left wall of the chapel, in dark colours and with ominous figures, shadows and weapons. On one side, the figure of Peace fights their corner, protected by a shield showing a white dove, and the face of Françoise Gilot, Picasso's then-lover. The right side of the chapel is painted in brighter colours and shows scenes of peace and harmony. The most striking imagery is that of a book, representing learning and culture, which is trampled on by destructive war, and read and valued in peacetime. Unlike Matisse's chapel in Vence, this work is secular, an ode to peace and humanity.

The Musée Marc Chagall in Nice offered an exhibition entitled 'Nice. Soleil. Fleurs. Marc Chagall et la baie des Anges'. Its title is taken from the poster that Chagall produced in 1962 to advertise the town upon the request of mayor Jean Médecin. The style of this image, in both deep and lighter blues, with an ethereal mermaid at its centre and a blooming bouquet of bright flowers, is characteristic of Chagall's other paintings of Nice. His incredibly vibrant blues, greens, and yellows, so similar and yet so distinct from Matisse's palette, are complemented by motifs of fish, couples, and red moons in the sky and reflected in the water. The museum's main collection focuses on Chagall's religious and spiritual works, and displays seventeen paintings of biblical scenes, including Jacob's ladder, Moses and the burning bush, the Creation of Man, and Noah's Ark. The latter was described as an iconographic first due to its depiction of the scene from inside the ark. There were also five paintings based on the *Cantique des Cantiques* in sensual reds. Also featured were mosaics and stained glass windows, and in the auditorium I watched a fascinating film on the life of the artist, including footage of the artist himself, who was presented as modest and interesting. It explained that despite living so close to Picasso, the two never became friends due to their artistic dissimilarities.

The final destination of my trip was the Musée Renoir in Cagnes-sur-Mer. It was in this building that, some thirty or forty years before Matisse, Picasso and Chagall, the Impressionist artist Pierre-Auguste Renoir settled on the Mediterranean coast. It was closer to a museum on the subject of Renoir than a collection of Renoir's work; there were disappointingly few paintings by his own hand, and a slightly greater number of sculptures. Nonetheless, the paintings that I did see were enjoyable and mainly took the surrounding area as their subject, such as *Les toits du Vieux Nice*, *La ferme des Collettes*, and *Promenade sous bois*. There were also similar works by other artists showing the property, such as by Albert André, as well as many photographs of Renoir with his family and some of his models.

Jacqueline Uren, St Hugh's

Of course, the convenience of such fantastic collections of art being located so close to each other was greatly increased by the opportunity to appreciate many of them in the settings which they feature. Behind all the comforts offered to the modern tourist, the area retains plenty of its unspoilt charm. I made further day trips to Cannes and Monaco, where I took in cultural heritage of an altogether different kind walking around the famous track. I would like to express my thanks and gratitude once again for the Marjorie Countess of Warwick Travelling Bursary, which gave me the opportunity to undertake such an interesting and rewarding trip to France this summer.