

# Henri Matisse's *Jazz*: The Mystery of *The Codomas*

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Fig.1, Henri Matisse, *The Codomas*, 1947, Paris, Tériade, in 'Jazz', 78–79, (© Succession H. Matisse/Copyright Agency, 2019)

## Introduction.

The two trapeze bars swinging beneath the circus canopy, the blue on the left and the white on the right, give *The Codomas* a sense of movement (Fig.1). Absent any discernible human figures, the two-yellow wavy aquiline shapes at the upper centre of the image, seemingly suspended in mid-air, highlighted by a green rectangular background, hint at two acrobats performing their challenging routine. Perhaps coming together in a gymnastic manoeuvre or separating after one. The safety net positioned below the acrobats, composed in reverse polarity, its dark black square grid accentuating the spaces between the lifesaving ropes, demands the viewer's attention. Emphasised by the yellow background, the blackness of the safety net projects a sense of danger. The high-risk acrobatic performance at the centre of the image is framed by an incomplete orange rectangular outer border which surrounds a brown inner border – the seating. The red, blue and mauve abstract arabesques on the left, right and top of the image present the audience – in the seating area. At the centre of the borders are the green and yellow rectangles – the circus arena. When bisected with an imaginary vertical line running top to bottom of the image, the left and right halves show a remarkable balance. Composed of ninety-one *découpage* cut-outs, this is the most fragmented of the twenty colourful images which Henri Matisse (1869–1954) composed during the German Occupation of France for his album of wartime prints with a circus theme, *Cirque*, which, by the addition of his self-authored handwritten text, he transformed into his historic *livre d'artiste Jazz* after the liberation of France.

*The Codomas* is an intriguing image. It very much a circus scene and aptly reflects the title of the album, but it seems devoid of the wartime symbolism that he embedded into its partner images - it is benign. *The Codomas* was not the only image that Matisse distinguished with an identity, there were three others, two of which relate to the circus, *Monsieur Loyal and Pierrot's Funeral*, and the third, *Icarus*, is a mythological character. While the three characters, Icarus, Loyal and Pierrot, of the personified images are readily identifiable, the *Codomas* was not. Despite extensive investigation of art historical databases and archives it was not possible to locate a circus family, circus performers, mythological or fictitious characters or any other group by the name of Codoma, or who may have used the name Codoma or *Codomas*. Further, the research could not locate any correspondence by Matisse or his associates which could provide any guidance on origin of the title *The Codomas*. However, what this research found was an internationally renowned circus troupe called *The Flying Codonas* whose misfortunes were continually reported in France prior to and during the German Occupation. Their tragedies were recorded in a film, a music recording and a book, created by the Germans and widely publicised and distributed in France at the time Matisse created his image.

This article reports on the search to decipher *The Codomas*. It argues that the interpretation of *The Codomas* lies in its caption in the same manner as *Icarus*, *Monsieur Loyal* and the *Pierrot's Funeral* and the tragedy that Matisse intended to depict in *The Codomas* is emphasised by his vignettes in the *Table of Images*. The article concludes that that the most likely explanation for Matisse's misspelling of the name was not deliberate or an accident but due to a prolonged memory lapse, where he incorrectly believed the acrobatic troupe was named Codoma. However, it remains puzzling how the many associates that handled the image between its creation and final publication did not identify and correct the error. Even more difficult to explain is that after over seventy years since the publication of *The Codomas* in the livre d'artiste *Jazz* in 1947, the extensive scholarly, curatorial and journalistic attention accorded to the book has not referenced the misspelling.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly in seeking to identify and explain this issue, this article adds to the considerable scholarship accorded to Matisse and *Jazz* and opens a discussion on seeking to explain why Matisse used the name Codoma instead of Codona in the caption of his image

In my published analysis of *Jazz*, I provided a theoretical framework for interpreting the images in *Jazz* within the context of difficulties faced by many of the French during the German Occupation of France.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on the work of scholars such as Jack Flam, Rebecca Rabinow and Pierre Schneider, who asserted that the images should be analysed within the context of the Occupation, I concluded that "Matisse camouflaged his messages of cultural resistance within the circus theme he adopted for the images which he originally created for an album called *Cirque*."<sup>3</sup> Of *The Codomas*, I argued "This image references a well-known circus family called the Flying Codonas, an acrobatic group seeped in tragedy", asserting that it was the tragedy of the Codonas that Matisse intended to convey.<sup>4</sup> But there was much more contained in this conclusion that will be of interest to the art historian.

It is not known precisely when Matisse completed *The Codomas* but apart from the three Lagoon images the others, including *The Codomas*, were completed in the first half of 1944, before the Allied landings in Normandy. Documentary evidence suggests that Matisse had settled on the caption *The Codomas* by 5 August 1944.<sup>5</sup> Nearly four months earlier on 29 April 1944 art critic Gaston Diehl reported on Matisse's images for *Cirque* in an article in *Comoedia* and descriptively referenced the image as *les trapèzes volants* (The flying trapezes), which suggests that at that time the artist had not yet nominated a caption.<sup>6</sup>

A shift of research focus from art history to circus brought immediate clarity. It was during a database search of circus-based archives, that the research for this paper identified the name Codona. In seeking to investigate the name Codona, further searches brought multiple results. The saga of the Codona family was well publicised. A request for clarification was sent to a number of recognised circus historians;

All circus historians consulted confirmed that the Codona's were a circus family who formed the internationally acclaimed troupe of trapeze artists called *The Flying Codonas*, a circus troupe who were swathed in tragedy. Further, the circus historians were unanimous that there were no circus performers named Codoma and that the correct name is Codona. Anthony Hughes, Head of the National Fairground and Circus Archive, The University of Sheffield, England stated 'although the handwritten table of images with their motifs, list XI Les Codomas, this would appear to also be an error ... Whatever led to the variation of spelling, there appears to be no record of a troupe called Codomas.'<sup>7</sup> Dr Kim Baston, Senior Lecturer, Creative Arts and English, La Trobe University, Melbourne Australia, confirmed, 'I've never heard of a group called the Codomas. Or the Cadomas. It is far more likely to be the Flying Codonas, who were immensely famous and did tour the world.'<sup>8</sup> Timothy Tegge, Director, Tegge Circus Archives was more direct 'Rest assured ... this was supposed to be entitled 'The Codonas'.<sup>9</sup>

Most convincingly, perhaps the leading circus historian and the creator of the renown Circopedia, Dominique Jando, an authority figure who has written extensively on the Codona family was unequivocal about the issue;

No there are no Codomas in the circus world (unless some trapeziums tried to use that name to confuse people) but I never came across such a name. The collage from Jazz illustrates the Codonas, who were the biggest international circus stars of the times, and performed at the Cirque d'Hiver, and at the Cirque Medrano (without Alfredo — and where Lalo also ended his career, and the act for that matter). Matisse was certainly aware of them and probably saw them in one of the two Parisian circuses (or both), and the name "Codomas" is a mistake or a misreading.<sup>10</sup>

This research confirmed that the Codona acrobatic family were well known in Paris and performed at the Cirque d' Hiver but more often at Cirque Medrano.

Cirque Medrano had its own wartime controversy, an issue that Matisse would have known. Medrano was a historic circus institution and a landmark in the entertainment scene in Paris for nearly a century. It commenced as Cirque Fernando in 1873 and was taken over by Geronimo Medrano in 1895, when it also changed its name to reflect the new owner. After a succession of directors, Jérôme Medrano took over on 14 June 1928 and managed it until he was mobilised in 7 September 1939 in the French armed forces just days after France declared war on Germany. Matisse visited Cirque Medrano, as did a number of other artists including Edgar Degas (1834–1917), Fernand Léger (1881–1955), Matisse, Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), many of who used Cirque Medrano as subject matter for some of their artworks.

Cirque Medrano stopped performing in May 1940 after the Germans invaded France, only to be reopened on 15 November 1940 for a trial period of three months under the auspicious of the German propaganda unit based in France Propagandastaffel and managed by two prominent German circus figures, Paula Busch and her partner, son-in-law Emil Wacker. Busch and Wacker

did not survive the trial period as Parisians refused to attend a circus they considered had become a propaganda tool of the German occupiers. The circus reopened again on 11 April 1941 by Jérôme, who had by then been demobilized and went on to reclaim the circus.<sup>11</sup> It is likely that Matisse modelled his *Cirque* images on the Cirque Medrano, the arena in which the *The Flying Codonas* frequently performed and where Georges Loyal was a prominent figure.

### **The tragedies of the Codonas**

The premature and tragic ending to *The Flying Codonas* occurred in Paris at the highly anticipated opening night of the Cirque Medrano's Golden Jubilee program on 12 November 1937. During an earlier practice session, the lead trapeze artist Lalo Codona (born as Abelardo, 1895–1951) hurt his shoulder, but insisted on performing at the formal show. During the live trapeze performance, Lalo Codona fell and seriously injured himself after failing to catch his swinging trapeze. Georges Loyal, *Régisseur de piste* of Cirque Medrano, the subject of *Monsieur Loyal*, rescued Lalo by climbing into the net using a ladder.<sup>12</sup> The accident was the main story in many of the leading newspapers in France and would have been difficult to miss. In its front-page headline *Paris-Soir*, 14 November 1937, informed its readers that Lalo was the only survivor of this most tragic circus family, thus linking Lalo with the wider misfortune that beset the family. *Le Petit Parisian* in its front-page depiction of the tragedy, on the same day, also reported the incident and gave the additional information that it was Georges Loyal who rescued Lalo Codona.<sup>13</sup> But the tragedy of the Codona family was not confined to this one incident, their history goes back many years

The Codonas were a world renown, United States based Scottish-Italian acrobatic family, popularly known as *The Flying Codonas* who performed regularly in France. Around 1888, Eduardo Codona born to Italian parents, established his circus performing company which in later years incorporated two of his children Alfredo (1893 – 1937), Abelardo, who became known as Lalo, and an Australian Steve Outch. Alfredo Codona became an internationally recognised acrobat being the first person to perform the triple somersault, a challenging and dangerous manoeuvre which at the time was deemed to be the pinnacle of trapeze achievement. His first wife, Cincinnati born Clara (1894–1927), also a circus performer, was injured while performing in 1927 and was forced to retire. Having left the circus and their lives growing apart she divorced Alfredo.<sup>14</sup>

Alfredo invited Lilian Leitzel (1892–1931) to take Clara's place in *The Flying Codonas*. The charismatic couple became inseparable both in the circus and out of it and eventually married. Alfredo, Lilian and Lalo took on the mantle of *The Flying Codonas* and because of their daring performances became international stars with a huge following, performing regularly with world renown circuses such as Barnum and Bailey Circus, Ringling Bros Circus and the Sells-Floto Circus. During a solo performance in the absence of husband Alfredo, tragedy struck again when Lilian's supports broke and she fell to her death during a performance in Copenhagen on Friday 13 February 1931. Such was her fame that Lilian's death was widely reported in the French newspapers, in many instances taking front page.<sup>15</sup>

Beset by loneliness, Alfredo married Australian born Vera Bruce, who had earlier joined *The Flying Codonas*. Tragedy struck again when Alfredo seriously damaged his shoulder after a trapeze fall in New York on 29 April 1933 leading to his premature retirement from *The Flying Codonas*. In 1937, Vera, who had not been happy at performing in Lilian's shadow, divorced Alfredo. Vera and Alfredo met on 10 July 1937 at their lawyer's office in Long Beach, California

to discuss a settlement of assets. Alfredo, who learned that Vera was having an affair with his brother Lalo, shot and killed Vera, aged 32, before shooting himself with the same pistol. Even though this tragedy took place in New York it was also widely reported in France making it difficult for the casual French observer to miss.<sup>16</sup> Lalo took over the trapeze act to fulfil the family's contract to appear with *Cirque Medrano* at their Golden Jubilee celebration performance in Paris. That was where Lalo's accident occurred.

Although Lalo's tragedy occurred five years before Matisse created *The Codomas*, the saga of *The Flying Codonas* was very much alive and being extensively publicised in France during the Occupation. The circus troupe became the subject of a major drama film, created by the Germans which was widely advertised in the French media and distributed in public cinemas throughout France during the Occupation.<sup>17</sup> Released on 1 August 1940, *Die drei Codonas*, running for 109 minutes, directed by the renown Arthur Maria Rabenalt, and produced by Tobis Film, one of Germany's prominent film production companies. The film was sanctioned by the German Reichsfilmintendant, head of the Film Section of the German Propaganda Ministry.<sup>18</sup>

The music from the film, *Die drei Codonas: So wie ein Lied im Winde verweht* (*The Three Codonas: Like a song blowing in the wind*) but billed as *La March de trois Codonas* in France, composed by Peter Kreuder, who briefly joined the Nazi's, was released at the same time as a piano composition played by Kreuder. Also released at the same time was a classical orchestral format of the music, but with a faint jazz melody, by the *Berlin Deutschlandsenders Orchestra*, also conducted by Kreuder. Both music formats were repeatedly played in France during the Occupation and was widely advertised in the French weekly radio magazine *Les Ondes*.<sup>19</sup> The German language book on which the film was based, *Die drei Codonas: ein Artistenroman* (*The Three Codonas – An artist's novel*), written by Joachim Bremer and published by Albert Limbach (Berlin) 1940 was also available in France. Matisse may have been aware of the tragedy of the Codonas through the widespread publicity of Lalo's accident in 1937, or through the publicity accorded to the film, music and book during the Occupation, or both. The name Codona would have been hard to miss in Occupied France.

Matisse may have realised at the time he was assembling *Jazz*, many years after creating *The Codomas*, that the image lacked a pictorial signal of tragedy in the manner of some of his other images such as *Swimmer in the Aquarium*. He cleverly resolved this issue by using his carefully constructed vignettes in the *Table of Images* to highlight the tragedy of *The Codomas*. In the *Table of Images* Matisse recorded *The Codomas* as item XI accompanied by a vignette depicting two empty swinging trapeze platforms (Fig. 2).

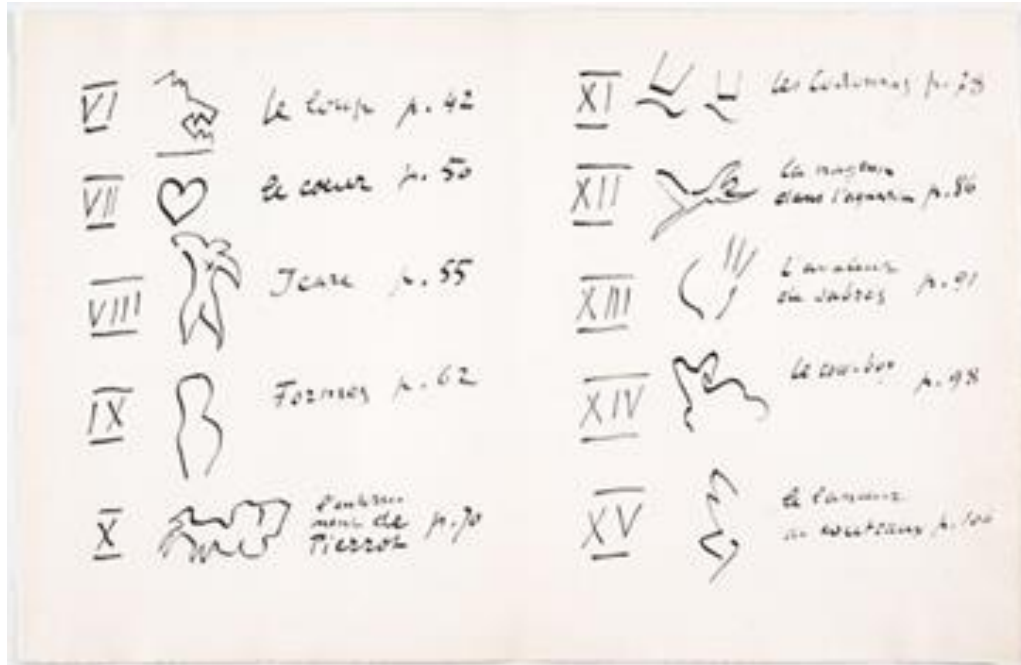


Fig.2, Henri Matisse, “Table of Images” 1947, Paris, Tériade, in ‘Jazz’, 150–151, (© Succession H. Matisse/Copyright Agency, 2019)

Below the entry for *The Codomas* in the *Table of Images* he positioned *Swimmer in the Aquarium* as item XII with its own vignette depicting the swimmer as a falling body. When the two vignettes are viewed as a single integrated image, perhaps with an imaginary border framing the combined image, it presents as two empty trapezes swinging, with a falling acrobat below. Here was Lalo Codona in his tragic fall. Or perhaps Alberto Codona or Lilian Leitzel. In this way, with the use of the caption and the vignettes Matisse cleverly emphasised the Codona's tragedies in a second image – while seeming oblivious to the misspelt name.

The image title was not the only error in *The Codomas* to have escaped Matisse's attention. Despite extensive and painstaking printing trials the final printing was not true to the original maquette.<sup>20</sup> The middle prong of the three-legged blue arabesque placed between the ropes of the blue trapeze is missing, one of the black squares at the bottom of the net is missing and two black squares are partially printed over by the orange border instead of the reverse.

### An explanation

Matisse clearly intended to appropriate the tragedies of the Codona family as a code for the tragedies facing France. But his use of the name Codoma rather than Codona is puzzling, even as the correct name received continuous public attention during the Occupation. There are two possible explanations, first that it was deliberate and second that it was accidental. If it was deliberate the simplest explanation would be the Codona's may have performed under the name Codomas or was popularly known by that name. Although Lalo's grandfather William used various names in the 1870's, Cardoni, Cardownie, Cardone, Codone, Candone, there is no evidence that he or his successors used the name Codoma, and as mentioned earlier the name Codoma as a circus performer was rejected by every circus historian consulted. Another was that Matisse deliberately misspelt the name as he did not wish to overtly publicise the misfortune of a

well-known family still alive, perhaps for legal reasons. While being a possibility, there is no documentary evidence supporting this assertion. Another hypothesis was that Matisse was referring to a relatively small and unknown group of trapeze artists who used the slightly misspelt name to gain recognition. Although this too is a distant possibility, as stated earlier, despite intensive investigations no circus performers by using Codoma could be traced.

If the spelling error was accidental, one possible explanation is that Matisse knew the correct name but made the mistake while writing the caption. However, bearing in mind his fastidious involvement in the printing and production of *Jazz*, he more than likely would have discovered this spelling error. Indeed, if it was an accidental spelling error it is unlikely he would have repeated the incorrect spelling in his 4 August 1944 list of completed images and that it would have gone uncorrected by him over the years. The most likely explanation, but it is speculation, is that Matisse genuinely believed that the group was called the Codomas. Possibly his memory had failed him, and he could not recall the correct name at the time he created the caption, or even at subsequent occasions. It should be noted that this explanation may well be questioned and scholars who review this evidence may well come to different answers.

Whatever the reason, then an even more inexplicable conundrum arises. How is it possible that this misspelling was not detected by the many hands the image and captions had to pass through during the printing, proofing and checking processes prior to publication? Beyond this, what is even more difficult to explain is how this misspelling could have escaped the attention of the many scholars, curators and connoisseurs who have written such a volume of academic papers, newspaper reports, journal articles and catalogue entries in the decades since the publication of *Jazz*.

As the above discourse reveals, Matisse's image caption of trapeze acrobats, *The Codomas*, the eleventh image in *Jazz*, was incorrect. It should have been *The Codonas*. The presumptive argument is that the error was due to a memory lapse rather than an accidental or deliberate misspelling. This paper has shown that *The Codomas* joins the other images in *Jazz* to provide a symbolic commentary of the difficulties of the German Occupation of France, that of tragedy. In this way this paper adds to the extensive scholarship attributed to *Jazz*.

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<sup>1</sup> The landmark exhibition 'Henri Matisse – The Cut-Outs' at the Tate Modern, London, 17 April – 7 September 2014 and then at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 12 October 2014 – 10 February 2015, showed both the maquette and the print of *The Codomas* and neither exhibition identified this misspelling. The book of the exhibition likewise published the maquette with no clarification, see Karl Buchberg et al (ed.), *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Modern, London 2014, p.112.

<sup>2</sup> Rodney T. Swan, Symbolism and Allusion in Matisse's *Jazz*, RIHA Journal 0209, 15 May 2019, URL: <https://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2019/0209-swan>,

<sup>3</sup> Swan 'Jazz' 2019, para 64.

<sup>4</sup> Swan 'Jazz', 2019, para 31.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Duthuit, *Henri Matisse: Catalogue Raisonné des Ouvrages Illustrés*, Paris, 1988, 446. Matisse recorded the working titles of his captions in a list which he dated 5 August 1944, (1) *Verve*; (2) *Cirque (Circus)*; (3) *Trapéziste ou aviator* (Trapeze Artist or Aviator); (4) *Clowns*; (5) *Tobogan*; (6) *Cauchemar de*

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*l'Éléphant blanc* (Nightmare of the White Elephant); (7) *L'Écuyère et le Clown* (Horsewoman and the Clown); (8) *Enterrement de Pierrot* (Pierrot's Burial); (9) *Avaleur de sabres* (Sword Swallower); (10) *Codomas*; (11) *Loyal*; (12) *Poses plastiques* (Plastic Poses, later renamed *Formes*); (13) *Le Cow-boy* (The Cow-boy); (14) *Lanceur de couteau*. (Knife Thrower); (15) *La Fatalité*; (16) *Le Loup Garou* (The Werewolf); (17) Aquarium; and (18) Océanie.

<sup>6</sup> Gaston Diehl, 'Le Leçon de Matisse', *Comoedia*, 29 April 1944, p.4.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Hughes to author, private correspondence, 30 August 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Dr Kim Baston to author, private correspondence, 24 August 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Tegge to author, private correspondence, 26 August 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Dominique Jando to author, private correspondence, 7 January 2019

<sup>11</sup> Clair 2004, pp.382; Jando, 'Cirque Medrano'.

<sup>12</sup> Dominique Jando, 'The Codonas,' *Circopedia*, [http://www.circopedia.org/The\\_Codonas](http://www.circopedia.org/The_Codonas), Accessed 20 April 2016.

<sup>13</sup> For example, see 'Lalo Codona, Seul Survivant de la Plus Tragique Famille du Cirque Tombe à Son Tour à Son Poste,' *Paris-Soir*, 14 November 1937, Front page; 'Le Tragique Destin des Codona,' *Le Populaire*, 14 November 1937, Front page; 'La Fin d'un Prestigieux "Numero" de Cirque', *Le Petit Parisien*, 14 November 1937, 2; 'Les Trapezistes de la Mort,' *Le Mond Illustré*, 20 November 1937, 814.

<sup>14</sup> Jando, 'The Codonas'.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see 'Mort Tragique de Miss Lilian Leitzel,' *Le Petit Parisien*, 17 February 1931, Front page; 'L'acrobate Lilian Leitzel a Fait Sur la Piste Une Chute Mortelle,' *Le Journal*, 17 February 1931, 4b; 'Les Tragédies du Cirque,' *Cyrano*, 22 February 1931, 32.

<sup>16</sup> For example, see 'Le Drame Codona,' *L'Intransigeant*, 8 August 1937, 2; 'Le Trapéziste Codona Blessé Grièvement Sa Femme et se Suicide,' *L'Echo d'Alger*, 2 August 1937, 2.

<sup>17</sup> 'Les Trois Codonas', *Paris-Soir*, 30 October 1940, 2; 'Les 3 Codonas' film advertisement – Royal Cinéma 9 May 1941 *L'Est-Éclair*, 9 May 1941, 3; 'Les Trois Codonas' film advertisement – Capitole Pathe), *Comoedia*, 10 June 1944, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*, 2009, 160.

<sup>19</sup> 'Les Trois Codonas' (P. Kreuder *Les Ondes*, 17 May 1942. For broadcast 0815 Saturday 23 May 1942; 'Les Trois Codonas' P.Kreuder, *Les Ondes*, 17 August 1941, 20.

<sup>20</sup> The long testing process of alternative printing techniques and inks to satisfy Matisse's exacting requirements has been well researched. The most revealing accounts are in John Bidwell, *Graphic Passion: Matisse and the Book Arts*, New York 2015, 178–80; Duthuit, *Henri Matisse*, 445–46; Rabinow 1995, 102–06, 16–18.