

1. THE PROBLEM

We moved in^{to} our newly built house in West Los Angeles in February, 1951. In the center thereof is a large patio. Over a couch 12 feet long was a large white wall with no relief, save for some plants in one corner. Since this area must be passed by all those going from one part of the house to another, we were very aware of the bareness and whiteness. The patio is open to the sky and is in the direct light of the strong California sun. A painting could have been hung there, being sealed in glass to prevent spoiling from rain or dew; however, the light in California is of such strength that there would be no way to prevent fading with any paint-type materials.

2. THE SOLUTION

Early in 1952, we approached Pierre Matisse, who represented his father, Henri Matisse, in the United States. We had conceived the idea of having a ceramic cover the wall in question which would be designed by Matisse. (While we were among the many great admirers of the artist and owned several of his works, we did not know him personally.) We sent colored stereo-realist photographs, a viewer, and wall dimensions to the artist who then expressed interest in doing the design.

Because of the difficulties of shipping anything so large and breakable, we, at first, planned to have the design executed in the ceramic in California. Matisse sent us 17 sheets of paper on which he had painted 17 different colors which he hoped could be fired by the local ceramacist.

Since the whole project was still in the conversation stage, we had not yet selected the ceramacist to do the job; however, we were unable to find anyone here who was able to produce exactly what the artist had in mind. Subsequently, Mr. Matisse (who lived above Nice) worked with a ceramacist on the Riviera who felt he had discovered the same baking process used at Pompeii. As Henri Matisse agreed to supervise the actual making of the ceramic himself and to be present during all crating for shipping, we decided to have both the design and the ceramic itself executed in France.

3. THE EXPLORATION

Following this decision, several months ensued with no discussion of contract, price, etc., (in fact, with no word at all from Matisse). In May, 1953, we went to France on holiday and spent some time at Beaulieu near Nice. An appointment was made for us to call on Matisse. His daughter telephoned us to confirm the date. But first, we visited the Chapel at Vence on one of its two visiting days.

We went to see Mr. Matisse, who lived in a large high-ceilinged, many-roomed apartment with his daughter and young woman secretary. The surroundings belied the accepted picture of the starving artist (in fact, the decor of ancient busts, plants, rocks, etc., tastefully arranged was far more decorative than the surroundings of the other contemporary artists that we had visited) We walked through Matisse's large bedroom-studio where, as many know, he spent considerable time creating from his bed, due to his illness; however, Mr. Matisse awaited us in the room beyond in a wheelchair since this was one of his well days. (His well known "cutout"

pictures emanated from his inability to paint in detail at that time. However, he himself painted the colors and cut them out with elongated scissors, supervising their juxtaposition on the wall.) In fact, we had heard rumors he was again painting in oil and we saw an easel with covered canvas in the bedroom. In back of Matisse when we entered was a large cutout attached to the wall which seemed close in size to the specifications from our own patio. He spoke no English, my husband conversed in American public school French (which, in his day, apparently omitted the use of verbs). I could understand and converse but would not be taken for a Parisienne. We stayed about half an hour during which period Matisse was very charming and verbose. We finally initiated our departure as we did not want to tire him. (At that time, he was 81 and while an invalid, he was brilliantly alert with most penetrating eyes.) In the conversation, we referred to mutual friends and he offered to arrange for us to revisit Vence when closed to visitors, so we could observe the Chapel to better advantage. He also commented that the plants shown in our stereo pictures in the corner of our California patio seemed much like the vegetation in the South of France. Because of similar climatic conditions, he was already aware of similar problems of strong daytime light and of heavy night dews. He had noted on a trip to California some years previous how differently from Californians the French treat landscape design, yet utilizing similar materials. (Theirs is a riot of randomly planted color and flower varieties: - ours is more a means of expressing formal design, rather than the flowers and colors being an end in themselves.)

During the conversation, our hunch was confirmed that the cutout on the wall was intended for us. Even though contract and price had not been discussed, Mr. Matisse had gone ahead and executed the full scale cutout as a surprise. But unfortunately, we disliked it intensely. Each end of the design had two tall bright blue pillars with knobs on top like solid-colored barber poles. The center was taken up by multiple colored designs topped by a black and white sun. The overall conception seemed too "busy" for the place it was created, and the sun and pillars too formal, geometric and cold for the area. Beyond the unsuitability for the particular spot, we just didn't like it.

Our next problem seemed unsolvable, how not to offend the artist, for whom we had such veneration and respect, - and still get a new design. Somehow, by telepathy, my husband and I hit on the same idea of saying the design was "too even and geometric" for our house, which is built on angles (both Mr. Matisse's daughter and secretary were present to help with any necessary interpretation, although most of the conversation was directly between the artist and us). Mr. Matisse proved a most eloquent salesman and tried convincing us we were wrong. After making our farewells to Matisse, we had a discussion in the hall with the two ladies. We reiterated to them that we felt the design was unsuitable for our particular wall and expressed our surprise and appreciation at finding the cutout executed, although no price had yet been discussed. We told them we were aware of the hopelessness of prevailing on Mr. Matisse to design a solution more fitting to our particular problem, but hoped he could be so persuaded. The two ladies said they would consult with the artist

and phone us before our departure from the Côte d'Azur. When we left the Matisse apartment that afternoon, we were exhilarated by our meeting but hopeless as to the success of our mission. For how could one reject the work of an artist of the caliber and temperament of Matisse?

Much to our surprise, his secretary phoned the next day to say Matisse had agreed to attempt a new design and would we return to the apartment as he had something to show us. When we arrived, Mr. Matisse was not feeling well and could not see us personally; however, the women had samples made by Matisse's ceramacist in new mediums - the tiles done in the most beautiful and varied colorings and made in larger pieces than we had known possible in tile. They were to be set in a background of white plaster mixed with ground marble which gave the whole a marvelous luminosity. The ceramacist and Matisse had already worked out very careful engineering for setting this structure in an inter-weaving of metal grids. The finished work, to be 12 feet long and 8 feet high, would be made in several sections which would be joined by sturdy and complicated dowels and holes. Everything had been foreseen to hang such a heavy piece safely on the wall and still allow for our local earthquakes. We did not want it set in the wall so that if at some future date the house were to be sold, we could take the ceramic with us. We were thrilled with the description of the prospective design and after seeing the beautiful materials and dazzling colors, we were more anxious than ever to have a ceramic designed and executed by Matisse.

4. THE EXECUTION

Pierre Matisse (the artist's son and art dealer in New York) was subsequently contacted. Much correspondence followed as to contracts, delivery dates, etc., (see enclosures and explanations of delays). The design was first to be executed in a small (approximately 9" x 12") water color. On our approval, the artist would make a full scale cutout which was to become our property. A colored transparency of same was to be shipped us from France to project on the patio wall. On approval of this, the ceramic itself was to be made.

During the work's progress, we received many photos and reports. The last photo (late summer 1954) shows Henri Matisse at the ceramacist's place of work (the ceramic was laid out on trestles outdoors sheltered only by a thatched roof). All that remained to be added in this picture was the small corner at the bottom right containing the artist's signature. This, he completed just before his death in November, 1954.

5. FOR SHIPPING - SEE CORRESPONDENCE

6. INSTALLATION

The two large crates utilizing the space of two cars in our garage arrived late June '55. The unpacking was witnessed by myself, two U.S. Customs men, our insurance man, the local ceramacist who would do the mounting, our architect responsible for engineering the hanging of so heavy a structure, an art dealer to appraise any damage and our gardner, houseman and my husband - the latter three doing the unpacking. We were all very excited. Each one of the 16 pieces was wrapped in 16 separate crates contained within the

two large crates. There was also an extra crate containing mounting, patching and cleaning materials with very detailed instructions and diagrams.

A steel frame of 16 pieces was made to follow the exact configuration of the 16 ceramic pieces. This was then mounted on our wall and braced on the floor of the patio. Before installing the ceramic itself, it was necessary to assemble it on a frame laid on boards elevated from the floor on trestles. The process was identical with piecing a jigsaw puzzle together - since, if a piece did not fit exactly, the last piece would not go in. When the ceramic was finally mounted on the wall, we constructed a small gutter parallel to the top to prevent rain from the roof draining heavily on the ceramic itself, and carrying with it streaks of dust. This was "painted out" and does not show.

The ceramic has been up since early August, 1955, and has neither faded nor pitted. Far from becoming tiresome, its simplicity of design never fails to bring warmth, gaiety, color and beauty to an area observed by all who pass through any part of the house. This is truly the heart of our home.