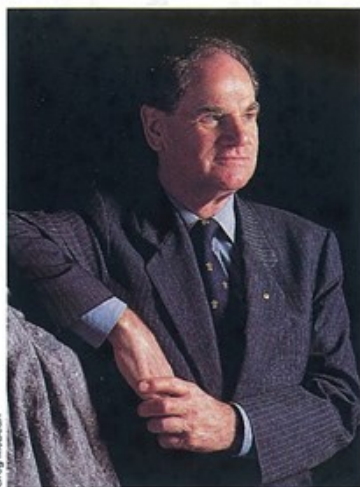


During February, Robert Edwards, moving as quickly as flights allow, will travel from Los Angeles to Dallas, then to Houston, Washington, Boston and Philadelphia, then back to Los Angeles and then to New York. At every point, there will be a meeting with a trusted representative of an institution or private collection which has agreed to lend works by the great French master Henri Matisse for exhibition in Australia this year.

At every encounter, the two parties will check carefully that the work changing hands is in the condition specified by the accompanying documents. Any discoloration or accidental discontinuity will be noted, with precise dimensions, however microscopic. A ceiling value applies to any single plane load so escorting works by Matisse from America to Australia and, later in the schedule, from Europe to Australia has to be done in shuttle mode.

As chief executive of Art Exhibitions Australia Limited, Robert Edwards is responsible for the organisation and financial management of the show which will open in Brisbane next month, move to Canberra at the end of May and transfer to Melbourne in July where it will run until the beginning of September.

The works travel in sealed containers and are released with bolt cutters at the ultimate destination. Checking, packing and sealing procedures are repeated with each transfer. Despite a prudent readiness to expect the worst at any time, Edwards experiences a perceptible drop in adrenalin once he's on Australian



Greg McBean

IT'S BEEN SEVEN YEARS
IN THE PLANNING. NOW
THE SHOW IS IN THE
PROCESS OF BEING
CHECKED, PACKED AND
ESCORTED TO AUSTRALIA.
ARTISTS, CRITICS,
CURATORS AND THE REST
OF AUSTRALIA'S ART
LOVERS ARE

*Waiting
for*

soil. Our biggest drawcard when he's negotiating to bring works of great value to this country is that they'll be safer here than almost anywhere else.

At moments when the February schedule looks daunting, Robert consoles himself with the thought that it can surely never meet the depths of awfulness encountered four years ago when he left Russia with 297 gold and silver objects of beauty and wonder in the back of a truck — testament to greed, vanity, and sublime virtuosity, and accumulated over a millennium. They were on their way to Australia to be exhibited throughout the summer of '92.

"The pick-up address was easy," says Robert. "Number one Red Square, Moscow. I had two German drivers. We loaded the collection into a Mercedes air-ride truck with insulated, environmentally controlled, closed body. A Russian vehicle with five armed police guards was to travel in convoy with us. The Russians carried their own petrol. We were travelling under international regulations so that we did not have to open up the vehicle for inspection at borders, and the arrangement was we had to supply our own fuel.

"I decided that to carry emergency petrol constituted a fire risk to the collection. We had to drive to Finland and then catch a boat from Helsinki to Lubeck and then take the collection by road to Frankfurt, and from there fly to Sydney.

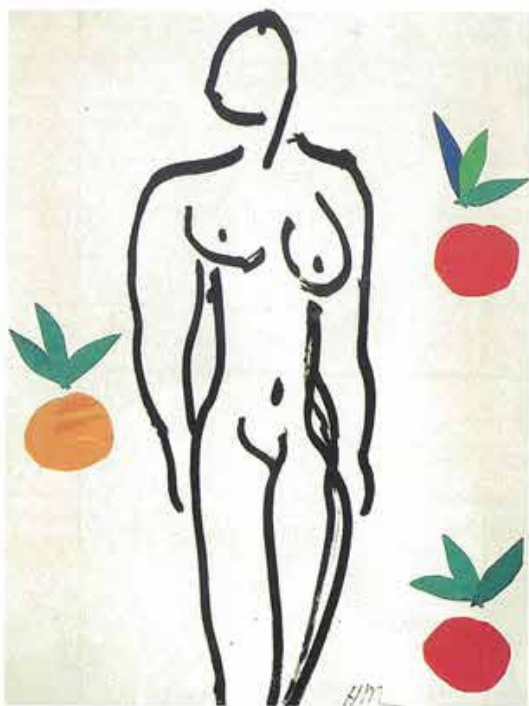
"It was November. The temperature inside the bonded van was a pleasant 21 degrees. The thermometer in the cabin, however, when we climbed aboard, was 20 below zero. The drivers took it in turns to drive while the

MATISSE

BY ANNABEL FROST

This page: *Woman
with a plume hat*
1918, oil on canvas.
Opposite page:
Robert Edwards,
Chief Executive of
Art Exhibitions
Australia Limited.





Above: Pierrot's funeral, papercuts, stencil, collage. Far left: Nude with oranges 1952-53, gouache on cut paper, brush and ink. Left: Algerian Woman 1909, oil on canvas.

other one slept. I sat between them."

There was snow as far as the eye could see. The plains were floodlit. They looked like the far side of Mars. Then, on a deserted road at 2am, the truck came to a halt.

"Friedrich, who was at the wheel, told me our tank was nearly empty. Our escorts had fuel but regulations, I gathered from the exchange with the police guards, prohibited the use of their supplies. It was beginning to look sinister.

"However, as it turned out, there was nothing to fear. We found an unofficial supplier and woke him up. The guards brandishing weapons with unnecessary zeal soon obtained what was needed. As we drove away I pointed out that we hadn't given the supplier any money. Friedrich said he'd given him 40 cigarettes from his satchel and the man had been entirely satisfied.

"The guards left us at the border and Finnish police took over. At the Gulf of Finland there was a slight hitch. All shipping had been cancelled. I was able to arrange secure storage for our treasures. Our whole itinerary depended on prompt arrival at Lubeck. There was nothing we could do about that.

"We caught a ferry the next afternoon. It took two and a half days to cross the

gulf. On board there were people from all countries in Eastern Europe. I was the only English-speaking passenger. There was a party atmosphere. On arrival in Germany, however, the informality vanished. Suddenly every one of those passengers was a poker-faced professional."

Unlike other major Matisse exhibitions over the 40 years since his death, the one mounted by Art Exhibitions Australia with Dr Caroline Turner of the Queensland Art Gallery as its commissioner shows the full range of Matisse's art — paintings, drawing, sculpture, costumes and cut-outs. It has been seven years in the planning.

Halfway through the negotiations, the New York Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) announced plans for a major exhibition of Matisse's paintings. The Matisse family, who hold the copyright on every one of his works regardless of ownership, suggested the Australian dates might be altered.

Hopes that the MOMA paintings could be transported en bloc were dashed because the Centre Pompidou in Paris

put in a bid to host a show featuring works dated from 1904 to 1917 directly after the MOMA exhibition closed. "And after that," said Robert, "the works had to rest."

In Australia, the artist whose work most consistently evokes homage to Matisse is John Coburn. In 1966, Aubusson, maker of the world's most famous tapestries, commissioned Coburn to design for their workshops in France. The Sydney Opera House then invited him to design two tapestry curtains, one for the Opera Theatre and one for the Drama Theatre. "I handed in the drawings with absolutely no expectation that I'd be asked to go ahead," says John. "I was so used to the grand-plans-no-money situation. But they had the funds to pay for my huge tapestries, influenced by the Matisse cut-outs and the Unesco mural by Mirò." Not that audiences these days see much of the famous curtains. They're lowered and raised for every performance before the public enters the auditorium. This arrangement ensures that their visual impact does not interfere with the atmosphere of the current production.

"In my opinion the timing of this exhibition is perfect," says John. "As little

as two years ago, it would have been too soon." However, as a result of the postponement, there was one considerable setback.

In the early years of the century, Matisse was at the height of his productivity. His work was appreciated throughout Europe and beyond in Russia whose merchants and aristocrats looked to France as the acme of culture and innovation. Sergei Shchukin, a merchant prince in St Petersburg, then the capital of Russia, became besotted with the work of Matisse. He bought as many paintings as he could from owners who were willing to sell (the Hermitage in St Petersburg has 53 of these) and then, in 1910, he commissioned two colossal works, *Dance* and *Music*. In 1917, Shchukin's collection fell forfeit to the revolution. In the process of glasnost and perestroika, Yeltsin removed barriers to borrowing from the fabled Russian collections. The Hermitage lent MOMA *Dance*. The Pushkin Museum lent *Music*. The two paintings were transferred to Paris where a shock was in store.

Shchukin's granddaughter, Irina, went to the French media and claimed that the Hermitage and the Pushkin were in possession of goods that were rightly hers. Her identity had been authenticated in a laborious court case 13 years earlier when she'd failed to retrieve her grandfather's Picassos, commandeered by the Bolsheviks, dispersed on the black market, seized by Nazis and finally sold to the highest bidder because Hitler and Goëring disdained contemporary art. This time, Irina Shchukin sued the French government and demanded the paintings be resumed on her behalf. Professor Mikhail Piotrovski, director of the Hermitage, and Robert Edwards were in the middle of discussions for an exhibition of Aboriginal art to be sent to Russia. They followed the Shchukin proceedings in an agony of suspense. The court ruled that the paintings belonged to Russia. Needless to say, there are no plans for *Music* and *Dance* to leave Russia ever again.

"I'm sorry they won't be coming here," says John Coburn, "but I'm glad the exhibition is now, rather than at the earlier

date. Australians needed to see the Van Goghs and Gauguins first. Now it's time for the greatest master of them all." The withheld works, moreover, physically dwarf every work in the vicinity. As with grand eccentrics in a large family, the others shine in their true colours only when the scene-stealers are absent.

In the meantime, Edwards is negotiating a few quiet coups. "We've offered to pay for the restoration of a work in Brazil that would otherwise be too fragile to be moved," he says. "In that way, we make a direct contribution to the survival of a great work and the Australian public will ultimately benefit."

Kimio Kawaguchi, conservator of the National Museum of Western Art in

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Tokyo, has congratulated Australia on a world record. *Two Breton Girls by the Sea*, shown in the Gauguin exhibition, experienced during its three-month absence no more than 1.7 per cent variation in temperature and humidity, and only infinitesimal vibration.

"They were able to tell me this because they'd buried a miniature computer in the work, a mole. When they got it back they extracted the chip and obtained a readout. I didn't even know that such a thing existed. Obviously, this is the way to go. Japanese technology is very ingenious in establishing who are the most reliable custodians of their works, and they have generously supported the Matisse exhibition," says Edwards.

Like royalty, Edwards will never offer an opinion on art. "You must ask the scholars," he says. "Or those who have direct expertise." He has just received confirmation that we will have *Woman in an Ostrich Feather Hat*. Later that day, John Coburn turns to a reproduction of the work and anticipates seeing the original for the first time.

"He would have painted this quickly. See, he turned the brush around and incised these stripes with the wooden end. He was more interested in the curves — the feathers and the collar — than the model's face," says Coburn.

"People said he lacked passion, working so unconcernedly through both world wars. But I think differently. I believe he was above everything. That's how you know a master."

"Students today have Matisse and his theory of colour drummed into them. They can't 'discover' him. He's too well known among artists. But there are people who aren't artists for whom this exhibition will be a revelation."

"When I saw the first Matisse which came to Sydney in 1953, he was dying at his home in Nice. He sat propped up in bed. An assistant covered sheets of paper with paint. Matisse drew on them. Too weak to wield a scalpel, he handed over his designs to be cut into shapes and then glued the pieces together."

"Thus were created the most moving works he ever produced," says Coburn. "Those cutouts — which we'll see at the exhibition — are, I believe, the greatest achievement of his career."

The Matisse Exhibition will be shown at three venues: Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, from Tuesday, March 28 to Wednesday, May 17; National Gallery of Australia from Friday, May 26 to Sunday, July 9 and National Gallery of Victoria from Wednesday, July 19 to Sunday, September 3.

A Matisse Conference will be held by the Queensland Art Gallery on the weekend of April 1 and April 2. For information, telephone (07) 840 7255 or (07) 840 7268.