



HENRI MATISSE

If line drawing is the foundation of Western art, we must surely concede that Matisse's contribution is among the most subtle and sophisticated manifestations of its kind. Clarity of concept, perfection of scale and an unwavering sense of melodic continuity characterize his drawings in line. They were, he wrote, "the purest and most direct expressions of my feelings."

The practice of woodcutting, lithography, and etching received his attention sometimes parallel with, sometimes in direct contrast to what was happening on his easel. In the early 1920's, heavily worked lithographs were carried out at the same time as some of his most alluringly colorful paintings. Towards the end of the decade, Matisse gradually forsook the lithographic crayon for the etching needle. And in 1929, virtually abandoning painting altogether, he produced an astonishing series of line etchings, small in scale and edition, but truly essential. It is a selection of these that makes up a great part of this exhibition.

Matisse's line etchings are extremely straightforward and exist in one state only. There is little discernible difference as far as his handling of the medium is concerned, between the small plates of 1914 and 1929. The earlier ones, represented here by several studies of the faces of his friends, are distinguished by a tremulous, slightly interrupted line. The heads are rarely seen as a whole but are nearly always cropped at the edge of the plate, increasing their sense of intimacy. It is as if the models, close to the artist, had momentarily stopped in mid-conversation for Matisse to transcribe their features.