

JOHN MITCHELL

FINE PAINTINGS



Henri Matisse (1869 - 1954)

Portrait de femme, 1944

ink on paper

19 ¼ x 14 ⅜ in. (49 x 36.5 cm.)

signed and dated *H Matisse 44* lower right

PROVENANCE:

with Neffe-Degandt Gallery, London;

acquired from the above in 2005, thence by descent.

By studying Old Master paintings, Henri Matisse taught himself to consider composition, value contrasts and harmony in his work. He then made a conscious effort to forget this learned technique, or as he put it, “understand it in a completely personal manner”. As his career progressed, he searched for a way to unite the formal elements of colour and line. On the one hand, he was known as a master colourist: from the non-realistic palette that earned him the designation of a ‘fauve’ or ‘wild beast’, in the first decade of the twentieth century, to the light-infused interiors of the 1920s. On the other hand, he was a master draftsman, celebrated for drawings and prints that described the figure in fluid arabesque lines.

This pen and ink drawing from 1944, the same year Picasso arranged for Matisse to be represented in the *Salon d'Automne* put on to celebrate the liberation of Paris, demonstrates the mature artist's masterful use of pure line. Though effortless in appearance, the portrait is the end result of a challenging creative process in which he would make many studies of the subject in looser mediums such as charcoal and stump drawing, and only when confident that the subject was fully understood, the character of the model internalised, would he give free rein to his pen. The drawing would then be executed in a single sitting, no hesitation in his hand nor opportunity for correction. If inadequate there was no alternative but to discard the work and begin again, with each attempt a unique performance, as if it were an acrobatic feat.

In his writings Matisse was at pains to express that his ink drawings were not sketches, but finished artworks, and their function was to convey the purest and most direct translation of emotion:

"I have never considered drawing as an exercise of particular dexterity, rather as principally a means of expressing intimate feelings and describing states of mind, but a means deliberately simplified so as to give simplicity and spontaneity to the expression which should speak without clumsiness, directly to the mind of the spectator."

Matisse built upon the technical experimentation and innovation of the preceding fifty years, to creating drawings of bold expression, emancipated from archaic hierarchies, opening the way to the modern art of the later twentieth century.