



Henri Matisse: The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation

M.A. Couturier

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Conversations and Correspondence with
Marie-Alain Couturier and
Louis-Bertrand Rayssiguier

Edited and introduced by
Marcel Billot

Henri Matisse devoted four years of his life to designing the Vence Chapel, his "crowning achievement," as he himself stated on several occasions. Though the circumstances which led to the creation of this unique building are well known--the project originated with Sister Jacques-Marie, who nursed the aging painter back to health after his brush with death in 1942--the story of the Chapel's construction has long remained shrouded in mystery.

Much of the material in this book is drawn from the Couturier Archives. The bulk of the archive consists of the notes of Brother Louis-Bertrand Rayssiguier, the young Dominican monk who drew the plan of the Chapel and worked closely with Matisse on all phases of its building and decorating. From December 1947 to June 1951, Rayssiguier met frequently with the artist and recorded their conversations verbatim. His notes allow the reader to follow day by day the unfolding of one of the supreme masterpieces of religious art in the twentieth century. Even more significantly, they give us a rare glimpse into the artist's private world. They chronicle his disappointments and his moments of elation, his habits and his foibles, his reactions to contemporary developments in the art world, as well as his deepest personal beliefs. Gifted with an unusually keen sense of observation, Rayssiguier shows us Matisse at work as well as Matisse relaxing in the intimacy of his own home.

Completing this invaluable record, the correspondence between Matisse and Father Marie-Alain Couturier, the Dominican priest at the forefront of the post-World War II movement to commission works of religious art from leading modern painters and sculptors, details the creation of the Chapel's most remarkable feature--Matisse's bold stained-glass windows. An expert on stained glass and the chief editor of *L'Art sacré*, an influential review devoted to religious art around the world, Couturier took care of all the logistical and technical matters relating to these great windows. The numerous letters he and the artist exchanged are in themselves a fascinating exchange on the art and the significance of modern stained glass.

This archive charts a unique journey to the heart of artistic creativity. The compilation of documents published here for the first time in English is abundantly illustrated with sketches by Matisse and photographic records that show the successive stages of the Chapel's completion.

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