

A ROARING FORTIES PRESS PUBLICATION

A Journey into Matisse's South of France

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ARTPLACE SERIES



Chapter 2
St. Tropez
Clarity of Color



The picturesque fishing village of St. Tropez has captivated the imagination of writers, painters, and poets from ancient times to the present. Its charm and beauty remain irresistible.



Paul Signac's *Port St. Tropez* (1899).

In May 1892, artist Paul Signac sailed into the little port of St. Tropez on his prize-winning boat *L'Olympia*. An accomplished sailor and painter, Signac was seeking an escape from the sadness that surrounded him in Paris, where he had recently organized posthumous exhibitions for his close friends Georges Seurat and Vincent van Gogh.

Like those of countless other French artists in the decades that followed, Signac's move to St. Tropez was an attempt to escape the grayness of the North by taking up residence amid the radiant and colorful Mediterranean landscape, with its extraordinary clarity of light. St. Tropez was a village and a view he would praise for the remainder of his life, joining a long list of travelers who arrive and never quite recover from the shock they experience when they first discover its beauty.

“A strange wind pushed me toward the eighth wonder of the world,” wrote Signac on arrival in St. Tropez. “In front of me are the golden banks of the gulf, the blue waves coming to rest on a little beach, my beach, below. In the background, the blue silhouettes of Les Maures. I have enough here to work on for the rest of my life. It’s absolute joy.”

Henri Matisse had wanted to travel to the south of France since his honeymoon trip to Corsica in 1899. “You talk of my going south to the Midi, it is, alas, my dearest dream,” he wrote Simon Bussy, who had moved to Menton, a small village between Nice and Monaco. “But, mon cher, without money, what can you do? I think I should work twice as hard there as in the North where the light is so poor—that will be for later, perhaps.”

Luck changed for Matisse in the spring of 1904. He had his first successful solo exhibition and great success at the Salon des Indépendants. Additionally, he earned more than a thousand francs from the sale of his paintings. For the first time in their marriage, Amélie and Henri Matisse were ahead of the bill collectors.

Matisse wrote Signac in St. Tropez, asking for advice about finding a place to rent for the summer. He had read Signac’s treatise on Pointillism, *From Delacroix to Neoimpressionism*, and had spent months attempting to teach himself the technique. Signac was also vice president of the Société des Artistes Indépendants, and the two began their friendship when Matisse made his first appearance at the Salon des Indépendants in 1904.

The prospect of spending the summer in St. Tropez with Signac appealed to Matisse immensely. He was eager to gain new insight into painting with Signac’s help, and he would be doing so in the light and color of the South. For his part, Signac was trying to build an

artist colony in St. Tropez, much as Gauguin had done in Brittany and van Gogh had attempted to do in Arles. He was valiantly working to establish a next generation for Pointillism, and he saw Matisse as an important recruit.

Signac found Matisse affordable lodging for fifty francs a month near his own home in a tiny cottage called La Ramade. With two small rooms upstairs and two down, it was not big enough for all five of the Matisses, so Henry and Amélie had to temporarily split up the family. Ten-year-old Marguerite was sent to Toulouse to stay with her mother’s sister, and three-year-old Jean was sent to stay with his paternal grandparents in Bohain. Only four-year-old Pierre accompanied his parents south that summer, in part because it was believed that his habitually poor health would benefit from weeks spent in the sea air. Henri, Amélie, and Pierre left Paris bound for St. Tropez on July 12, 1904.

Unearthly Radiance

The Côte d’Azur has captivated the imagination of writers, painters, and poets from ancient times to the present, and travel narratives have itemized its most charming cities and significant monuments since as early as the sixth century. Like so many villages and towns along the Mediterranean coast, St. Tropez has a long and varied history of invasion, destruction, resurrection, and tourism, and its origins are as deeply rooted in myth as is its lingering reputation.

In 68 B.C., an officer of Nero named Torpes was beheaded in Pisa for his Christian beliefs. His head was buried in Italy, but his body was put into a boat with a rooster and a dog that were expected to slowly devour it. The animals apparently had no appetite, and their boat floated to a tiny village inhabited by the Romans known by the name of Heraclea Cacabaria. The

headless martyr whose body had drifted to shore was buried in the village; centuries later, Catholic settlers made him their namesake.

Set into the hills just above the curve of a deep bay, St. Tropez rises up the mountainside at the tip of a small peninsula between Marseilles and Cannes. Cut off from the interior by a range of mountains at the foot of the Alps known as Les Maures, and surrounded by the deep blue waters of the Mediterranean on all other sides, the small fishing village is so geographically isolated that an eighteenth-century travel guide considered it “doomed to inevitable ruination . . . certain to be forgotten about.”

A visit by author Guy de Maupassant gave origin to St. Tropez’s mythology as an artistic and hedonistic paradise. He wrote about discovering the village in

an 1887 account of his Mediterranean voyages, and in doing so launched a procession of artists looking for a coastal muse:

St. Tropez is the capital of this little Saracen realm where almost all the villages built atop steep crags, the better to defend themselves from marauders, are still full of Moorish houses with their arches, their narrow windows and their inner courtyards, home to tall palm trees which now soar above the roofs. St. Tropez is one of these charming, simple daughters of the sea . . . one of those modest little towns, growing in the sea like a shell, nourished by fish and sea air.

The Côte d’Azur is a landscape of dramatic contradictions, where lavender fields, olive trees,

St. Tropez, circa 1900.



A Journey into
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South of France



This beautiful and fascinating volume follows Henri Matisse on his journeys into the South of France, where he discovered the light and color that saturate his work. Part biography, part travel guide, it explores the painter's private life, artistic evolution, and relationships with the places that inspired him.

The book begins in Paris and then moves to fashionable St. Tropez, the fishing village of Collioure, chic Nice, the medieval refuge of Vence, and luxurious Cimiez. In each location, the author visits the villas and studios where Matisse lived and worked, and explains how his art responded to the palette and ambience of the local landscape.

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ISBN 0-9766706-9-0



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\$21.96 / \$27.95 Canada
ISBN 09766706-9-0