Brush and Pen

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Magritte, René. *Ecrits complets*, Paris : Flammarion, 2001, (Tout l'art / Ecrits d'artistes)

Bonnard / Vuillard : *correspondance*. Paris : Gallimard, 2001, (Art et artistes)

Matisse / Rouveyre : *correspondance*. Paris : Flammarion, 2001

- 1 The publication of Magritte's complete writings in a volume edited by André Blavier means that the Belgian painter will be joining fellow artists Malevich and Matisse on the M-shelves of French booksellers. According to Schwitters, this is very much the elite bookshelf for 20th-century art, containing as it does the *Monstruivists* Malevich, Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian and, of course, the German artist's *Merz*. This alphabetical cohabitation occasioned by publishing events, is *alogical*, a piece of *zaoum*. Still, Magritte is at least close to Malevich in that he wrote a lot. The pen mattered as much the brush.
- 2 In Magritte's view, indeed, the painter worked the same way a writer does: "when I have an idea, I put it on canvas, as properly as I can. As a writer would: subject, verb, complement" (p.601). The edition put together by André Blavier contains both widely-read texts such as "Les Mots et les images", which was published in *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1929, and previously unpublished texts such as "La ligne de vie I" from 1938. Among the total of 214 texts we find manifestos, tracts, talks, interviews, letters, answers to questionnaires and reports and scripts—proof that Magritte, who also went in for art criticism, was a very diverse writer. The edition is rounded off by "statements" and "miscellaneous" texts plus apocryphal texts, which take up a limited amount of space (pp.693-729). The texts are commendably annotated but it is a pity that the list of names gives only the number of the texts concerned. A chronology of the writings would also have been useful and the lack of a bibliography is a real shame.

- 3 The correspondence between Matisse and Rouveyre was eagerly awaited. Announced years ago (it was supposed to be published in 1993, at the time of the Pompidou Centre's Matisse exhibition), it is here at last. Matisse needs no introduction, of course. Still, it has to be said that there is still a lot of exploring left to be done. The first volume of Hilary Spurling's biography, published in 1998, was aptly entitled *The Unknown Matisse*. Then there were the fragments of the correspondence between Matisse and his son, Pierre, published by John Russell in 1999.¹
- 4 Hanne Finsen has done a remarkable job. With nearly 1,200 letters, this volume dwarfs other books of correspondence.
- 5 Published in Gallimard's "Art et Artistes" collection (which has already published correspondence by Matisse/Bonnard and Apollinaire/Picasso), the volume of letters between Bonnard and Vuillard contains only some sixty un-numbered missives, but they provide precious information about the two artists' lives. The volume is rather well annotated and Antoine Terrasse provides copious detail about their entourage. We find out, for example, that in 1924 Bouin, Bonnard's frame-maker, was living in the Rue Pierre Haret, at the foot of Montmartre (p.74), a point that will no doubt be of interest only to historians of that part of Paris. The Matisse-Rouveyre book is also full of biographical information.
- 6 Matisse and Rouveyre met at the studio of Gustave Moreau but only began exchanging letters with any frequency in 1941, the year when Matisse underwent a serious operation. Part of this correspondence is from a particularly gloomy period, with stamps bearing the image of Marshal Pétain disfiguring and polluting Matisse's envelopes.² These envelopes are well known. Some of these were reproduced in Pierre Schneider's superb monograph. ³ Finsen reproduces some 200 letters and envelopes, revealing the remarkable visual importance of this correspondence which can have few equivalents elsewhere. When Matisse wrote, he did more than add drawings; he did his envelopes and letters in calligraphy. The pen gives way to the colour pencil. André Rouveyre had a real treasure in his hands.
- 7 In 1953-54 he donated these envelopes, together with Matisse's letters, to the Royal Library in Copenhagen. As the correspondence has remained inaccessible, the publication of Finsen's book is a real event for Matisse scholars. In addition to the biographical aspects, it makes a fundamental contribution and enables us to better understand Matisse's relation to writing. Matisse wrote many letters, but he did not like to write about his art. He sometimes gave interviews, but he only ever wrote one text, his "Notes of a Painter", in 1907. As he reminded his son, Pierre, in 1945: "I do not have any texts to send you, because I have not written any since the *Grande Revue*."⁴ Still, in 1941 Matisse did consider publishing a "book full of memories connecting more or less with painting, or rather, the life of a painter. [...] Given its recollective nature, I wanted the book to have the title *BAVARDAGES* [chat] and not, as the publisher wanted, *ENTRETIENS* [conversations], which is too demanding." (letter 49). It was no doubt going to be a sizeable volume because Matisse sent Rouveyre 300 typewritten pages (letter 64) with a request that he correct them. Rouveyre at first rejected the proposed title, then accepted it: "*Bavardages* is airy and light, as you say. It also has the advantage of showing that in your mind you do not put your ideas and their written expression on the same level as your painting" (letter 53).

- 8 Matisse needed a “literary practitioner” to set down his *bavardages*. Pierre Courthion was chosen to give them form. However, Matisse imposed his own ideas and rejected Courthion’s, dismissing him as a *littérateur*. “I have to go over everything he does [...] he doesn’t understand a thing” (letter 64). Rouveyre wholeheartedly approved Matisse’s suzerainty. “I can imagine what it is like: your text, your words, are perfectly autonomous in themselves and he is trying to make it seem as if your developments are introduced by his lapidary suggestions. [...] Don’t let him tell you what to do. Stick to your opinions” (letter 65). In the end, the *bavardages* were abandoned. Matisse’s style was too “unkempt”, as he put it in 1947 (letter 850): “I don’t know the precise meaning of many words and the construction of my sentences is uncertain.” His brush, though, was not. It is present throughout the correspondence, as for example in letter 313. For Finsen, it is impossible to tell here whether Matisse used a big pen or a brush.
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NOTES

1. Spurling, Hilary, *The Unknown Matisse: a Life of Henri Matisse: the Early Years 1869-1908*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1998. [See also in this issue of *Critique d’art*, review n°063, p. 54] Russell, John. *Matisse Père et Fils*, Paris: Ed. de La Martinière, 1999
2. The letters contain some uncomfortable moments. For example, in n° 419, dated 30 April 1944, Rouveyre describes Max Jacob as a “clown” and, in another passage, asks Matisse if he has heard about the death of Paul Poiret. Jacob, lest we forget, died at the Drancy internment camp on 5 March 1944.
3. Schneider, Pierre. *Matisse*, Paris: Flammarion, 1984
4. Letter dated 14 May 1945, in John Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 246