

# What's Wrong With This Picture?

## An Interview With Pierre Matisse

By Nicholas Fox Weber

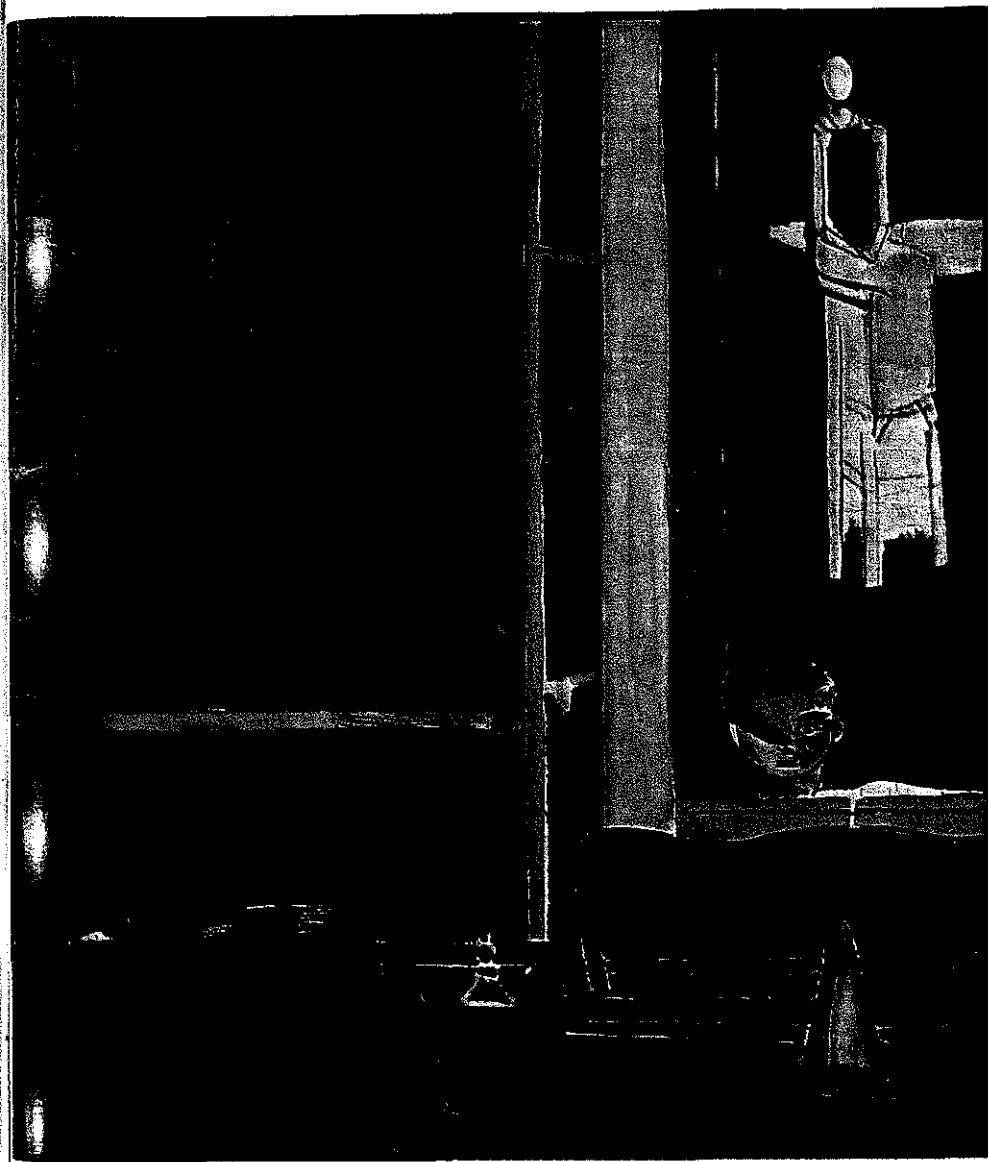
**G**reat artists often draw inspiration from children's art. They admire its spunk and freshness and aspire to some of its spontaneity. But whether this respect extends from the work to the actual child is quite another question.

Picasso, for example, certainly captured the poignancy of childhood moments, both in style and in subject matter, but he was hardly the dad of a kid's dreams. Renoir, on the other hand, not only painted his son Jean as bright-eyed and rosy-cheeked, but he also raised a boy who loved him and who became a brilliant artist himself in the medium of film.

As for Henri Matisse, his children shared enough of his passion for art to make it their lives' work, but their memories of "notre père" are far from warm. Pierre Matisse is one of the world's most respected dealers of modern art, and he greatly esteems his father's work, but his respect is more aesthetic than it is filial. Most of us see Matisse's canvases of his children as dream-like images of vast visual charm, but for the painter's son they represent some painful truths about his youth as well.

Henri Matisse's *Piano Lesson*, showing Pierre seated behind metronome and

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Henry Matisse, *Piano Lesson*, 1916, oil on canvas, 8'1/2" x 6'11 3/4". Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.

music at the Pleyel piano, is one of the best-known masterpieces in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Painted in 1916, this large (approximately eight-by-seven-feet) canvas was done when Pierre was 16, although he looks much younger in it. It is a haunting picture, because of both its subject matter and its geometry. The vast expanses of gray, the brilliant green triangle of the outdoors, the severity of the space played against the ornate scrollwork of the balustrade and music rack: All these elements draw us in and fix our attention. So does the

portrait of a sad-looking, pinheaded boy dwarfed by the world around him. The two solid wedges that block his right eye are full of suggestion. They repeat the form of the metronome and thus link its imposition of disciplined repetition to Pierre's mind, while at the same time they pick up the shape of the lush green of the garden, which is probably where all the child's thoughts and dreams were. What was life like for this boy who sat with the stern form of a woman on a high stool in the painting behind him, the lush curves of his father's nude sculpture to

his side? To us, the world of this painting denotes the learning of music, the balance of colors and forms, the life of culture. What that world meant to the child sitting in its midst is something else.

Pierre Matisse today, at age 87, bears an uncanny resemblance to both the little boy at the Pleyel and to photographs of his father as an old man, especially if one

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imagines what Henri Matisse would have looked like clean-shaven. Pierre's face still has the roundness it had in the painting. His expression is as set, and his look of inward concentration as deep. Sitting in the office of the gallery he has owned and run for many years on East 57th Street in New York, he makes a splendidly elegant impression. Gracious if taciturn, he seems the essence of cultivation, surrounded by a well-organized library of art books on neat shelves behind glass doors, with a Miro mural overhead, a Diego Giacometti table beside him, and sculpture by Miro, Alberto Giacometti, and others nearby.

The first surprise was to learn that the instrument Pierre actually specialized in was the violin. The piano was peripheral. And so the title *Piano Lesson* is essentially a misnomer. What he was doing in the painting was working on exercises called "solfa"—practicing the music scale and the four syllables of the tetrachord. And this rigorous ritual—two hours every morning—was all in pursuit of something about which he really did not care... the second surprise.

He was learning the violin solely because his father wanted him to. Henri Matisse played the instrument himself, and hoped that his son would master it. Not that Henri had had an easy time when he stud- (Continued on page 152)

ied as a youth. Says Pierre, "My father took lessons as a child, but not seriously. When the professor came, he would jump out the window into the back garden to escape." But in 1914, Henri, already an accomplished and highly acclaimed painter, took up the instrument again, in large part, says Pierre, to calm his nerves. It was the beginning of wartime, and the painter hoped that the violin would relax him so that he could approach his painting with less tension. The next year, Pierre—who heard his father playing at home and saw that many of his classmates were taking violin lessons—asked his father if he, too, could study the instrument.

From Pierre's point of view, his father went overboard in response. Henri decided that Pierre, at age 15, should leave school to study violin exclusively. The boy had daily lessons with a professor, plus the requisite two hours of solfa every morning from 6 to 8 a.m. There he sat,

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alone, working on exercises, miserable. Sometimes he would fall asleep on the piano bench, but if he did his father, whose room was directly above, "would hear the silence and tap with a stick on the floor and wake me up.

"It was hopeless, at 15, trying to be a violinist." Pierre feels that he had started far too late in life, and that the effort was futile. "My father reasoned that with will power you can make up for time lost, which is what happened to him at the Beaux Arts... But for me this was impossible. Musicians must start very, very

young." And they must love what they are doing; when a child is destined to perform, "He is possessed by the instrument he is playing; you have to tear him from it."

But though his father had run away from his own violin lessons, he had little feeling for Pierre's misery. "On the contrary. He didn't see it. The musician has to acquire a technique; that was all he knew. The work was beyond my power; and there was no fun in it for me—except playing duets with my father, a little Bach, not too difficult... Mainly I was stuck between the wall and the music stand, with the damn tick tock tick tock of the metronome.

"He was aware that the solfa was very boring, and he accepted that. What he did not recognize was that if I had been gifted, I would have kept going long after eight o'clock." Nonetheless, Pierre continued his studies faithfully until he left home a couple (*Continued on page 156*)

of years after the time of this painting. "What finally saved me was the military; I went into the army."

Henri Matisse did not actually watch Pierre at the piano, he did not have his easel set up in the living room while his son practiced. And the *Piano Lesson* is far from an exact portrait. "At the time I was for him an object in a general composition, which was just slightly abstract—deprived of details. My feeling is that he was not showing *me* anymore, but an abstract figure. His main concern was to carry out this composition the way he wanted it. I was there at the beginning, but after that I didn't exist anymore."

In the picture, the boy's face indeed serves as a mix of curves and straight lines, and as both a sphere and a flattened circle, within the whole picture—but it is also far more. It has life to it and is what we notice first. Henri Matisse may have been incapable of acknowledging his son's anguish, yet he managed nonetheless to capture it in a way that suggests awareness. The former Director of the Museum of Modern Art, art historian Alfred Barr, writing about the painting while Henri Matisse was still alive, described Pierre as "barricaded behind the Pleyel." The metronome and *Woman on a High Stool* (this is a painting within a painting) suggest more than abstract geometry; they suggest a discomfiting sternness. That sense of rules and strictures is accentuated by the lush curves elsewhere in the picture, which offer respite in the same way that the verdant green brings a hint of the outdoor world into the prison of the indoors. Pierre's father may have been a despot, but his portrayal of his son's plight indicates that he was not totally blind to it.

Paternal sensitivity, however, had not been a strength of the previous generation, either, according to Pierre. When Henri's father would visit the house in Issy-les-Moulineaux where they were living at the time, he always criticized the artist's impracticality. Looking at the garden in front of the studio that Henri had built so that he could work on his oversized canvases of *Dance* and *Music*, the elder Matisse's only question was, "Why don't you plant some potatoes instead of those nondescript flowers?"

There are differing opinions as to why the *Piano Lesson* depicts Pierre as

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younger than he was at the time. One interpretation is that the artist, apprehensive about the possibilities of both Pierre and his brother Jean going into the army, was intentionally pushing back the clock to a period when there was less danger. Pierre, however, says that by the time he enlisted, the war was almost over and there was no risk of seeing action. But the parent and the child could view history in different ways. Pierre, eager to escape home and violin lessons, had no fear of the military; the father of teenage sons during wartime may have had good reason for anxiety and might have wished to go back in time.

Pierre has a different theory as to why his father painted him looking so young. "He painted me with the memory he had of me from the beginning of my living with him... The image that he gave me was younger than my age because it was the image that came to him more than any other." Any parent who looks at his five-year-old and at the same time sees the child as he looked at three and at birth understands.

This seeing of past faces in the present can occur at any time. Pierre Matisse recalled being awakened by the phone one day at 7 a.m. Regarding his own sleepy visage in the mirror, he was astonished to see, if only for a few seconds, the very image that the artist Dubuffet had painted of him many years ago. "For people who have known others over a period of time, the image that they see is not always the last one, but could be the image that they remember from two years before." This seems truest of all for parents. "We have an impression of someone," says Pierre. "The next day we have another impression. But at the bottom there is always the basic expression."

Like anyone looking at a scene from his childhood, Pierre Matisse has strong memories of the objects in the room in which the *Piano Lesson* was painted. He recalls the painting *Woman on a High Stool* with a child's unique point of view. The canvas had actually been sold several years before the *Piano Lesson* was done, but because the purchaser—the great collector Sergei Shchukin—lived in Moscow, it could not be shipped during wartime. Its main significance to Pierre was that in the background of that canvas Henri had shown a drawing that he—Pierre—had done. However, in reproducing *Woman on a High Stool* in *Piano Lesson*, "he suppressed everything that he did not need—no more drawing by me." Exactly the sort of thing a kid would remember.

The Pleyel piano also evoked strong memories. The composer Stravinsky and the choreographer Diaghilev had come to ask Henri Matisse to do sets for a Tchaikovsky ballet. "I was shooed out in the garden, told not to interrupt and to keep quiet," while the three men met in the living room. Then "I heard Stravinsky play some Tchaikovsky on that piano." (Matisse did end up doing ballet sets, although for Stravinsky's own *Firebird* rather than for anything by Tchaikovsky.)

Pierre Matisse points out that in other paintings of approximately the same period, he looks very different from the way he appears in the *Piano Lesson*. In *The Music Lesson* and *The Artist's Family*, "I have an entirely different face." *The Music Lesson*, painted a year after the *Piano Lesson* and done in a far more realistic style, shows not only Pierre at the piano, but also his sister Marguerite next to him, and nearby is his brother Jean, reading. Their mother can be seen sewing beside the garden pool. If the *Piano Lesson* suggests the rigors of practice, this is a far more idyllic view of life. Pierre remembers it well. "This painting is the idealistic family scene. I was 17, my brother, 18. We were out in the garden. It was midsummer. There was a pear tree, and some of the pears had fallen down. They were hard, not yet ripe. My brother started throwing pears at me. I told him to stop, but he didn't, and in a minute we were fighting in the rose (Continued on page 158)

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bushes. My mother shouted at us. Then suddenly we heard a bell telling us to come and pose for the picture. We returned, our hair full of rose petals. My mother's hands were shaking so much that she couldn't make her *petit point*."

It sounds like many another family scene, except for that response to the ringing bell. But for Pierre Matisse, "The bell meant it had to do with my father's work, and my father's work was the discipline of the house." All of life was arranged for the convenience of the painter. The children always kept quiet when he was at work, and Mme. Matisse's whole purpose in life seems to have been to maintain a world in which her husband could work.

Another painting for which Jean, Marguerite, Pierre, and Mme. Matisse posed was *The Artist's Family* of 1911, which hangs in the Hermitage in Leningrad. The setting—Persian rugs, ornately patterned wallpaper and upholstery fabrics, lovely fireplace tiles, and vases full

of fresh anemones—suggest all the ease of a well-cushioned home life. Jean and Pierre, both clad in vibrant red, concentrate on their checker game.

Pierre, of course, remembers it as not all that tranquil. His mother would have to instruct them to pretend that they were playing. "Usually when we played checkers, we banged the board so hard that we ended up having to buy a new one. One of us was winning, the other cheating. The board generally ended up in the rose bushes."

But whatever the reality, the canvas works as art. The Matisse family may have had frictions, but the paintings for which they posed evoke a rich and happy life. Such are the prerogatives of art. Pierre Matisse may remember all the feuds with his brother and all the angst of his solfa, but when I asked him finally how he felt about the *Piano Lesson*, his answer was simple enough. "Well, I wouldn't mind having it," he replied with a warm smile. ■