

Change of Pace

by Joan Altabe



Rather than rail at you this time out, consider this column a motivational chat exhorting you to keep on no matter who's carping at your work, me included.

When Henri Matisse left his law studies for an art career in Paris, his father shouted at his departing train, "You'll starve!"

But Matisse continued to make art until his death in 1954 at age 85. The last 13 years he lived mostly in bed, propped up as if at a desk, with a table set over his knees. He drew constantly, even while talking to visitors. His walls were full of the drawings, mostly of females. As he said of the drawings around him, "I am never alone."

Six years before he died, he produced 127 works that celebrated French Renaissance Poetry. And while made by a dying man - he suffered from duodenal cancer - the work is far from dark and despairing. Rather, they tell love stories as lyricized by 16th century poet Pierre de Ronsard. What you see are fleshy, lustful females taking pleasure from nature, from men, and from being female.

But while the sensuality of the figures is distinct, Matisse said he was thinking along

spiritual lines when he created them:

"What interests me most is neither still life nor landscape but the human figure. It is through it that I best succeed in expressing the nearly religious feeling that I have towards life. I do not insist upon the details of the face. I do not care to repeat them with anatomical exactness. Though I happen to have an Italian model whose appearance at first suggests nothing but a purely animal existence, yet I succeed in picking out among the lines of the face those which suggest that deep gravity which persists in every human being."

It's not surprising that Matisse found solace in illustrating love poetry in the dark days of his illness. He discovered art when he was ill at age 20 when his mother gave him some paints. Art became his consolation throughout his life.

Once, when he was a poor and struggling artist, he spent all of his wife's dowry on a painting of three bathing women by Cezanne. He said it gave him hope.

When he quit his law studies, he called art "a good armchair" that put order in his chaos.

Art also saw him through the breakup of his

marriage to Amelia Parayre with whom he had three children.

Picasso once said of Matisse that he had sun in his belly, meaning Matisse's brightly hued, ever-exuberant imagery. But the king of color wasn't naturally exuberant. It wasn't that he was a happy man and that's why his work looked sunny. It was because he wasn't. His uplifting palette and his lilting life-assertive line-work are said to be his way of dealing with anxieties.

The modern old master said it himself:

"What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing

subject-matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he businessman or writer, like an appealing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue."

Of course, I don't agree with him for a minute. But I thought to give you all out there who paint eye candy a break, the main idea being that you mustn't surrender your vision.

End of pep talk. Back to business next time. 

