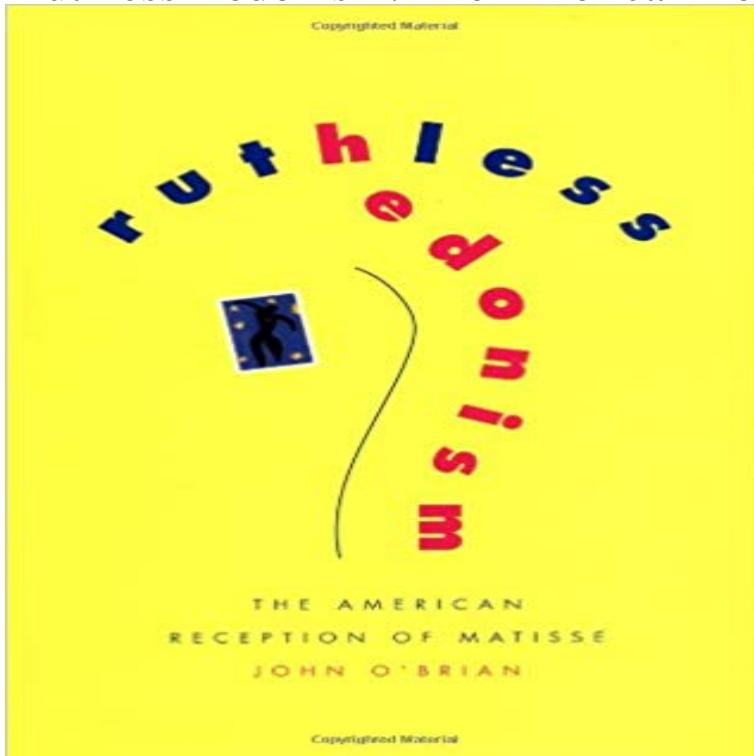


# Ruthless Hedonism: The American Reception of Matisse



Oh, do tell the American people that I am a normal man; that I am a devoted husband and father, that I have three fine children, that I go to the theatre. These words were spoken by Matisse just before the Armory Show in 1913 a pivotal moment, after which his work was seen in America as an example of what should be admired or deplored in modern art. In this ambitious study, John O'Brian argues that Matisse's sober presentations of himself were calculated to fit with the social constraints and ideological demands of the times. Matisse's strategy included cooperating with museums, cultivating private collectors, playing off dealers one against another, and reassuring the media that, whatever his reputation as an avant-gardist, the conduct of his life was solidly bourgeois. Moving from the late 1920s, when Matisse's output was shedding its outlaw reputation, to the early 1950s, when his work was canonized, O'Brian shows how the way Matisse's work was viewed changed as attention shifted away from the seductiveness of his subject matter to the seductiveness of his paint. The arts resolute rejection of political concerns, its deployment of decorative design for visual satisfaction, and its representations of pleasure encouraged American audiences, who in the 1930s deemed the art disreputable, to celebrate its gratifications by the early years of the Cold War. This intriguing, wide-ranging investigation of Matisse's self-promotion, America's uneasy embrace of modernism, and America's consumer culture and politics provides a rich context to Clement Greenberg's words published in the *Nation* in 1947: Matisse's cold hedonism and ruthless exclusion of everything but the concrete, immediate sensation will in the future, once we are away from the present *Zeitgeist*, be better understood as the most profound mood of the first half of the twentieth century.

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