

# Lydia Delectorskaya

Behind *The Pink Nude* (1935) by Henri Matisse, there is the story of an extraordinary life, not of Matisse, but of his model, muse, friend, personal assistant and eventual carer, Lydia Delectorskaya.

She should have been a doctor, like her father, a respected paediatrician in Tomsk in Siberia, but he died of typhus and her mother of cholera in 1922, leaving her an orphan at 12. Brought up by her aunt, and leaving Russia to escape the revolution, she was accepted for medical studies at the Sorbonne, but could not afford the fees.

She married young, but the marriage lasted only a year and she moved to be part of the Russian émigré community in the south of France, trading on her looks as a film extra, dancer, and model. Delectorskaya had no money. After 6 months of helping Matisse with his huge mural *The Dance*, she was given 500 francs by Matisse to make a new start, but her partner blew the lot in one night at the Casino, and left. When Matisse found out she was taking part in dance marathons to repay the debt, he

was both horrified and impressed. It was the beginning of one of the most fruitful partnerships in art.

Despite his sedate appearance in later life, Matisse was a driven man, seething to paint. On marrying Amelie in 1900, he told her, 'I love you dearly, mademoiselle, but I shall always love painting more'.<sup>1</sup> He began conventionally enough, as an impoverished art student in Paris, but parted company with convention in 1905 with his *Woman with the Hat* and blazed a trail of colour for the next 50 years. He courted neither celebrity nor critics and was at the receiving end of a lifetime of hostility, rejection, misunderstanding, and abuse. Matisse competed mainly with himself and found painting stressful. He was fortunate in having dedicated collectors who bought his work, although much of it went abroad and was not widely seen for decades.

His wife Amelie supported him through thick and thin, but by 1930, when Matisse had achieved financial security, she had already retreated into invalidism. Delectorskaya was hired to look after her and 3 years later, Matisse asked her to

model. As a blonde ice princess, she was unlike anyone he had painted before.

Matisse impressed her as the first painter she had met who did not try to get her into bed. As Hilary Spurling makes clear in her magnificent biography, *Matisse the Master*,<sup>1</sup> Matisse was too committed to painting to waste time and energy having sex with his models.

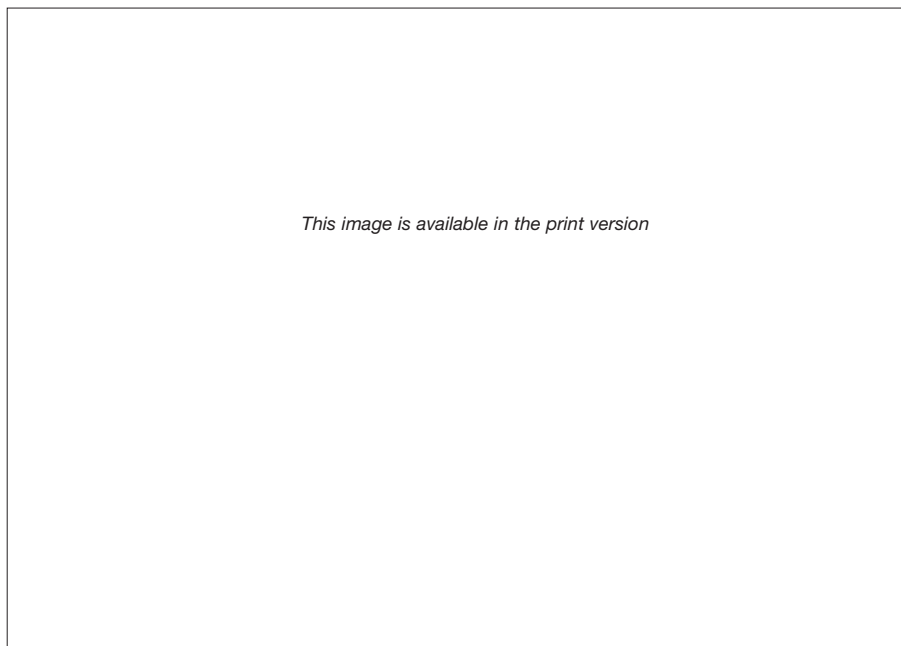
For 4 years he painted nobody else. She became indispensable, not only as his model, but also his factotum, taking charge of his studio and his affairs. Amelie rose from her invalid bed, insisting 'it's me or her'. Years later, Delectorskaya reflected, 'Madame wanted me to leave, not from female jealousy — there was no question of adultery — but because I was running the whole house'.<sup>1</sup> When Matisse did sack her, Delectorskaya tried to shoot herself. After the marriage finally failed, Matisse took her on again.

Matisse was 40 years older. Hilary Spurling says there is no evidence that they had a sexual relationship and Delectorskaya herself denied it. Matisse gave her a sense of power and purpose. Spurling interviewed Delectorskaya several times:

*'She could have run an army, she had amazing capacities. She ran the studio, she organised the models, she dealt with the dealers, sales people, the gallery ... everything worked like clockwork.'*<sup>1</sup>

From the cancer operation in 1941, which he was not expected to survive, until he died in 1954, Delectorskaya provided Matisse with the calm, support and comradeship that enabled him to continue at the top of his creative powers. Remembering her father, she likened Matisse to a doctor, totally absorbed in his work. Delectorskaya was his theatre sister. Without her, it is unlikely there would have been the brilliant flowering of his cut out shapes, for which he is now perhaps most remembered. Delectorskaya also coordinated the 4 years of preparation and installation that

**Henri Matisse, French, 1869-1954. Large Reclining Nude, 1935. Oil on canvas. 26 x 36 1/2 in. (66 x 92.7 cm.). The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland BMA 1950.258. Photography By: Mitro Hood.**



*This image is available in the print version*

## Book review

went into the exquisite chapel at Vence, just outside Nice, which he flooded with blue and yellow light.

The relationship of Henri Matisse and Lydia Delectorskaya was hugely productive but exclusive, especially of the Matisse family, who never came to terms with her position. When he died, the day after making his last portrait of her, she left immediately, leaving the funeral arrangements to them.

Although this part of her life was over, she lived as long again, dying aged 88 in Paris in 1998. By then she had donated the paintings Matisse had given her to the Hermitage in St Petersburg and published two authoritative books on Matisse's most productive years.

Spurling describes this summer's exhibition at the Musée Matisse in Nice, 'Lydia Delectorskaya was the beautiful, blue-eyed blonde from Siberia who became Matisse's model, muse and studio manager in the last two decades of his life, and the show includes all the works he gave her, which she in turn presented to her Russian homeland. A scintillating homage to an extraordinary woman.'<sup>2</sup>

### Graham Watt

#### Exhibition

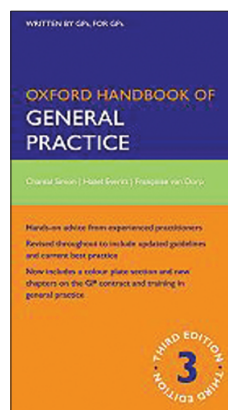
Lydia Delectorskaya, Matisse's muse and model. Musée Matisse, Nice. 18th June – 27th September 2010. See [www.musee-matisse-nice.org/](http://www.musee-matisse-nice.org/) (details of the exhibition are on the French language site only).

#### REFERENCES

1. Spurling H. *Matisse the Master: a life of Henri Matisse, Volume Two: 1909–1954*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.
2. Cripps C. Cultural Life: Hilary Spurling, writer. *The Independent* 2010, 14 May: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/cultural-life-hilary-spurling-writer-1972553.html> (accessed 13 Jul 2010).

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp10X515250

**OXFORD HANDBOOK OF GENERAL PRACTICE: THIRD EDITION**  
**CHANTAL SIMON,**  
**HAZEL EVERITT, AND**  
**FRANCOISE VAN DORP**  
*2010, Oxford University Press, PB,*  
*1200 pages, £32.95, 9780199236107*



In this digital age is the traditional reference book a thing of the past? Or can it still be useful in modern day general practice?

The new edition of the *Oxford Handbook of General Practice* is a champion in the battle between hardback and hard drive.

Its compact size makes it the perfect companion not only for the surgery but also for house calls. The logical lay out and referencing makes it as fast (if not at IT meltdown times, faster) than online resources.

It provides an up-to-date and comprehensive guide to current day general practice. New sections include requirements for foundation level doctors and details of the nMRCGP. There is also a new 'Healthy Living' chapter which provides useful advice on tackling such hot topics as obesity, drug and alcohol abuse.

Many conditions that affect all age groups may differ for children or the elderly. A superb new feature is the highlight system for these instances. A box with a symbol for the elderly or children draws the reader's attention to relevant differences for the extremes of

age. This avoids having to look up different chapters and saves time. Care of the Elderly and Child Health chapters are not compromised however, remaining as extensive as in prior additions.

The symptoms and signs chapter has been removed. This is replaced with a short segment at the start of each chapter which details symptoms and signs relevant to each system. This affords a more streamlined layout.

Finally, this edition retains its tendency to be funny, wise, and have encouraging quotations dotted throughout its pages.

As a comfort blanket for the less experienced it remains unrivalled, but truly, it is a must-have book for all.

**Faye McCleery**

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp10X515269