

29. **Picture This**



La Chute d'Icare, Plate 8 from *Jazz* by Henri Matisse
Mixed Media Collage Composition

Despite its initial apparent simplicity, Henri Matisse's *La Chute d'Icare* is evocatively ambiguous. A single figure against a simple background, in the midst of six equally simple objects -- yet what do we see? Is this the triumphant Icarus rising into the blue sky, reaching for distant stars? Or is this the tragic Icarus, his flight over, feathers loose in the air around him, plummeting toward a deep azure sea? That is the significant question about the picture, and also about the myth.

This simple yet vividly colorful portrait of Icarus juxtaposes the joy of escaping gravity with the ultimate fall. Are those irregular yellow shapes feathers floating downward or fragmented stars? Are we looking up at the sky or down at the sea? Are his arms rising in powerful mid-stroke or flailing outward to stop his fall? And is that single red spot his triumphant heart, or a broken one? The forms are uncomplicated and the colors pure, yet Matisse still manages to convey both the story's triumph and its tragic end.

Matisse's execution of the work is crucial to its strength. The blue sky background, painted with wide brush strokes, using tones of light to medium blue, produces an airy, light, ethereal backdrop on which the brilliant yellow shapes glow and the stark blackness of Icarus's figure almost recedes in stark contrast. The catastrophic nature of the fall is underscored by this contrast and the simple construction: there is nothing to cover or mute the tragedy of the moment. Nothing distracts.

Certainly the title focuses us on the inevitable end, but the execution draws us back to the beginning. Though nowhere in sight, Daedalus is in every stroke. Ovid's Daedalus was a skilled architect-inventor-sculptor, who, jealous of his talented nephew Talus, flung him headlong down from Minerva's sacred citadel. The goddess Pallas rescued Daedalus's nephew Talus from his uncle's wrath, changing him into a bird, clothing him with feathers in mid-air, saving his life through that transformation. That crime trapped Daedalus and his son on Crete, where Daedalus built the famous Labyrinth. Unable to keep his accomplishment secret, Daedalus revealed the mystery of the Labyrinth, allowing Theseus to kill the Minotaur. When Minos found out what Daedalus had done, he imprisoned Daedalus and Icarus themselves in the Labyrinth. To escape from the Labyrinth and from Crete, Daedalus designed sets of wings made of feathers and wax. Before flying to freedom, he warned Icarus not to fly too low -- for his wings would touch the water and get wet -- nor too high -- for the sun could melt the wax. But young Icarus, overwhelmed by the thrill of flying, forgot his father's warning and flew too close to the sun. Sure enough, the wax in his wings melted down and he fell into the sea killing himself. How ironic that Daedalus's son is not saved.

More poignantly, perhaps Daedalus's son is punished for his father's overweening pride. Daedalus uses his knowledge to gain power over his limited nature. In a metaphorical way his technology aims at matching his power with that of the goddess Pallas. But only gods can convert falling humans into birds. Daedalus, and humankind with him, is humiliated and punished with the death of his own son, for daring to overreach. Icarus, the impulsive and inexperienced youth, too daring and deaf to his father's wisdom, makes a rash use of the powers given to him and pays with his life. The folly of the ambitious artist, his inevitable failure to attain his lofty goals, and the misuse of his rude technology ends in tragedy.

The motif of the fall resonates, whether it be Icarus, Adam and Eve, or Lucifer. Is it a cautionary tale about over-reaching our human bounds? Is it an inspirational story about amazing possibilities? Is it a parable about age and youth? Because this version is so simple, we are compelled to interpret it, and each of us brings our own perspective to that interpretation. For me, the thrill of the flight might well be worth the fall.