

PIERRE SOULAGES

Pierre Soulages was born on December 24, 1919, in Rodez, France. Attracted by Romanesque art and prehistory at a very young age, he began to paint. At 18, he went to Paris to prepare for the entrance exam to the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. He was admitted, but, convinced of the mediocrity of the education received there, refused to enter and immediately returned to Rodez. During his brief stay in Paris he frequented the Louvre Museum and saw exhibitions by Cézanne and Picasso, which were revelations for him.

During World War II, Soulages went to Montpellier and regularly visited the Fabre museum, but, because he was in hiding, he did not paint during that period.

After the war, in 1946, Soulages began to paint fulltime. He found a workshop in Paris, rue Schoelcher, near Montparnasse.

In 1948, he took part in exhibitions in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, notably at "Französische abstrakte malerei" (French abstract painting) in several German museums. He was by far the youngest of this group of French abstract painters, which included the first masters of abstract art, Kupka and Herbin.

In 1949, Soulages received a solo exhibition at the Lydia Conti gallery in Paris and group exhibitions in New York, London, Sao Paulo and Copenhagen.

From 1949 to 1952, he produced three theater and ballet sets. He also created his first etchings at the Lacourière workshop. His group exhibitions in New York began traveling to other American museums, including "Advancing French Art" (1951), "Younger European Artists" Guggenheim Museum (1953), and "The New Decade," Museum of Modern Art (1955). He also began to exhibit regularly at the Kootz Gallery, New York, as well as at the Galerie de France, Paris.

Beginning in the early 1950s, his works were acquired by The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; the Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Tate Gallery, London, the National Museum of Modern Art, Paris; and the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, among others.

In 1960, the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover, Germany, held the first retrospective for Soulages. Several additional retrospectives were devoted to his work in the 1960s, including the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (1966) where,

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for the first time, Soulages "tended" his canvases with steel cables, between floor and ceiling.

In 1968 he created a ceramic wall with the Mégard workshop for a building in Pittsburgh.

In 1979 Soulages exhibited his first single-pigment paintings based on the reflection of light by the surface states of black at the Musée National d'Art Moderne—Centre Georges Pompidou, which differed from his semi-figurative and very colorful paintings of the post-war period. The pictorial light arising from the difference between two darknesses in the new paintings carried with it a great power of emotion and great possibilities for development. It was later called "black-light" and "outrenoir." Since that time, Soulages has created other works where rhythm, space and light are born from the violent contact of black and white on the surface of the canvas, another pictorial light.

From 1987 to 1994, he produced the 104 stained glass windows of the abbey church of Conques.

Between 1994 and 1998, the three volumes of the catalog raisonné "Soulages: The Complete Work Paintings" was published by Editions du Seuil, Paris.

In 2001, Soulages was the first living artist invited to exhibit at the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, then at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

In 2005, with his wife Colette, he donated 500 pieces, including all the engraved work (etchings, lithographs, serigraphs), the preparatory work for the stained glass windows of Conques, paintings on canvas and paper (a unique set, including gouaches, inks and walnut stains), documentation, books, photographs, films, and correspondence to the Community of Greater Rodez, followed by a second donation of 14 new paintings covering the period from 1946 to 1986, in December 2012. At that time, this donation was estimated at 6.8 million euros, which allowed the Ruthenian Museum to house almost all of the painter's works from very rare periods in the largest collection of Soulages in the world. The Soulages Museum in Rodez was inaugurated in May 2014 with the first temporary exhibition "Outrenoir in Europe: Museums and Foundations."

In 2007, the Musée Fabre in Montpellier dedicated a room to Soulages to present a donation he made to the city, which included 20 paintings from 1951 to

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2006, major works from the 1960s, two large outrenoir works from the 1970s, and several large polyptychs.

In October 2009, on the occasion of its 90th anniversary, the Centre Pompidou presented the largest retrospective since the beginning of the 1980s devoted to a living artist, occupying more than 2,000 square meters of exhibition space. Despite being closed for three weeks due to a staff strike, the Soulages retrospective received 502,000 visitors, ranking as the fourth most attended exhibition in the history of the Centre Pompidou. That same year, the Louvre Museum exhibited a 300 × 236 cm painting by Soulages, dating from July 9, 2000, in the Salon Carré in the Denon wing.

“The Soulages Twenty-First Century Exhibition,” presented at the Museum of Fine Arts in Lyon and then at the French Academy in Rome, was made up of works produced between 2000 and 2012, some of which were still unpublished.

Volume 4 of the catalog raisonné “Soulages: The Complete Work Paintings” was published in late November 2015 by Gallimard Editions, Paris.

In 2016, the Picasso Museum in Antibes presented “Soulages. Papers” bringing together a large number of works from public and private collections.

The exhibition “Pierre Soulages, works on paper. A presentation” in 2018 and 2019 displayed 118 works from the Soulages Museum in situ.

In 2019, in homage to the artist for his 100th birthday, numerous events were organized in France and abroad, along with bookstore editions and radio and television programs. The Soulages exhibition at the Louvre in the Salon Carré in the Denon wing, designed as a mini-retrospective, presented three new paintings dating from August and October 2019 of 390 x 130 cm and was accompanied by a hanging at the Musée National d’Art Moderne—Centre Georges Pompidou.

Soulages died on October 26, 2022, in Sète, France.

His work lives on with more than 230 paintings in more than 110 museums around the world.