

The revival of painting in the contemporary era

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The Pierre and Colette Soulages Donation

With its twenty canvasses spanning some fifty years, from 1951 to 2005, Pierre and Colette Soulages's gift to the Musée Fabre in Montpellier is the only set of its kind in the world. Based around exemplary works, it provides an overview of an oeuvre essential to twentieth-century French art and painting in general.

In keeping with the painter's wishes, the two rooms devoted to his work are not arranged chronologically. "For me, I don't think that a linear presentation is very useful as it corresponds more to a rational evolution or career path. This is not the case with me : a picture that I am painting may follow on from the one that went before, but not in any systematic way. I work without a predefined plan ; the canvas I have just painted is not going to direct me to what I am to do next." However, the paintings are hung so as to bring together matching works in a looped progression. The key to this presentation is apparent in a remark made by André Malraux at the time of the artist's first retrospective exhibition at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in 1967, namely that, "in the oeuvre of every artist, there is one work that keeps coming back in a different form, and this work is very often the most significant thing in the painter's process".

Little is needed to appreciate the work of Pierre Soulages, who has always been opposed to interpretations of artworks. In anticipation of Umberto Eco's *Opera aperta* (Open Work) (1962), he wrote, "A painting is an organisation, a set of relationships between forms (coloured surfaces and lines) onto which the meaning we give it comes together and falls apart". A few years later he specified that, "the public alone decides its meaning – such is the viewer's liberty". A few biographical milestones will therefore suffice as a guide to shedding light on the sources of his oeuvre and the personality of the artist.

Origins

Born on 24 December, Pierre Soulages lost his father at the age of five. Several factors from his childhood at Rodez appear to have been significant for his work that was to follow. His predilection for black? A spot of tar on the wall facing his bedroom seems to have stuck in his memory. His interest in tools that he invents or reuses? We know that various craftsmen – shoemaker, printer, blacksmith – had workshops in his street. His ability to work with light? We may remember a "snowscape" drawn in the blackest charcoal.

For Pierre Soulages, what is commonly known as "art education" took on a quite particular form. He visited no museums as a child, and his only claims to artistic sensibility were a few rare images from the *Petit Larousse* dictionary – the reproduction of a wash drawing by Claude Gellée and an ink drawing by Rembrandt, supplemented by art classes at school. When he was twelve or thirteen, he went on a school trip to Conques Abbey – where half a century later he would be commissioned to create the stained glass – and made up his mind to pursue an artistic vocation. In 1938, he went to Paris to study to become an art teacher and enrolled in classes with René Jaudon (1889-1968), a painter from Marvejols who encouraged him to take the entrance examination to the *Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts*, where he was admitted the following year. He dropped out almost immediately, realizing that the still very academic style of teaching did not correspond to his expectations. On his return to Rodez he completed his *baccalauréat* (high school diploma) and was called up to service from 1939 until 1941, but continued in his desire to be an art teacher and started to prepare for the entrance examination to the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Montpellier. This was the beginning of what was to be a quite particular relationship with this city. It was here that he met Colette Llaurens, a student at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, whom he married in 1942 and was to remain with throughout his life. It was also here that he gained access to materials, the likes of which he had never seen before – the college library where he read art book after art book, and above all the Musée Fabre, where he could spend as much time as he liked with Zurbaran, Campana,

Room Soulages

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The revival of the
painting in the
contemporary era

• • •

46

Poussin and Courbet. And Montpellier also provided the land where he would settle down to work : to get out of the Service du Travail Obligatoire, enforced labour implemented by the Vichy regime for young Frenchmen in Germany, he assumed a false identity as land agent of two wine estates from 1942 to 1945. And finally it was there that he met writer and poet Joseph Delteil (1894-1978), a nonconformist figure in French literature who, after breaking with the Surrealist movement, settled at La Tuilerie de Massane near Montpellier, where he led a rural life as a writer. In the years that followed, up until the building of their house at Sète in 1960, Pierre and Colette Soulages were frequent visitors to Montpellier.

In the Beginning

In the precarious post-war climate of incertitude, it was not until 1946 that Pierre Soulages decided to devote himself fully to painting and to settle in Paris. His first canvasses were dark and abstract, made up of areas of unsaturated colours with straight broad black bands and fine light lines sometimes obtained by scraping. Already apparent was a system that at the same time gave rise to a space, a constructed form, a light all the more intense because of its scarcity and a format pushed to its limits. Pierre Soulages's first Parisian contact was the German painter Francis Bott (1904-1998), who had become a member of the Resistance in the south during the war and exhibited his work at Montpellier under an assumed name. This acquaintance would lead to many others, including Henri Goetz and Christine Boumeester who urged him to take part in the Salon des Surindépendants in October 1947. It was there – effectively his first exhibition – that Pierre Soulages caught the eye of Francis Picabia and Hans Hartung. An artistic entourage – with abstract painters sometimes coming from Surrealism – began gradually to take shape, which was to provide a broad welcome to this newcomer with his impressive art.

Yet Pierre Soulages cannot be reduced to any single movement and pursued his own path that yielded new discoveries with every step, guided by rigour and will to lay only solid, lasting foundations. In 1947, he broke away from all the conventions of traditional painting with “its techniques (turpentine, fine colours ground with oil, siccative mediums, glazes, etc.) and its little luxurious brushes “For Artists Only” (...). I recoiled from such tools, shrank back from them and the idea of the artist they represented. One day [I] bought some industrial



76,5 x 45,5, 1948-3
Tar on glass
 Museum of modern Art, Saint-Étienne
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paintbrushes made of ordinary silk that were very broad and of a completely different design (...) Such equipment involves other materials and gestures that are quite different from those of traditional painting (...) Like a painter in the building trade, I wanted to work with a mass of paint that was ready to use. I had the urge to use large jars of paint and that is why, in 1947, I went for walnut stain”. This decision to go back to a cottage industry or even “primitive” style of tools and techniques was not only for financial reasons – it reflected the painter’s desire to throw off all affectedness and to build up his own practice of which he was in complete control. In the same vein, during the summer of 1948 he produced three paintings in Montpellier using tar on glass, the meagre materials used for roofs and greenhouses. These works that are now on loan to the Saint-Etienne Museum of Modern Art are harbingers of other radical works that would emerge twenty years later. In this way a completely self-contained style was born that met with immediate exposure, thanks to the keen eyes of some important curators. James Johnson Sweeney, then at the Museum of Modern Art and soon to be the director of the Guggenheim Museum, visited Pierre Soulages’s studio in late 1948 and opened doors for him to American museums and leading agents including Sidney Janis or Samuel Kootz who would devote several private exhibitions to him. In France, Pierre-André Farcy purchased his *Painting 146 x 97 cm* for the Grenoble museum in 1949, the first of his works to join a French public collection. The Lydia Conti gallery organised his first private exhibition in Paris in 1949, followed by the Louis Carré gallery before the artist was admitted to the Galerie de France in 1956. In the mid 1950s the painting of Pierre Soulages was exhibited the world over and occupied a dominant position in the French artistic scene.

1. Daniel Abadie, Sylvia Lorant, “Enquête sur le cadre” in *Le cadre et le socle dans l’art du xxe siècle*, University of Burgundy, Paris, MNAM, 1987, p. 143 (our translation).

2. Daniel Abadie, Sylvia Lorant, *ibid.*, p. 144 (our translation).

3. *Französische abstrakte Malerei*, exhibition catalogue, 1948, Stuttgart.

4. “L’art et le climat visuel contemporain”, survey by Yvon Taillandier, catalogue of the May Salon, Paris, 1951, p.1.