

The Enduring Energy of Pierre Soulages

By Ricki Morse



This article is reprinted from the April 2020 issue of La Muse in anticipation of our upcoming exhibition curated by James Glisson, Going Global, on the emergence of abstract art in the 20th century.

It seems appropriate to highlight Soulages, since Paris celebrated his 100th birthday last December with a rare exhibition for a living artist at the Louvre, an honor previously only granted to Marc Chagall and Pablo Picasso.



Pierre Soulages in December 2019 at his opening at the Louvre

Born in the small southern French city of Rodez, Soulages was fascinated with the ancient cave paintings, the menhirs (Neolithic standing stones), and medieval churches throughout the area, particularly with the artifacts and Romanesque architecture of the Sainte Foy de Conques, the 10th century abbey/church in a nearby village. As a boy he collected arrowheads and pottery fragments and felt drawn to the pre-historic images created in the dark caves. He remembers being questioned by a friend about what he was drawing as he made black lines on white paper. "Snow." The black revealed the white of the paper.

Before World War II, Soulages visited museums in Paris, viewing works by Picasso and Cezanne, and in 1938 enrolled in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He was disappointed by the school's traditional methods and rigid ideas and soon returned to Rodez, painting black leafless trees against a bright sky. After military service he enrolled in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Montpellier, studied Russian abstract painting, and in 1946



Pierre Soulages, *Painting 193* (1948-49), oil on canvas, MOMA, NY.

moved back to Paris, opening a studio and beginning his exploration of bold black gestural painted swaths on a white background. Exhibitions quickly followed; his first one-man show opened in 1949. During these years he also designed sets and costumes for plays and ballets. In 1954 prominent New York dealer, Samuel Kootz began representing him. By then museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, had begun to acquire his work. Today his career is the stuff of legends, touted as France's greatest living painter, his canvases selling internationally in the millions of dollars.

In 1979 Soulages had a revelation that transformed his work. Up to this time he had used black "for its power of expression in contrast with other colors." Waking one morning to view yesterday's canvas, which he had not felt good about, he saw it differently. What he saw now was the reflection of light on dark surfaces. "Where it was layered, the light danced, and where it was flat it lay still. A new space had come into being." He named this black "outré-noir," ultra-black, beyond black or the other black. The sculptural qualities of outré-noir produce a unique visceral experience, as if the black gains facets. In



Pierre Soulages, *Walnut Stain* (2004) oil on canvas.

exploring the reflective power of black, Soulages used brushes, spoons, small rakes, sometimes gouging and chipping away the paint to achieve unique reflective experiences—truly abstract *expressionism*.

In 1987, Soulages was commissioned to return to his beloved Sainte Foy de Conques to design 100 abstract stained glass windows for the 10th century church. He developed a new kind of glass with variable translucency. The installation was completed in 1994, providing an overwhelming experience within the Romanesque vaulted dome. In 2014 the city of Rodez honored its most famous son, opening a Soulages Museum, housing over 500 of his paintings. You may want to add this ancient city to your next European itinerary and experience *outré-noir* for yourselves!



Sainte Foy de Conques, France



Soulages Museum, Rodez, France



Pierre Soulages, (b. 1919), French, *10 Mai 1961*, oil on canvas. SBMA Gift of Robert B. and Mercedes H. Eichholz. Soulages named each painting by the date on which it was executed. On May 10, 1961 Air France Flight 406 from Algiers to Marseille crashed in the Sahara, killing all aboard. Perhaps this painting records Soulages' emotional response to the crash, serving as a memorial to all who lost their lives in that disaster.