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Meet France's greatest living artist

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A contemporary of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, Pierre Soulages is the most famous painter you've never heard of. And nearing 95, he's still working. Adrian Dannatt meets France's greatest living artist



Pierre Soulages
Roberto Frankenberg for High Life magazine

'I still find myself working in a trance on a painting, in a fit, doing nothing else, in the middle of the night. I might get up at 2am just to go to work in the studio, but much less nowadays. After all I am going to be 95 this year.'

Pierre Soulages certainly wears his years with an elegant insouciance, if not absolute disregard, his imposing, slightly pugilistic physique entirely unbowed by the countdown clock. Dauntingly tall and broad, Soulages hasn't lost the looming presence of the 'rugbyman' he used to be either: 'I was number 8, the 8-man, and played very seriously for years, so I'm still passionate about the game. But I abandoned rugby for art.'

Soulages is also distinctly handsome, his white mane and piercing gaze generating something of the aura of Kirk Douglas or Christopher Walken at his more intimidating, that certainty of being in the presence of 'someone'. Dressed head-to-toe in shades of dark grey and deep charcoal down to his all-black Reeboks, Soulages is jestingly known as 'the man in black', always wearing the colour that has made him famous, the consistent core of his palette deployed in so many guises throughout his *oeuvre*.

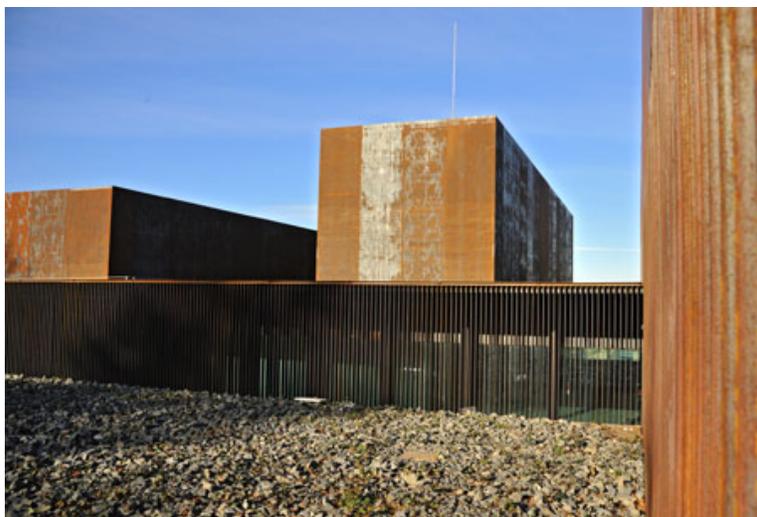
Even if he was not France's most famous living artist, and among a handful of the great surviving painters of the 20th century, Soulages would still be a clearly remarkable nonagenarian; smart, erudite, sharp, with perfect recall and agile wit, his hard-drive purring perfectly, almost audibly, as he moves around his Paris studio. There is also the additional oddity of his name. In French, soulages means to relieve: soulages toi quite literally means to relieve yourself. Whereas in English there is the far more poetic combination of 'soul' and 'ages', the man himself providing an enviable example of how well the soul ages.

But if Soulages has decided to ignore the decades, they have hardly ignored him in turn, as every year adds further glories to an already celebrated career. And this month sees something of an apotheosis with the opening of his own eponymous museum in his hometown of Rodez in the Aveyron.

'I have to make clear that even if it is called the Soulages Museum it is not really my museum,' he protests. 'I would be embarrassed if it were only that. Instead it is a museum for the whole area and for every sort of artistic expression.'

Modest to boot, the fact is that Soulages has had to turn down repeated offers from various towns to host such a museum. The origins of the Rodez project lie in his gift to the city of all his preparatory models for one of his greatest achievements, the stained-glass windows of the Romanesque abbey at Conques. Soulages has been passionate about Roman art since childhood, and had been inspired to become an artist by this very church, even going back to visit it on his honeymoon: 'People joked that I was going to produce entirely black windows, but my intention was exactly the opposite.'

Instead, from 1987 Soulages dedicated himself to creating a special pure 'white' glass, which took some 800 trials to perfect, and whose luminous, numinous sheen lures many tourists to this listed historic monument. Having received these preliminary window studies, which being enormously large required their own building, the Mayor of Rodez cunningly suggested they could be accompanied by a complete collection of the artist's prints 'and why not the donation of some other works, also?' 'But you are now trying to create precisely the Soulages Museum that I already turned down for Montpellier!' exclaimed the artist, before agreeing.



Musée Soulages,
Rodez

Whatever municipal cunning was involved, the end result is a collection of art worth an estimated £34m and a dramatic new building complex occupying over 6,000sq m on a prime site near the cathedral. It is also near the house in which Soulages was born on Christmas Eve 1919, which has recently been purchased by the town and will eventually host artists-in-residence. Along with a library, education wing and a much-anticipated restaurant by Michelin-starred duo Sébastien and Michel Bras, the museum has an impressive hall for independent exhibitions.

Soulages emphasises the importance of this space: 'I only accepted having the museum named after me on condition that there was this gallery for exhibitions by others.' However, though the museum is not dedicated to his work, its debut show is of all the *Outrenoir*, or 'country beyond black', paintings he has created since 1979.

The museum also has its own photography department, not least to gather the many portraits of Soulages taken by famous photographers from Yousuf Karsh and Irving Penn to Isis and Soulages' long-time friend Henri Cartier-Bresson. After all, it is fairly daunting to realise that this is a man who has been interviewed, written about, photographed and profiled for some 60 years.

'I demand nothing of the viewer' may be one of Soulages' favoured statements, but he's certainly been asked plenty of questions himself. Not least about his consistent use of black, which dates back to infancy, when he was fascinated by a patch of tarmac on a wall, as well as by the contrasting light of snow. For white, along with black and blue and walnut brown, has been equally essential to his work. 'Black is the colour at the origin of painting, for centuries humans in the absolute blackness of caves came to paint with black,' he says. 'I always loved black in my childhood.'

Indeed, Soulages began exclusively wearing black at 16, shocking his mother: 'She thought I was already in mourning for her!' He was also strongly influenced by medieval and prehistoric art. 'I am proud that the first time my name appeared in a museum was when I was aged 19, because of the ancient objects I had discovered. Someone recently found a photograph of me digging them up, and they are still there at the Musée Fenaille in Rodez.'

As well as being an active explorer of archaeological sites, the teenage Soulages was passionate about rugby, about professional trout fishing and net casting, and learnt how to fly, becoming a qualified pilot of biplanes.

He moved to Paris to pursue his studies at art school, changed his mind, was mobilised into the army and after the fall of France wisely moved back down to the south. Here his neighbour was the writer Joseph Delteil, who introduced him to his many artist friends, beginning with Sonia Delaunay. Soulages also met his wife, Colette, whom he has lived with for more than 70 years, another impressive aspect to an exceptional existence.

After the war he moved back to Paris with Colette and began to work with the most basic and 'poorest' materials: housepainter brushes, wooden spatulas, shards of broken glass, plain tarmac and especially walnut stain, the cheapest paint he could find and one that he has made his own.

His father had been an artisan who died when he was only five, and it was as if Soulages was rediscovering the artisanal heritage of the world in which he was reared. The simplicity and honesty of these materials were also perfectly suited to post-war existential austerity. Thus, remarkably soon, aged only 27, he found himself included in key exhibitions of new abstract art.



Pierre Soulages,
aka 'the man in
black'

'I was selected to be in a travelling show in Germany with many of the major painters of the period, and for some reason they chose my work as the poster,' he recalls. 'This poster then ended up in New York where it was hung prominently at the Artists' Club and seen by all the downtown artists of the time. This was in 1949 and apart from Pollock there was hardly any art like this in America. Franz Kline, with whom I was always compared, had barely begun to make his own black-and-white work.'

Despite being a decade younger, Soulages was close to most of these American abstract artists, not least Robert Motherwell and Barnett Newman. Yet art history remains reluctant to admit that his work predates many of them. Likewise, while Soulages's auction record is a very respectable £4,338,500 achieved at Sotheby's London last summer, an equivalent work by his long-time friend Mark Rothko can sell for £53m – twice the entire cost of the Soulages Museum.

Yet Soulages is hardly unknown in the Anglo-Saxon world. His work is in some 90 museums, with both the Tate in London and New York's Museum of Modern Art acquiring major early works soon after they were painted. His most recent work is to be seen at two of Manhattan's most powerful galleries in a show jointly hosted by Dominique Lévy and Emmanuel Perrotin.

Although Soulages himself would be loath to dwell upon it, his collectors and collaborators over the years have included everyone from Alfred Hitchcock and Billy Wilder to Henri-Georges Clouzot and Charles Laughton, as well as revered writer-philosophers such as Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Badiou. Similarly, the director Louis Jouvet commissioned Soulages to create sets for several plays including Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*.

He has created carpets for the Ministry of Finance, hung his work in the Louvre next to Ucello and even had his own postage stamp. And naturally le President *lui-même* will be coming down to inaugurate the museum.

Nevertheless, it is the painting that counts for Soulages, whether in one of his three spacious studios in Paris or his main residence in the south in Sète, where his monastic atelier refuses any view of the nearby ocean. Having already been fêted by countless retrospectives (the most recent at the Centre Pompidou beat all previous attendance records), he maintains a wry, amused enthusiasm about the opening of the new Rodez building.

'My only problem is that I have now been fitted with a pacemaker, and the museum features a magnetic system that apparently can be dangerously strong,' he confides, laughing. 'So who knows? I may well be killed outright as soon as I enter my own museum!'

Musée Soulages, Jardin du Foirail, Rodez. The Soulages exhibition at Lévy-Perrotin, New York runs until 27 June.