

A museum for the master of black



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Pierre Soulages, arguably France’s most famous living artist, is known as a master of the colour black. A museum dedicated to his life’s work opened on Friday in Rodez, a town in the south of France where he was born.

If there’s one thing that Pierre Soulages resents, it’s the idea that his career is behind him.

Although the artist is 94, retirement could not be further from his mind. He is still active, creating works either in his studio in Paris or in Sète, a French town on the Mediterranean coast where he splits his time.

As the Musée Soulages opens in Rodez, the town in the Massif Central has become home to the single largest collection of the artist’s work.

Soulages has been called the “painter of black and light,” because of the fundamental role the colour plays in his abstract pieces. He has been fascinated with it for as long as he can remember, insisting that, “I didn’t arrive at [black], it has always been with me”. Midway through his career in 1979, he began using the colour differently, creating a style that he calls “outrenoir,” or beyond black.

His paintings, etchings and lithographs from both before and during his “outrenoir” period have been shown all over the world. In 2001, he became the first contemporary artist to be exhibited at Russia’s Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg. The Tate in London counts three of his pieces among its collection, while the Guggenheim in New York has two.

I flew down to Rodez from Paris on Wednesday for a pre-inauguration press tour of the Musée Soulages. The museum is housed in an impressive 6,000-square-metre (64,583-square-feet) structure of black steel cubes, covered in a beautiful ochre rust patina.

Designed by Catalan architects RCR, the museum has been a long time in the making, and cost a total of 21.46 million euros (almost \$30 million) to construct. Although the project was approved in 2004, the first stone wasn't laid until six years later. Overall, Soulages and his wife, Colette, have donated more than 500 works to the Musée Soulages, which are valued at 70 million euros (around \$95,284,000).

Inside the museum, workers and staff were putting on the finishing touches as we arrived. Next to a massive picture window overlooking the landscape below, a table was piled with pieces of foam, tape and other objects, while a ladder stood propped up against a wall. There were also labels missing from many of the paintings and etchings hanging on display.

The press tour began with a few words from the museum's director, Benoît Decron, and one of the architects from RCR, Gilles Tréguouët, about the building's construction and design, which was meant not only to reflect the artist's works but also blend with Rodez's scenery. We were then led to the first of many rooms, where Decron pointed out some of Soulages' earliest pieces - four colourful landscapes painted between 1934 and 1938.

Decron later ushered the group into a room to look at a series of the artist's sculptural black and white "brous de noix" paintings before leading us to a hall where a number of his etchings were on display. Standing in front of one, I was approached by a man who joked I should get my partner to buy me one. I laughed. According to Sotheby's, the artist's works regularly sell for several hundred thousand euros, if not a few million.

A working artist

At a press conference later in the day, a very dry Soulages responded to journalists' inquiries about the museum's opening and his feelings about his career.

"If you have any questions about the museum, you should ask its director," he said, nodding towards Decron.

His wife of over 70 years, Colette, who was sitting in the seat behind me laughed quietly as he picked apart a journalist's question about how it felt to "still" be creating art. "What's that supposed to mean, 'still?'" Soulages shot back.

His attitude towards his age and work are reflected in the museum itself, which has been conceived as a living, active space. In addition to the permanent collection, more than 500-square-metres (around 5,400-square-feet) have been reserved for temporary exhibits by different artists.

"I've always been wary of artist museums that everyone goes to for three years, but are then forgotten," he has said in the past.

There are some in Rodez, however, who fear that the Musée Soulages will become just that. As the town's mayor, Christian Teyssède, pointed out during the press conference, the museum was a massive investment for Rodez, which has a population of 58,000 people. The hope is that Soulages is a big enough name to draw tourism to the town.

Walking around later that afternoon, I met Laure Gaffier, a nurse who's lived there for the past 15 years. "The questions people are asking in Rodez are, will people come? Will they continue to come?" she said. "We don't know if it's going to work." "[His art is] very specific - not everybody likes it. There are some people who say it just looks like a big, black square," she added.

Decron, the director of Musée Soulages, said the museum aimed to bring in 100,000 visitors in its first year.

"I think the first year is going to go just fine. It's the years after that are going to be complicated," he said acknowledging the challenges ahead.

He disagreed, however, with Gaffier's concern that Soulages' art might be too abstract to attract a wide audience.

"His works are, for above all, people who know nothing [about art]," he said.