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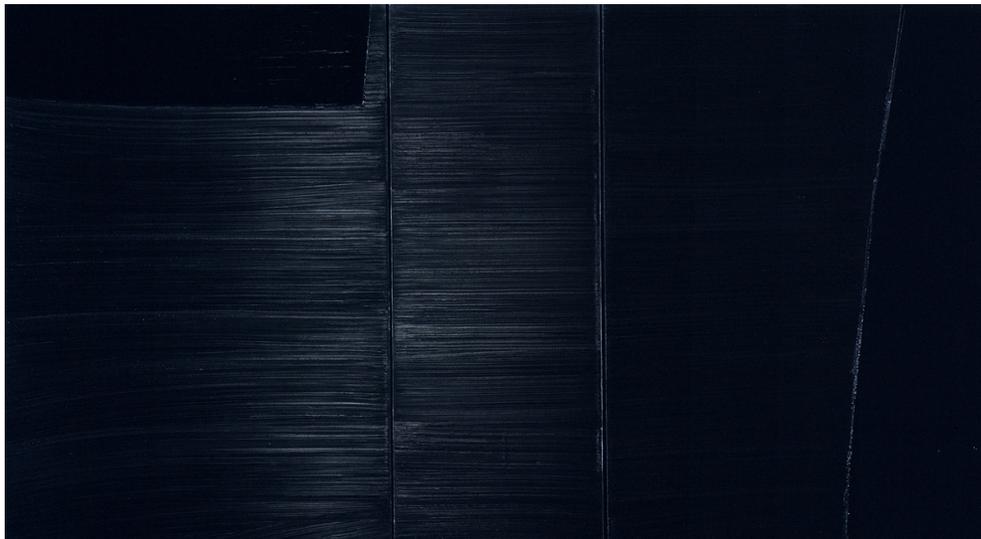
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Soulages is the New Black

At age 94 and with 1,500 works of art to his credit, the artist famous for his luminous black canvases now has a museum devoted to his oeuvre. It is as singular and iconoclastic as Soulages himself.



Few artists have the privilege of seeing a major museum built in their honor during their lifetime. Pierre Soulages belongs to that elite group. On May 31, the 94-year-old artist was on hand for the inauguration of the Musée Soulages in Rodez, his hometown in southern France.

From the beginning, Soulages played a major role in the museum's concept, content and design. His donations were the catalyst for the project: Between 2005 and 2012, he and his wife offered the town of Rodez more than 500 pieces. These included 250 works of art as well as preparatory sketches, notes, letters, films and archives. Together they compose one of the largest gifts ever made by a living French artist.

But this would be no vanity project, no shrine. What Soulages envisioned was a dynamic cultural hub where other art would be shown as well. "Pierre didn't want a museum, the whole idea of a monographic institution put him off," explains **Benoît Decron, chief curator of the Musée Soulages.** "He agreed to go along with the project only if it included a large gallery for temporary exhibitions."



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Accordingly, Decron plans to stage at least three modern and contemporary shows a year. Among the first are a look at master printmaker Aldo Crommelynck, who collaborated with leading 20th-century talents; an exhibit devoted to Claude Lévêque, known for his work with neon lighting; and a survey of *arte povera*, the 20th-century Italian art movement that used unconventional materials and found objects.

The Musée Soulages also boasts an unusual annex—the house where Pierre Soulages was born. Located on rue Combarel, it now belongs to the city. Yet another unique feature is the museum restaurant, which is run by none other than Michelin-three-star chef Michel Bras (read interview, [here](#)). All of these features are designed to attract a wide and varied public to Rodez, as the Guggenheim Museum has done in Bilbao.

Soulages seems to speak to the French more than many other contemporary artists. When the Centre Pompidou mounted a retrospective of his work in 2009 (a show that then traveled to Berlin and Mexico), it attracted close to half a million visitors, making it the third-most-visited exhibit in the Pompidou's history. His works fetch as much as €5 million at auction—he's France's priciest living artist—and he is well represented in the collection of billionaire François Pinault.

For Alfred Pacquement—the Pompidou's recently departed director and co-curator of the 2009 exhibition—Soulages is not just an important French painter, “He's an important painter, period. One who

unquestionably marked the history of abstract painting.” He came after the generation of abstract pioneers—Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky—who all died before or during World War II, explains Pacquement. While his contemporaries employed elegant, conventional materials in their non-representational art, “Soulages set himself apart by using materials that were completely different—neither elegant nor traditional. He drew and painted with *brou de noix* [walnut stain], a material that carpenters use, and even with tar.”

Also extraordinary is the artistic longevity of a man who, after all, was born a year after World War I ended. “He started his career in 1946, and today he's still busy working on remarkable paintings,” says Pacquement. That longevity has allowed him to straddle two different periods in art history. “He's a figure of both modern and contemporary art,” says the Musée Soulages's Decron. “Who can match that? He's the last man standing of his generation. There's also Ellsworth Kelly, but he's 10 or 15 years younger.”

The raw, tarry look of Soulages's works can be traced back to that little house on rue Combarel, visible from the museum entrance. The son of an artisan who died when Pierre was a little boy, he was raised by his mother (who ran a hunting and fishing supply shop) and his much older sister. He grew up on a street crowded with craftsmen—the local saddler, carpenter, printer and blacksmith all got their aprons dirty before the boy's eyes. Small wonder that elements of their toolkits wound up years later in Soulages's own atelier. To this day he prefers the very broad brushes used by house painters and places his canvases on the floor while he's working on them. Equally unusual is the fact that he has always shunned color; from the age of six he preferred to dip his paintbrush in a bottle of ink.

Soulages discovered his artistic vocation sometime in the early 1930s, when he made a visit to the Abbatale Sainte-Foy in Conques, a beautiful medieval town nearby. “It was there that, as a boy, I decided that art would be the most important thing in my life,” he later recalled. In 1994, Soulages would design striking stained-glass windows for that same abbey, creating transparent panes covered with black lines in abstract patterns. They are among his finest works and have become a major tourist attraction.

In 1938, Soulages left Rodez for Paris. He enrolled at an art school and set his sights on becoming a drawing teacher until his instructor talked him into applying to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where he was admitted in April 1939.

Soulages's longevity has allowed him to straddle two different periods in art history. “He's a figure of



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Ever the contrarian, the young man never showed up for class.

Faced with an opportunity others would kill for, he promptly headed back to Rodez. Having seen exhibitions of the works of Cézanne and Picasso in Paris, he decided that he preferred a spontaneous, independent education to a strict school. That did

not stop him from subsequently enrolling at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Montpellier in April 1941, where he studied to become a drawing teacher. There, he met Colette Llaurens, whom he married the following year. Soulages's very first show was held in the foyer of Montpellier's theater.

Five years later, the couple settled in Paris, where Soulages took up painting again (during the war years, he had been drafted, then worked on a farm near Montpellier). His first non-figurative works date from this period; he caught the abstract-painting bug after meeting Sonia Delaunay in the early 1940s.

His first solo show was in 1949 at the Galerie Lydia Conti in Paris. Five years later came his first New York solo show, at the Kootz Gallery. It sparked international interest as well as multiple museum purchases. By 1966, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston was staging a retrospective of his works, followed a year later by the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris. Today, Soulages is represented in some 90 international collections, including many in major world capitals. But for an understanding of his early years, no collection can compete with the museum in Rodez.

Here you can see some of the very first works he exhibited in France, Europe and the U.S. There are the figurative landscapes of his youth (1934-38), and oils on canvas from the 1940s to the 1970s, decades that saw him gradually revert to the color black. There are also 100 paintings on paper produced between 1946 and 1948, the period marking the start of his abstract paintings and ultimate allegiance to black.

"Black is the original color of painting," explains Soulages. "For hundreds of centuries, men, in the complete darkness of caves, would paint in black. It is also the color of our origins. Before seeing the day, are we not plunged in darkness?"

The museum's inaugural show will be the first-ever European retro-spective of his all-black canvases. Two dozen of these "Outrenoirs," borrowed from major museums and foundations, will highlight a period of the painter's career that spanned 35 years and started one fine day when, in the artist's own words, the color black "invaded the canvas." The texture, variations and luminosity that he manages to give to this darkest of hues is indeed extraordinary.

As museums go, the Musée Soulages has an almost temporary look about it. It's a suite of monolithic boxes sheathed in rust-colored Corten steel that from afar look like shipping containers posed on a grassy hillock. On paper the concept may sound off-putting, but in reality, the buildings blend nicely into their surroundings. They look out over the Parc du Forail, a renovated garden set on more than an acre and bordering boulevard Victor Hugo, the wide thoroughfare leading to the town's heart.

Why Corten steel? "It's a living material that develops a patina over time and can readily be integrated into a botanical context such as the Parc du Forail," says Gilles Trégouët, the project's French-born, Catalonia-based lead architect. "Also, the dark-brown color of Corten echoes the color of the walnut stains [in Soulages's work.]" Trégouët says Soulages was an inspiration for him and his colleagues long before they were picked from among hundreds of candidates to design the Musée Soulages.

Inside the museum, Catalan RCR Arquitectes gave the steel floors, wall panels and doors an ultra-dark finish that is reminiscent of Soulages's palette. A spacious foyer leads to exhibition galleries on the lower level and to Café Bras. The complex also includes an 80-seat auditorium.

The museum galleries have been tailor-made for Soulages. Some are cathedral-like with high ceilings and

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☪☪ The museum galleries have been tailor-made for Soulages. Some are cathedral-like with high ceilings and pitch-dark walls; others are small and cozy with off-white walls.

pitch-dark walls; others are small and cozy with off-white walls. Here, visitors can see Soulages's walnut-stain works, the etchings and the preparatory works for Conques, recent large-format canvases and a few bronze sculptures.

For the architects, working on a museum devoted to a living artist was a unique experience. "Soulages is extremely knowledgeable and curious about architecture," says Trégouët, who admits that he was somewhat intimidated at first. "He is demanding, sharp and precise, yet when there was a task at hand, he was very easy to work with. As soon as we got down to talking specifics, pulling out the building plans, drawing and using measuring sticks, things moved along very naturally."

Soulages has said that he has two birthplaces, "Rodez and contemporary painting." At the Musée Soulages, the two have finally come together. ▲

Musée Soulages, Jardin du Foirail, avenue Victor Hugo, Rodez.

"Outrenoir paintings: European Museums and Foundations" runs through October 5. musee-soulages.grand-rodez.com

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