

Pierre Soulages

OPERA GALLERY

Pierre Soulages

13 May - 6 June 2022

OPERA GALLERY

Foreword

Opera Gallery New York is thrilled to present a solo exhibition honoring French artist Pierre Soulages, showcasing a curated selection of important paintings by the artist from the post-war period to present day. Soulages’ decades-spanning career is a testament to the force and power of his artistic practice.

Since 1979, he has pursued his series *Outrenoir*, which roughly translates to “beyond black,” which is his way of working the light from the color black exclusively: it’s “like Outre-Rhin or Outre-Manche” [in French, “beyond the Rhine or the Channel”]. This concept that defines the most iconic part of his work, explores the physical properties of the color black and its ability to reveal light. According to the artist, black is the most intense, most violent absence of color, which gives an intense and violent presence to other colors, even to white.

Known as the “Painter of Black,” Pierre Soulages uses black as a means to create light. The infatuation with the color began long before his investigations with *Outrenoir* at the age of 60. In fact, he has remained devoted to this one color since the beginning of his career, all the way back in the 1940s.

In his early paintings, he used knives and brushes to make sweeping, energetic strokes on his canvases, creating abstract compositional forms. These works gained him international recognition as one of the first painters to develop a new style of post-war abstraction, and, despite his rejection of labels, he was eventually associated with movements such as tachisme, art informel, and Action Painting.

Born in Rodez in southern France in 1919, young Soulages was drawn to powerful expressions of humanity. First inspired by the region’s menhirs, which are carved standing stones dating to the late Neolithic era, he later decided to become a painter while standing beneath the barrel vault ceiling of the Abbey Church of Sainte-Foy de Conques, France,

watching light and shadow come to life. The 20,000 year old cave paintings found nearby were also a point of inspiration. Notably, his color palette has scarcely deviated from the rich, elemental reds, blacks and ochres used by the ancient artists who worked in the darkness of the caves.

For more than seven decades, Soulages has exhibited internationally. He has been honored with two retrospectives in France, at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1996, and at the Centre Pompidou in 2009. In 2001, he was the first living artist to be given a full-scale survey at the Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia, and in 2014, the Musée Soulages opened in the artist’s hometown of Rodez, France, housing five hundred paintings spanning Soulages’ career. More than 150 of his paintings are in public collections around the world, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris, France; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, United States; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, United States; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Canada; Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France; Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, United States; Philadelphia Museum of Art, United States; Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, United States. On Soulages’s 100th birthday in December 2019, the Musée du Louvre paid homage to the artist—who continues to paint today—with a survey of his seven-decade career, concurrent with an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.

We invite visitors to immerse themselves in the world of Pierre Soulages, where a myriad of influences culminates into an instinctive, radical, and immersive body of work. Soulages approaches each new painting as the advancement of his investigations of depth and light, thus giving substance to the unreal and unique light emanating from each.

Gilles Dyan

Founder and Chairman
Opera Gallery Group

Laura Adams

Deputy Director
Opera Gallery New York



"A painting is a poetic object that allows me,
when I contemplate it, to live intensely."
- Pierre Soulages

Soulages: Transcribing the Ascetic Poetry of Light

Enlightened by the mysteries of light, the French abstract artist, Pierre Soulages, invites us into the mental realm opened by his paintings. The artist places colours and forms in relation to each other not only to anchor the visual experience of the work, but to activate space and dictate time. He is fascinated by the sudden transformation that takes place during the viewer's immediate, corporeal, whole, visceral, emotive experience of painting. "Soulages feels that if his painting succeeds without figurative anecdotes, it is due to the importance of rhythm – the beating of forms in space, the cutting of space into pieces of time."

The neolithic menhirs of his hometown Rodez and the Romanesque architecture of the Abbey Church of Sainte-Foy de Conques left a lasting impression on the young Soulages. Moved by the warm darkness, the grandeur of the barrel-vault nave and the dynamic tension of the stone arches, the artist began seeking out new ways of expressing his experience of rhythm, space and light. Turning to his paleolithic origins, Soulages became fascinated with art's vital impulse, lasting presence and its ability to transcend temporal boundaries into our contemporary lives.

Soulages doesn't paint with black. He paints with the light reflected off the black surface in order to unlock the optic possibilities trapped in paint's textural folds. The medium expands "beyond the material limits of oil paint into something immaterial and intangible – light." This mark making method presents the possibility of a painting gesture governed by spontaneity and unconscious instinct.

The experience of Soulages' early oils on canvas is marked by expressive tensions between heavy, opaque blacks and vibrant, fiery coppers, and between the clear and controlled vertical and horizontal brush strokes. *Peinture 81 x 60 cm*,

20 juin 1956 illustrates a study in spatial depth. This dark instinctive work "conveys an experience that is meant to be understood instantaneously, as each component of its composition collapses into a cohesive and comprehensible sign that is understood viscerally."

With its totem inspired hieroglyphs and their reduced palette, *Peinture 81 x 60 cm, 20 juin 1956* possesses a timeless majesty. Seeking a balance between terrestrial, primitive forces and celestial light, Soulages excavates the canvas to unearth the light trapped under multiple layers of paint. "Painting-object annihilates all trace of mimetic tradition and transcends the antagonising forces of the past and future by concentrating in an instant an eternal timelessness, with the promise of an immanent mystic ascension."



Peinture 81 x 60 cm, 20 juin 1956

One of Soulages' earliest influences was the abstract pattern of bare tree branches set against an icy sky. The artist explained, "a black tree in winter is a kind of abstract sculpture... what interested me were the lines of the branches, their movement in space." In *Peinture 92 x 65 cm, 3 août 1954*, a bold vertical trunk rises upwards, branching off in all directions against a partially illuminated background.

In the criss-crossing pattern formed by the thick black lines, we can detect the organic structure of the tree. The composition reflects a dynamic tension between the kinetic freedom of the branches and their strict organisation within the canvas' static structural framework.



Peinture 92 x 65 cm, 3 août 1954

Hubert Juin, author of Soulages' first monograph, writes: "In these paintings, there was both a sense of the sacred, to which I could not remain indifferent, as well as a calm, rooted solidity, a terrestrial presence... Soulages compelled me to meditate on the necessity of painting."

Peinture 81 x 54 cm, 16 juin 1951 is an early example of Soulages' iconic black style that was beginning to emerge in those decisive years. This important work demonstrates a complex understanding of colour and form. "Each stroke of the present work is conceived as a unique entity, cast in a play of endless variation with its neighbouring elements." The artist paints a tightly packed composition of black angular beams, layered over shades of blue and gray.



81 x 54 cm, 16 juin 1951



Peinture 130 x 89 cm, 8 juin 1959

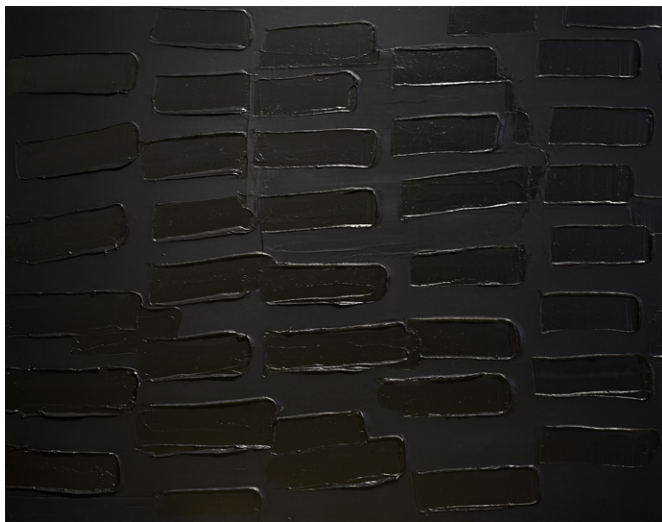
The interplay of colours within the rigid black frame, creates the effect of stained-glass windows, which remained an important source of inspiration for Soulages throughout his career.

In *Peinture 130 x 89 cm, 8 juin 1959*, Soulages celebrates the raw, unadulterated power of the materials of his craft. The artist skillfully toys with opacity and transparency, combining prehistoric shades of red-brown and black. He paints and repaints the surface, simultaneously adding and stripping away layers of black paint in thick horizontal sweeps. Soulages succeeds in developing a highly original form of chiaroscuro with a large housepainter's brush. His delicate chromatic layering combined with his masterful

scraping technique creates an overall vibration effect. Soulages' 'transparency by uncovering' reveals infinite variations of red and white, "new luminosities and unexpected coloured intensities through black transparencies."

Early on, Soulages was deeply drawn to the divine rendering of light in Rembrandt and Claude Lorrain's works. In *Peinture 80 x 60 cm, 8 juin 1969*, glints of white punctuate a dark imposing prehistoric cave wall. The dense black paint layers become an abyss of mysterious depths. Eliminating all traces of narrative and movement, the intriguing work induces a meditative perception. This scintillating vision recalls the narrow shafts of light shining in the darkness of the Romanesque church of his childhood. The bright white peepholes which pierce the darkness invite the viewer to pierce the enigma of the work. "Soulages' majestically abstract, almost architectural configurations present complex chromatically unfolding scenes that generate absorbing visual experiences and a distinctively celestial aura."

The history of black dates back to the Lascaux paintings discovered in 1940 near his native region Rodez in southern France, where images of horses and bison lined the walls of prehistoric caves. The black charcoal used in the 20,000-year-old cave murals has a deep, mineral and graphic quality; it's a drawing black rather than a surface black. Soulages explains "I like the authority of black. It's an uncompromising colour. A violent colour, but one that encourages internalisation. Both a colour and a non-colour. When light is reflected on black, it transforms and transmutes it. It opens up a mental field all of its own." In 1979, Soulages noticed how reflections transformed the surface of a black canvas and decided to devote his life to exploring the power and possibilities of black with his *Outrenoir* (Beyond Black) series.



Peinture 142 x 182 cm, 28 mars 2018

There is an intrinsic rhythm in each of his works. In the split panel *Peinture 81 x 122 cm, 20 mars 2019*, Soulages offers a dual visual experience. The Beyond Black work plays on the repetition of the horizontal strokes and the rhythm which emerges from the interstices of each motif. The thin furrows on the right panel contrast with the loose wide swaths of opaque paint on the smaller left panel. Although they appear in opposition with each other, the two textural black sections present a surprising *Outrenoir* continuity. The smooth horizontality of the left section is a natural extension of the tightknit grooves on the right.

The artist is not interested in the colour black *per se*, but rather its capacity and power to reveal the way light plays on materials and textures. “We do not see these works so much as experience them visually and physically.” The eye no longer registers black as a brushstroke, but as a surface. The obscurity spreads over the entire canvas. The whole black-saturated surface glistens, creating vibrations of varying intensities, which emerge from that same black.



Peinture 142 x 115 cm, 22 décembre 2018

Soulages uses light as other artists use colours. The black surface essentially acts like a light trap. *Peinture 142 x 182 cm, 28 mars 2018* and *Peinture 142 x 115 cm, 22 décembre 2018* explore all of the physical properties of acrylic paint, all the possibilities of black 'light'. The undulating edges and peaks of the tarry impasto catch the light, bringing out its rich, colourful intensity. The viewer's interaction with the work reveals a spectrum of blues, grays and charcoals.

The knotted deep black curves in *Peinture 162x114 cm, 17 avril 1972* evoke ancient Egyptian calligraphy. Soulages expresses the full potential of black against white using 'macrographics'. The play of contrasts between the stark black writing and the silent white background makes the celestial blue background appear even more radiant. “The juxtaposition of black and blue has always been voluptuous, one gives in to it with a certain sensuality,” declares the artist.

“If Soulages' paintings have such a convincing presence, it's because the painting technique is in perfect harmony with their poetic power.” Michel Ragon, *Pierre Soulages*, 1962

Juxtaposing different brushing techniques creates a new surface musicality, composed of ruptures or fractures. Long and narrow like a stained-glass window, the vertical triptych *Peinture 237 x 81 cm, 2 mars 1990* exudes transparency and opacity, brilliance and solemnity. A soothing flat midnight blue colour field is followed by a thick striated black frieze, which casts a smooth black shadow on a final strip of azure. Soulages balances the arresting power of thick black texture with deep blue chromatic depth.

Soulages finds the eternal in the infinite richness of details offered by the very material of his work. “The calm, monumental unity of Beyond Black, which is really like ultramarine, is the pictorial landscape of a world without borders, and of an infinite potentiality of perspectives and meanings.” For the master of light, a good painting is inherently transcendent. Profound, timeless and serene, it exists in the constantly evolving space between the surface of the painting and the person in front of it.

If there is a common thread to Soulages' myriad compositions and techniques, it is his sublime orchestrations of light. Critic Donald Kuspit described Soulages' paintings as “negatively sublime — they inflect obdurate materiality with the mercurial aspects of light, achieving the effect of the immeasurable.” This rare selection of key works from various periods of his career possesses the same elusive and captivating quality of Lascaux's timeless cave paintings. The strong pictorial incarnation and sacred presence of each work is immediately and instinctively comprehensible, leaving a lasting aesthetic impression on the viewer. “Space and time cease being the setting for painted forms; they have become the instruments of the painting's poetry.”

Chase Doolan



Peinture 237 x 81 cm, 2 mars 1990

Works

Peinture 81 x 54 cm, 16 juin 1951

Signed on the lower right; signed with location on the reverse
Oil on canvas
31.9 x 21.3 in | 81 x 54 cm

PROVENANCE

George David Thompson collection
Private collection, United Kingdom
Christie's, Paris, 19 October 2017, lot 18
Private collection

EXHIBITED

Copenhagen, Galerie Birch, *Soulages*, August - September 1951

LITERATURE

Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages, L'œuvre complet : Peintures, Vol.1*,
1946-1959, Seuil, 1994, Paris, p. 128, no. 80, ill

CERTIFICATE

The artist has confirmed the authenticity of this work



Peinture 92 x 65 cm, 3 août 1954

Signed and dated on the lower right; signed and dated on the reverse
Oil on canvas
36.2 x 25.6 in | 92 x 65 cm

PROVENANCE

Otto Stangl Gallery, Munich, Germany
Private collection, Germany
Private collection

EXHIBITED

Krefeld, Museum Haus Lange, 1964

LITERATURE

Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages, L'œuvre complet : Peintures, Vol. 1*, 1946-1959, Seuil, Paris, 1994, p. 180, no. 151, ill.



Peinture 81 x 60 cm, 20 juin 1956

Signed on the lower right; signed and dated on the reverse
Oil on canvas
31.9 x 23.6 in | 81 x 60 cm

PROVENANCE

Galerie de France, Paris, France
Private collection
Galerie Galarté, Paris, France
Drouot-Montaigne, Paris, France, 24 June 1994
Private collection
Artcurial, 3 June 2014, lot 45
Private collection

EXHIBITED

Paris, Grand Palais, Salon de Mars, Galerie Galarté, 1993

LITERATURE

Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages, L'œuvre complet : Peintures, Vol. I*, 1946-1959, Seuil, Paris, 1995, p. 219, no. 229, ill. in colour





Peinture 130 x 89 cm, 8 juin 1959

Signed on the lower right; signed on the reverse;
signed on the stretcher

Oil on canvas

51.2 x 35 in | 130 x 89 cm

PROVENANCE

Galerie Raymonde Cazenave, Paris, France, 1960

Mrs. Sonja Henie collection, Oslo, Norway, 1960

Mrs. Astrid Onstad-Talley collection, New York,
United States, 1960

Sotheby's Parke Bernet, London, 28 June 1984, lot 533

Galerie de France, Paris, France, 1984

M. Fernandez Cabezas collection, 1986

Sotheby's, London, 29 June 1989, lot 552

Galerie Prazan-Fitoussi, Paris, France, 1989

Private collection, France, 1989

Galerie Protée, Paris, France, 1989

Private collection, Toulouse, France, 1989

Private collection, Belgium, 1994

EXHIBITED

Paris, Galerie Raymonde Cazenave, *Permanence et actualité
de la peinture*, 25 March – 29 April 1960

Oslo, Kunstnernes Hus; Copenhagen Louisina Museum;
Göteborg, Konstmuseum; Stockholm, Moderna Museet;
Hambourg, Kunsthalle; Esse, Museum Folkwang; Stuttgart,
Württembergischer Kunstverein; Frankfurt, Kunstverein;
Basel, Kunsthalle; London, Tate Gallery; Paris, Musée de la
Ville de Paris; Vienna, Künstlerhaus; Edinburgh, Edinburgh
Festival; Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery; The Hague,
Germeente Museum; Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire,
Collection Sonja Henie-Niels Onstad, 12 November 1960 –
24 February 1963

Hovikodden, Kunstsentret, *Collection Sonja Henie Niels
Onstad*, 1968, catalogue, ill.

Paris, Grand Palais, Salon de mars, Galerie Prazan-Fitoussi,
1993

Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, *Passions Privées*, 1995 –
1996, catalogue, pp. 428-431, no. 6, ill., December 1995 –
March 1996

New York, Lévy Gorvy Gallery, *Pierre Soulages*, 27 April –
27 June 2014

LITERATURE

Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages, L'œuvre complet : Peintures, Vol. I*,
1946-1959, Paris, 1994, p. 274, no. 371



Peinture 202 x 143 cm, 21 septembre 1967

Signed on the lower right; dated and titled on the reverse
Oil on canvas
79.5 x 56.3 in | 202 x 143 cm

PROVENANCE

Knoedler & Co., New York, United States, 1968
Galerie de France, Paris, France, 1973
Galerie Beaubourg, Paris, France, 1985
Private collection, Los Angeles, United States, 1989
Dominique Lévy Gallery, New York, United States
Private collection, France
Private collection, France

EXHIBITED

New York, Knoedler & Co; Pittsburg, Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute; Buffalo, Albright-Knox Gallery, *Soulages paintings since 1963*, 1968
Montréal, Musée d'Art Contemporain, *Soulages*, 1968, no. 34, ill. ; Québec City, Musée du Québec, *Soulages*, 1968
College Park, University of Maryland, *Pierre Soulages*, 1972, no. 9, ill.
Dakar, Musée Dynamique, 1974, no. 20, ill.; Lisbon, Fundação Calouste Gulbekian, 1975, no. 18; Madrid, Salas del Patrimonio artistico y cultural, 1975, no. 25; Montpellier,

Musée Fabre, 1975, no. 27; Mexico, Museo de Arte moderno, 1975-1976; Caracas, Museo de Bellas Artes, 1976; Maracaibo, Museo, 1976; Brazil, Fundação Cultural, 1976; São Paulo, Museu da Universidad, 1976; Rio de Janeiro, Museu de Arte Moderna, 1976, no. 25, *Soulages peintures et gravures*, 1974 - 1976
Charleroi, Palais des Beaux-Arts, *Fragments d'une histoire dédiée à Robert Rousseau*, 1983-1984

LITERATURE

Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages, L'œuvre complet : Peintures, Vol. II*, 1959-1978, Seuil, Paris, 1995, p. 179, no. 602, ill.

CERTIFICATE

The artist has confirmed the authenticity of this work





Peinture 80 x 60 cm, 8 juin 1969

Signed on the lower left; signed, dated and titled on the reverse
Oil on canvas
31.5 x 23.6 in | 80 x 60 cm

PROVENANCE

Mr. Leslie Arky collection, Vancouver, Canada, 1970
Mr. Michael Broszman collection, Montreal, Canada, 1970
Mr. R.W. Linden collection, New York, United States, 1970
Sotheby's Parke Bernet, New York, 20 May 1983
Galerie de France, Paris, France, 1983
Mr. Bernard Vidal, Paris, France, 1987
Drouot-Richelieu, Paris, France, 15 June 1992
SAR Prince Murat collection, Paris, France, 1992
Artcurial, 23 October 2012, lot 112
Private collection

LITERATURE

Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages, L'oeuvre complet : Peintures, Vol. II*, 1959-1978, Seuil, 1995, p. 182, no. 634, ill. in colour



Peinture 162 x 114 cm, 17 avril 1972

Signed on the lower right; signed, dated and titled on the reverse
Oil on canvas
63.8 x 44.9 in | 162 x 114 cm

PROVENANCE

Mrs. Francesca Chandon collection, Paris, France, 1972
Galerie de France, Paris, France, 1978
Birch Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1979
W. Molsgaard collection, Skodsborg, Denmark, 1980
Versailles enchères, Mes Perrin-Royère-Lajeunesse, 27 April 2002, lot 47
Private collection

EXHIBITED

Paris, Galerie de France, *Soulages 1970-1972*, May-July 1972
Høvikodden, Henie Onstad Kunstenstret; Aalborg, Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum; Copenhagen, Rådhus, Gentofte, *Soulages*, February-April 1973
Neuchâtel, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, *Soulages*, June-September 1973
Teheran, Negarkhaneh Saman Gallery, *Soulages*, 1975, no. 27

LITERATURE

Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages, L'oeuvre complet : Peintures, Vol. II, 1959-1978*, Seuil, Paris, 1995, p. 692, no. 705, ill. in colour



Peinture 162 x 130 cm, 13 novembre 1969

Signed on the lower right
Oil on canvas
63.8 x 51.2 in | 162 x 130 cm

PROVENANCE

Gimpel Fils Gallery, London, United Kingdom, 1970
Galleria Internazionale, Milan, Italy, 1974
Galerie di Meo, Paris, France, 1974
Private collection, Paris, France, 1976
Private collection, Geneva, Switzerland
Sotheby's, Paris, France, 7 December 2011
Private collection

LITERATURE

Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages, L'oeuvre complet : Peintures, Vol. II*, 1959-1978, Seuil, Paris, 1994, p. 222, no. 641

CERTIFICATE

The artist has confirmed the authenticity of this work





Peinture 92 x 73 cm, 3 avril 1974

Signed on the lower left; signed and dated on the reverse

Oil on canvas

36.2 x 28.7 in | 92 x 73 cm

PROVENANCE

Private collection, France, 1974

Private collection, Europe

LITERATURE

Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages, L'oeuvre complet : Peintures, Vol. II*, 1959-1978, Seuil, Paris, 1995, p. 280, no. 715, ill. in black and white



Gouache sur papier 76 x 57.5 cm, 1977

Signed, dated and dedicated on the lower right
Gouache on paper laid down on canvas
29.9 x 22.6 in | 76 x 57.5 cm

PROVENANCE

Private collection (Gift from the artist)
Christie's, Paris, France, 8 June 2017, lot 162
Opera Gallery, Geneva, Switzerland
Private collection, Singapore

CERTIFICATE

The artist has confirmed the authenticity of this work



Gouache sur papier marouflé sur toile, 108,5 x 74,5 cm, 1977

Signed and dated on the lower right; dedicated on the reverse, on the stretcher
Vinyl gouache on paper laid on canvas
42.7 x 29.3 in | 108.5 x 74.5 cm

PROVENANCE

Mrs. France Huser collection, France
Opera Gallery, Geneva, Switzerland
Private collection, Switzerland
Artcurial, 3 June 2014, lot 68
Private collection

EXHIBITED

Paris, Grand Palais, FIAC, 22 - 30 October 1977
Denmark, Birch Gallery, 1979

LITERATURE

Pierre Encrevé, *Soulagés, 90 Peintures sur Papier*, Gallimard, Paris, 2007, p. 100, ill. in full page in colour

CERTIFICATE

The artist has confirmed the authenticity of this work





Peinture 237 x 81 cm, 2 mars 1990

Signed and dated on the reverse
Oil on canvas
Triptych: 93.3 x 31.9 in | 237 x 81 cm

PROVENANCE

Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne, Switzerland, 1990
Private collection

EXHIBITED

Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne, Switzerland, *Soulages, Peintures*, 1990
Galerie Alice Pauli, Grand Palais, FIAC, 1992
National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul;
China National Museum of Fine Arts, Beijing; Taipei Fine
Arts Museum, Taipei, *Pierre Soulages : une retrospective*,
1993-1994
Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, *Pierre Soulages, Malerei als Farbe
und Licht*, *Rétrospective 1946-1997*, 1997

LITERATURE

Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages, L'oeuvre complet : Peintures*,
Vol. III, 1979-1997, Seuil, Paris, 1998, p. 231, no. 1046, ill.
in colour

CERTIFICATE

The artist has confirmed the authenticity of this work



Peinture 142 x 182 cm, 28 mars 2018

Signed, titled and dated on the reverse
Acrylic on canvas
55.9 x 71.7 in | 142 x 182 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist's studio

CERTIFICATE

The artist has confirmed the authenticity of this work



Peinture 142 x 115, 22 décembre 2018

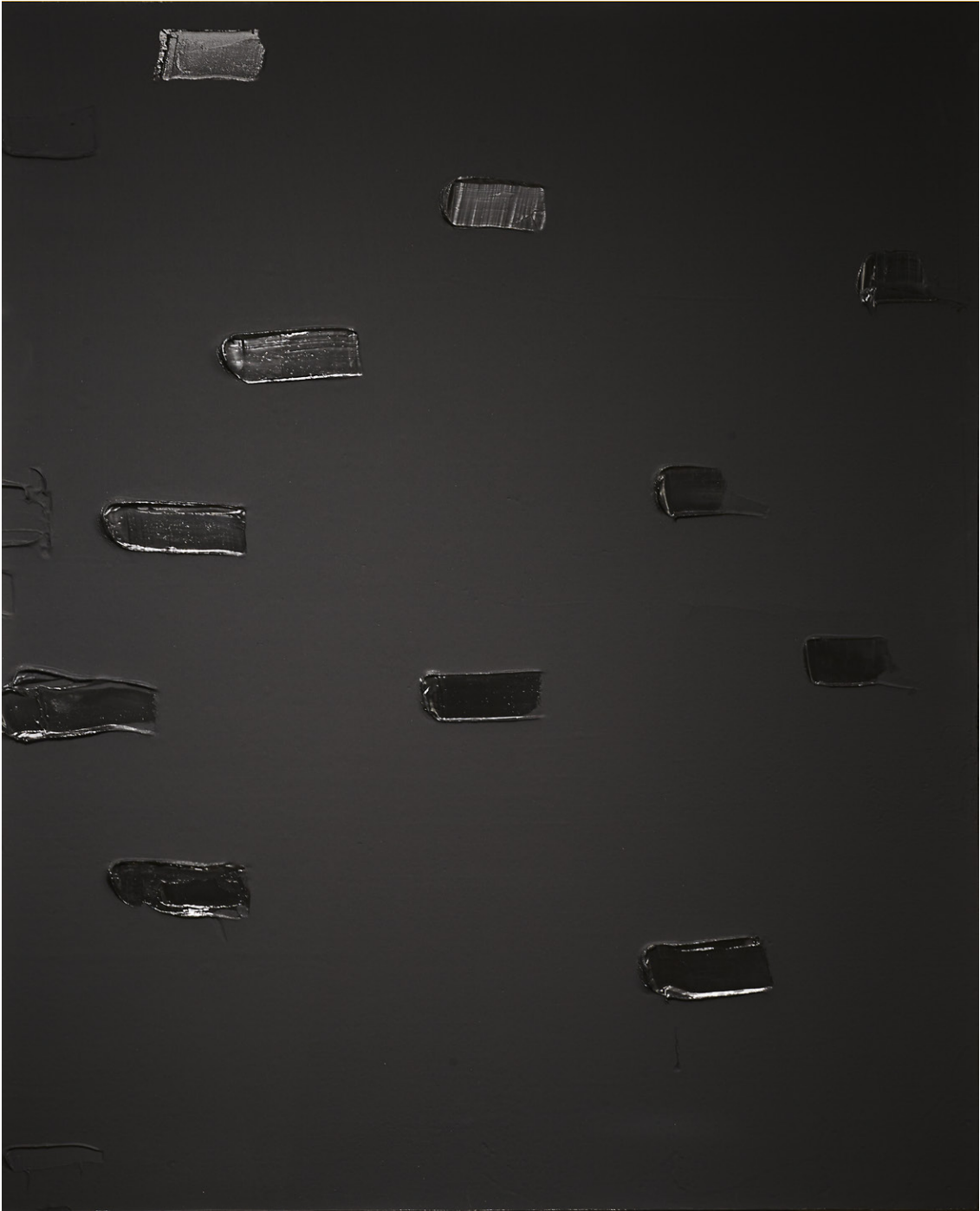
Signed, titled and dated on the reverse
Acrylic on canvas
55.9 x 45.3 in | 142 x 155 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist's studio

CERTIFICATE

The artist has confirmed the authenticity of this work



Peinture 81 x 122 cm, 20 mars 2019

Signed, titled and dated on the reverse
Acrylic on canvas
31.9 x 48 in | 81 x 122 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist's studio

CERTIFICATE

The artist has confirmed the authenticity of this work



A portrait of Pierre Soulages, an elderly man with white hair, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and textured with vertical lines.

Pierre Soulages

B. 1919

1919-1946: RODEZ - PARIS - MONTPELLIER

Pierre Soulages was born in Rodez on December 24, 1919. As a young child, he preferred black ink to any other colour.

1931 At the age of twelve, after a visit to the Abbey Church of Sainte-Foy de Conques, he decided to be a painter.

He made a few Figurative paintings of the Aveyron landscape.

1937 After gaining admission to the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, he decided not to study there.

1941 While studying at the École des Beaux-Arts in Montpellier, he met Colette Llaurens, who has been his wife since then.

1942-1945 During the German occupation he stopped painting, but he nonetheless discovered non-Figurative Contemporary creation. `

1946-1949: AN INTERNAL NEED

From 1946 onwards, Pierre Soulages dedicated himself entirely to painting and broke with figuration. He settled in Courbevoie with Colette.

1947-1949 He made his first walnut stain works on paper, which “*prefigure everything his painting was to be*” (Michel Ragon). One of his works was chosen to illustrate the poster for the first abstract art exhibition *Französische abstrakte Malerei* held in Post-War Germany.

1947 He moved to rue Schoelcher (in the 14th district of Paris), to a studio that allowed him to express himself on larger formats.

1948 Meeting with James Johnson Sweeney, curator at the MoMA New York, then director of the Guggenheim Museum. Sweeney led him the way to the American market.

At the end of the 1940s, he participated in numerous group exhibitions in Europe and America (Galerie Lydia Conti in Paris, Gimpel Fils gallery in London, Galerie Louis Carré in New York, etc.) and met some of his peers (Hans Hartung, Jean-Michel Atlan, Francis Picabia, Gérard Schneider, etc.).

1950s: INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM

The most important Modern Art museums bought his works: the Guggenheim Museum (New York), the MoMA (New York), the Tate Gallery (London), the Musée National d'Art Moderne (Paris), the Museu de Arte Moderna (Rio de Janeiro).

1952 Four of his works were displayed at the Venice Biennale.

1954 Samuel Kootz became his American art dealer and remained so until 1966.

1955 Participation in the first edition of Documenta in Kassel (Germany).

1956 First of a long series of exhibitions at Galerie de France (Paris); they continued till 1992.

1957 Moved his studio to rue Galande (in the 5th district of Paris). He now worked with his canvases placed on the ground. He spent some time in New York where he met Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and Mark Rothko.

1958 First trip to Japan with his friend Zao Wou-Ki, discovery of Japanese culture and aesthetics.

1959-1978: MATERIALISATION OF LIGHT

In 1959 Pierre and Colette had a modern villa built in Sète. They still live there today. The Galerie de France organised the 40-year old artist's first retrospective. Creation of large formats; he raked or scraped the black matter, revealing coloured areas beneath it (ochre, blue or red).

1960s First retrospective exhibitions at international museums.

1966 Retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, where Pierre Soulages used steel cables to hang his paintings, for the first time.

1967 First presentation of Pierre Soulages' works by an institution in France, the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris. Creation of his first polyptychs.

1972-1973 He stopped painting and worked on etching and lithographs.

1974 New studio, rue Saint-Victor (in the 5th district of Paris). The beginning of the transition period that was to lead Pierre Soulages to *Outrenoir* in 1979.

1979-2021: OUTRENOIR / BLACK LIGHT

One night in January 1979, Pierre Soulages began a new phase in his work, *Outrenoir*. End of 1979, exhibition of his first "*Chromatically versatile single pigment paintings*" (Pierre Encrevé) at the Centre Georges Pompidou.

1984 Pierre Soulages was the only French post-war artist to be shown in the new MoMa collection display in New York.

1986-1994 Project for, and creation of, 104 stained-glass windows for the Abbey Church of Sainte-Foy de Conques.

1994-1998 Publication of the first three volumes of the Catalogue raisonné by Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages, L'œuvre complet: Peintures*.

1997-1999 Pierre Soulages dedicated himself solely to walnut stain works on paper.

2001 Exhibition at the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg and at the Tretyakov gallery in Moscow.

2004 Onwards exclusive usage of mixtures of acrylic resins, which provide greater thickness, varying consistencies and faster drying.

2005 Pierre and Colette Soulages made an exceptional donation of 500 works to the future Soulages museum in Rodez.

2007 Inauguration of a Soulages room at the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, to display the couple's donation of 20 paintings.

2009 Retrospective at the Centre Georges Pompidou to celebrate the artist's 90th birthday.

2014 Inauguration of the Musée Soulages in Rodez.

2015 Publication of volume IV of the Catalogue raisonné *Soulages, L'œuvre complet: Peintures* by Pierre Encrevé.

2019 To honour his 100th birthday, the Musée du Louvre and the Centre Pompidou simultaneously dedicated exhibitions to him.

Pierre Soulages continues to paint in his studio in Sète.



Key artistic concepts

COLOUR BLACK

Black has been a part of Pierre Soulages' life, right from his childhood. His father died when he was 5, and his mother wore mourning. At the local school, he preferred black ink to any other colour; dipping his pen into his inkwell he enjoyed making the paper seem whiter in contrast to the darkest shades. When he was an adolescent, he decided to only wear black as he found it sober and elegant. In 1942, Pierre and Collette Soulages got married at midnight, dressed in black.

It is only natural that when Pierre Soulages chose to dedicate himself entirely to painting at the end of the 1940s, he created works with charcoal or oil loaded with black pigment. He thus reintroduced this colour that had fallen out of favour since the emergence of impressionism, into modern art. This is what the artist has to say about it: "I like the authority of black. It's an uncompromising colour. A violent colour, but one that encourages internalisation. Both a colour and a non-colour. When light is reflected on black, it transforms and transmutes it." Black is the least common colour in nature, its potential for abstraction is unique, and what most interests the artist, is its reaction to light.

Pierre Soulages also sees black as the original colour of painting, in reference to prehistoric man's cave paintings. He admires these early artists who went into caves, the darkest places on earth, to paint by the light of a flame using black pigment made of charcoal.

"In my painting, dominated [by black] from my childhood till now, I objectively identify three paths black takes, three different fields of action: Black against a background serves as a more active contrast than any other colour to illuminate the lightness of the background; [Black associated

with] colours, they are first obscured by the black, as they emerge occasionally from the canvas and exalted by the black that surrounds them; The texture of black (with or without directivity, activating or not the surface): is a matrix material with changing reflections." Pierre Soulages, Interview with Charles Juliet, Caen, L'échoppe, 1990.

LIGHT

Pierre Soulages' tool of reference is not the colour black, but light. This idea has inhabited him since his childhood when at the age of eight he painted a snowy landscape with Indian ink to reveal the whiteness of the paper. According to the artist, the difference between black and white creates the strongest contrast and is the best way of creating light, a light that seems to be contained in the work itself.

From 1947 onwards, the white of the paper, marked by the fluidity and transparency of walnut stain, continues to make light vibrate. Then in 1959, Pierre Soulages begins to rake or scrape the black matter to reveal coloured areas beneath it, allowing light to emerge.

This approach took on a new meaning in 1979 when he made his first Outrenoir (or black light), a canvas entirely covered in black, no longer based on the contrast with white, but absorbing or reflecting light depending on the state of the surface of the pictorial matter. The paintings he made from this time onwards are marked by the variations in the smooth or furrowed surfaces, upon which light vibrates or rests. They also reveal a paradox as they make light emerging from darkness.

One of his most important areas of experimentation with light is the stained-glass

project for the Saint Faith Abbey Church of Conques (1986-1994). He spent eight years working with a master glassmaker to create a unique translucent and colourless type of glass that captures light in a new way.

OUTRENOIR / BLACK LIGHT

One night in January 1979, Pierre Soulages began a new phase in his work that inaugurated a new type of painting.

This is what the artist says about this shift: “Black had occupied everything; I had been struggling and insisting on my canvas for hours on end. I would apply some black paste, then remove it, add some and then scrape some off... I was floundering and persisted some more; everything was covered in black with no apparent way out. Yet, something irresistibly compelled me to carry on to the verge of fatigue. A kind of inner need pushed me to go further. I was completely drained, so I stopped and went to bed. When I woke up, I went back to my canvas and this is when I realised I was making something that had never been done before: black was not black anymore, it was the cradle of a particular light, which occupied me. Black created its own space: a new adventure began.”

Pierre Soulages, *Outrenoirs*, conversations with Françoise Jaunin, La bibliothèque des Arts Éditions, 2012.

Pierre Soulages baptised this new way of painting black light, then *Outrenoir* in 1990.

“*Outrenoir* to say: beyond black, reflected light, transmuted by black. *Outrenoir*: black that emits light, a secret light, when it ceases to be black. *Outrenoir*: a mental field other than that of mere black.” Pierre Soulages, *Les Éclats du noir*, interview with Pierre Encrevé in *Beaux-Arts Magazine*, special edition, March 1996.

It is about going beyond the colour black to make light visible thanks to the variable physical features of the material and its application using different tools. Pierre Soulages experimented tirelessly. He superposed layers, scraped, brushed, smoothed and gouged the ivory black coloured matter. He thus gave his paintings a true sculptural dimension. What interested him at the time was the ability of material and its imperfections to absorb or reflect light, depending on the condition of the surface, and to give rise to nuances ranging from white to deep black, as well as blue, green or grey.

We should state that these “*chromatically versatile single pigment paintings*” (Pierre Encrevé) are different to monochromes. Indeed, an *Outrenoir* painting is never exactly the same, depending on the viewer’s position and the moment when he looks at it. From one instant to the next, from one angle to another, it is never really the same painting. The light in it changes, so does the colour, adapting to the environment. It is a visual experience for the viewer, who is “*free and has to interpret the work himself*” as Pierre Soulages says.

With the *Outrenoir* concept, the relationship to space and time is different to that of traditional painting.

RHYTHM

The idea of rhythm is fundamental in Pierre Soulages’ work. It is primarily created by variations in the black matt or glossy, shiny, smooth or grooved surfaces that capture or reflect light.

Rhythm is also created by the marks the tools leave in the matter. The direction of the gesture, oblique, horizontal or vertical — the pressure

of the artist’s hand, light or insistent — narrow or broad marks, juxtaposed or widely spaced. All these treatments of the pictorial layer catch light differently and punctuate the spectator’s gaze. The artist also sometimes uses horizontal strips of painted canvas that he sticks to the main canvas.

Lastly, rhythm is also born out of the assemblage of several canvases. Pierre Soulages began to use the polyptych in 1967. The horizontally or vertically juxtaposed canvases, occasionally of different formats serve to disrupt the continuity of the pictorial surface. The large formats also force the viewer to stand back, to extend his or her field of view.

TOOLS AND MATERIALS

The artist Pierre Soulages soon realised that every tool serves its own purpose and creates its own effects. “You can’t do anything with just any tool. I quickly realised that one has to pay great attention to the tool...” he explains.

At the end of the 1940s, Pierre Soulages wanted to express himself more freely, and he felt constrained by traditional pictorial techniques. He hence began to work with walnut stain or tar, and borrowed the tools employed by the craftsmen he visited during his childhood in Rodez. He acquired building workers’ brushes and spatulas, dull blade tanner’s scrapers, beekeeper’s knives, which he used and diverted from their original purposes to obtain the effects he desired.

He also invented his own tools: “I have constantly invented instruments, most often in a great hurry. When I can’t do something, I make us of whatever comes to hand”. He thus created unusually wide brushes, various leather, wood or metal blades, rubber scrapers... All these tools serve both to

apply and to remove matter, to scrape, scratch or smoothen, and allow him to obtain a range of effects, reliefs and marks.

Pierre Soulages paints standing up with the canvas laid on the ground. He has developed a system of wooden ramps to cross his canvas, and gutters to spread the paint.

The artist, who makes his own stretchers, always chooses and defines the size of the canvas in advance. He also makes his own paint. Since 2004, Pierre Soulages has worked exclusively with a mixture of acrylic resins.

It is tools and materials, as well as the artist’s gestures that determine the final result. The work is always created spontaneously, without a predefined idea: “What I am doing tells me what I am looking for.”

TITLES

Right from the beginning of his career, Pierre Soulages systematised the titles of his works, which he defines by their materiality. Every work is an object designated by the technique employed, the height, the width and the date of completion. Every painting or work on paper adds to the overall body of work. This system confirms the artist’s constancy and rigour.

Pierre Soulages does not name his works in order to avoid influencing the spectator’s gaze. The latter must live his or her own experience and interpretation of the created object. He only frames his paper works, but never his canvases.

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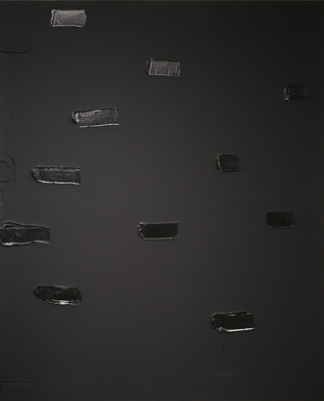
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