

DIANE DE POLIGNAC

ZAO WOU-KI (1920-2013)

A Franco-Chinese painter, Zao Wou-Ki was a fundamental member of the Lyrical Abstraction movement. His works, associated with abstract landscape art combine the heritage of traditional Chinese painting and the contribution of modern non-figurative oil painting, for a meditative contemplation of nature.



BIOGRAPHY

A CHINESE PAINTER'S YEARS OF STUDY

T'chao Wou-Ki (Zao Wou-Ki on his arrival in France) was born in Peking in 1920 to a prosperous intellectual family descended from the ancient Song dynasty. From an early age, he drew and painted, supported by his family and trained by his grandfather in Chinese characters, which were essential for studying calligraphy. He then entered the art school of Hangzhou where he studied traditional Chinese painting and western techniques for six years. Very quickly, he broke away from the imposed teaching and began to paint in oils, a typical western painting technique. In 1941, Zao Wou-Ki was made an assistant teacher in his school. At that time he was especially influenced by Avant-Garde artists: Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso, whom he discovered through illustrations from western magazines and postcards brought back from Paris by his uncle.

In 1946, about twenty of Zao Wou-Ki's works were exhibited at the Musée Cernuschi in Paris at the exhibition of contemporary Chinese painting (Exposition de peintures chinoises contemporaines) and the following year, a solo exhibition about Zao Wou-Ki was held at Shanghai.

ZAO WOU-KI IN PARIS: FRIENDSHIPS AND BEGINNING OF THE RECOGNITION

The year 1948 marked the painter Zao Wou-Ki's arrival in Paris. He settled there with his first wife Lalan in the Montparnasse district and attended the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He became friendly with a very cosmopolitan artistic circle: the Americans Sam Francis, Norman Bluhm and Joan Mitchell, the Canadian Jean-Paul Riopelle, the Portuguese Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, the German Hans Hartung and Pierre Soulages from France. In 1949, the Galerie Creuze in Paris held the first exhibition about Zao Wou-Ki. He also became friendly with the artist Henri Michaux who introduced him to the dealer Pierre Loeb: their collaboration lasted from 1951 to 1957.

In Switzerland, the painter discovered Paul Klee's art which marked him deeply. Zao Wou-Ki's work evolved and led him towards abstraction. "Still Lifes and flowers don't exist anymore, I lean towards an imaginary undecipherable writing" he confided.

In 1954, the Cincinnati Museum of Fine Arts held a retrospective of his prints. The following year, the Chinese painter began to work with the Galerie de France in Paris which organized a show of Zao Wou-Ki's work in 1957 and where he found his friends Pierre Soulages, Hans Hartung and Alfred Manessier. This association continued until 1986.

Zao Wou-Ki became a close friend of the poet René Char: they worked together on the collection *Les Compagnons dans le jardin* for which he created four etchings in 1957.

A CHINESE PAINTER IN NEW YORK: FRIENDSHIPS AND SUCCES

The same year, the painter Zao Wou-Ki visited his brother Wu-Wai in the USA, near New York. There, he met the famous American dealer Samuel Kootz who held his first solo exhibition in 1959 and with whom he collaborated until 1965, the year of his sixth and final solo show with Kootz. Zao Wou-Ki discovered American painting which he appreciated for its free spontaneous gesture and he mixed with the New York art scene, meeting Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Adolph Gottlieb, William Bazotes, Hans Hofmann, among others, who became friends. He continued this long voyage with Pierre and Colette Soulages to Hawaii and Japan. He then spent six months in Hong Kong in 1958 where he met his future second wife: Chan May-Kan. In 1961 the first exhibition of the painter Zao Wou-Ki was held at the Tokyo Gallery in Japan.

The following year, the Chinese painter made ten lithographs to illustrate a publication by French Cultural Affairs minister, André Malraux, *La Tentation de l'Occident*. Zao Wou-Ki obtained French nationality in 1964. In 1967, he participated in the French Pavilion at the Montreal Exposition International. A retrospective exhibition about the painter was held in Canada in 1969, at the Musée d'Art Contemporain of Montréal and at the Musée du Québec.

ZAO WOU-KI: RECOGNITION IN ASIA

At the start of the 1970s, on the advice of his friend Henri Michaux, Zao Wou-Ki rediscovered the difficult technique of Chinese ink, and then began to paint very large format works that the Galerie de France exhibited in 1975. Zao Wou-Ki's art continued to be shown in Japan: in 1977, the museum of Hakone and the Ishibashi Foundation bought works by Zao Wou-Ki. He married Françoise Marquet the same year. During this period he began a partnership with the dealer Pierre Matisse in New York.

From 1980 to 1984, the artist Zao Wou-Ki taught the mural painting at the École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs in Paris. Jean Leymarie, director of the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris, organized at the Grand Palais a presentation of his works, between 1981 and 1982: it was the first solo show about Zao Wou-Ki in a French museum; this exhibition would be presented later in seven museums in Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore.

In 1983, the Franco-Chinese painter travelled to Taipei for an exhibition at the National Museum of History. There he met the great Chinese artist Zhang Daqian a few months before his death. The same year, Zao Wou-Ki exhibited his works in his native China for the first time since his arrival in Paris in 1948: at the National Museum

of Beijing and at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (previously his old school at Hangzhou). Two years later, Zao Wou-Ki and his wife were both invited to teach at the Academy of Fine Arts of Hangzhou: painting and charcoal for Zao Wou-Ki, museology for Françoise Marquet.

Retrospectives about Zao Wou-Ki continued around the world during the 1990s: at the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon (1992), at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (1993), at the Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporaneo in Mexico City (1994), at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts in Taiwan and finally at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in Hong Kong (1996). Various honours followed in succession: Zao Wou-Ki was promoted to Commander of the Légion d'honneur, made doctor honoris causa by the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1993 and the following year, he won the Japanese Praemium Imperiale in painting.

In 1997 and again in 2000, he accompanied the French president Jacques Chirac on his visit to China. He also returned in 1998 for the major retrospective devoted to his work by the museum of Shanghai, which was afterwards shown at the Palace of Fine Arts of China in Beijing and at the Guangdong Provincial Museum in Guanzhou.

In 2002, the painter Zao Wou-Ki was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts of Paris. The following year, the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris organized a major retrospective in his honour gathering about a hundred works from all over the world. It was a huge success.

In 2006, his friend, the architect I.M. Pei, inaugurated the new museum of Suzhou in China with the exhibition *Black & White Dream*, a presentation of works by Zao Wou-Ki. The same year, the French president Jacques Chirac promoted the painter Zao Wou-Ki to the rank of Grand Officier of the Legion of Honour. In 2008, he decided to stop painting with oil and in spring 2010, painted his final watercolours. His large triptych, *Hommage à Claude Monet* (1991), was shown alongside a selection of masterpieces from the Musée d'Orsay at the Universal Exposition of Shanghai, in the French Pavilion, in 2010.

The Franco-Chinese painter Zao Wou-Ki died in 2013 in Nyon, in Switzerland.

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Translation: Jane Mac Avock

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Beijing, China Central Academy of Fine Arts
Berkeley, CA, Berkeley Art Museum
Bilbao, Museo de Bellas Artes
Boston, MA, Museum of Fine Arts
Brussels, Musée d'Art moderne
Brussels, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique
Cambridge, MA, Fogg Art Museum
Chicago, IL, The Art Institute of Chicago
Cincinnati, OH, Cincinnati Art Museum
Colmar, Musée d'Unterlinden
Dallas, TX, Museum of Art
Detroit, MI, Detroit Institute of Art
Dunkerque, Lieu d'Art et Action Contemporaine
Fukuoka, Fukuoka Art Museum
Genes, Galleria d'arte moderna
Geneva, Fondation Gandur pour l'Art
Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Fondation Gérald Cramer
Hangzhou, China Academy of Art
Hong Kong, Hong Kong Museum of Art
Houston, TX, Museum of Fine Arts
Issoudun, Musée de l'Hospice Saint-Roch
Jakarta, Jakarta Museum
Kyoto, Kyoto National Museum of Modern Art
Le Havre, Musée Malraux
Lisbon, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian
Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Moderna
London, The Tate Gallery
London, Victoria and Albert Museum
Metz, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire
Mexico, Museo de Arte moderno
Milan, Civica galleria d'arte moderna
Minneapolis, MN, The Walker Art Center
Montpellier, Musée Fabre
Montréal, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
Montréal, Musée des beaux-arts
Nantes, Musée des Beaux-Arts
New Haven, CT, Yale University Art Gallery
New York, NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York, NY, Museum of Modern Art
New York, NY, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
Osaka, National Museum of Art
Paris, Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne
Paris, Musée Cernuschi
Paris, Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris
Québec, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec
Rio de Janeiro, Museu de Arte Moderna
San Francisco, CA, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Stanford, Stanford University (California)
Taipei, National Museum of History

Taipei, Taipei Fine Arts Museum
Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv Museum
Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario
Washington, Washington DC, Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institute
Washington, Washington DC, National Gallery of Art

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Exposition de peintures chinoises contemporaines, Musée Cernuschi, Paris, 1946
Solo show, Galerie Creuze, Paris, 1949
Galerie Pierre Loeb, Paris, 1951, 1955
Retrospective of his prints, Museum of Fine Arts, Cincinnati, 1954
Galerie de France, Paris, 1957, 1975, 1986
Solo shows, Kootz Gallery, New York, 1959, 1965
Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo, 1961
Retrospective, Folkwang, Essen, 1965
International exhibition, Montréal, 1967
San Francisco Museum of Moderne Art, San Francisco, 1968
Retrospective, Musée d'Art contemporain de Montréal, Musée du Québec, 1969
Solo show, Grand Palais, Paris, 1981-1982
National Museum of History, Taipei, 1983
Solo show, National Museum of Beijing, Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, 1983
Artcurial, 1988
Hommage à Claude Monet Triptyque, Fondation Vasarely, Aix-en-Provence, 1991
Retrospective, Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, 1992
Retrospective, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1993
Retrospective, Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporaneo, Mexico, 1994
Retrospective, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1996
Retrospective, Shanghai Museum, Palace of Fine Arts of China, Beijing, Palais des beaux-arts de Canton, 1998
Chine, la gloire des empereurs, Petit Palais, Paris, 2000
Retrospective, IVAM, Valence, 2001
Retrospective, Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels, 2001
Retrospective, Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, 2003
Black & White Dream, Suzhou Museum, China, 2006
Retrospective, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris and Suzhou Museum, 2008
Musée de l'Hospice Saint-Roch, Issoudun, 2008
Universal exhibition of Shanghai, French Pavilion, 2010
Musée des beaux-arts de Rouen, 2012
L'Espace est silence, Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, 2018-2019

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Claude Roy, *Zao Wou-Ki*, Paris, Georges Fall, collection Le Musée de Poche, 1957

Michel Tourlières, Jean Leymarie, François Cheng, *Zao Wou-Ki, Peintures, Encres de Chine*, Paris, Éditions du Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, 1981

Claude Roy, *Zao Wou-Ki*, Paris, Cercle d'Art, collection Les Grands Peintres, 1988

Pierre Daix, *Zao Wou-Ki, L'œuvre 1935-1993*, Neuchâtel, Ides et Calendes, 1994

François Cheng, Pierre Schneider, Jean Lescure, Guitemie Maldonado, *Zao Wou-Ki*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Éditions du Jeu de Paume, 2003

Dominique de Villepin, Yann Hendgen, *Zao Wou-Ki, 1935-2008*, Paris, Flammarion, 2009

François Michaud, Yann Hendgen, Daniel Marchesseau and al. *Zaou Wou-Ki. L'Espace est silence*, exhibition catalogue of Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, Paris, Éditions Paris Musées, 2018

