

**Pierre Soulages, leading French abstract painter, dies at 102** ARTDAILY October 28, 2022

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Pierre Soulages at home in Sète, France, Nov. 22, 2019. Soulages, whose searching explorations of the color black established him as France's pre-eminent postwar abstract painter, died on Wednesday, Oct. 26, 2022, in Sète, a port city in southern France. He was 102. Sandra Mehl/The New York Times.  
by William Grimes

**NEW YORK, NY.-** Pierre Soulages, whose searching explorations of the color black established him as France's preeminent postwar abstract painter, died Wednesday in Sète, a port city in southern France. He was 102.

His death, in a hospital, was confirmed by Dominique Lévy and Emilio Steinberger, the co-founder and senior partner

of LGDR, the gallery that represents Soulages in the United States.

Soulages attracted attention in the late 1940s with a series of bold calligraphic works on paper using walnut stain or, on occasion, tar on glass. Their somber tones stood in sharp contrast to the bright colors favored by the adherents of Tachisme, France's answer to abstract expressionism. In comparison, he told Interview magazine in 2014, his paintings "looked like a fly in a glass of milk."

In his work from the 1960s and '70s, swaths of black were scraped away to reveal colored backgrounds, but the overall composition — dark slashes made with a wide brush, which critics have often likened to the calligraphic marks of Franz Kline — remained consistent with his earlier work. James Johnson Sweeney, curator of painting at the Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s and '40s, characterized Soulages' imposing, static forms as "a chord played on the piano and held."

Soulages quickly developed a European reputation; his work appeared in the Venice Biennale in 1952 and the inaugural Documenta exhibition in Kassel, West Germany, in 1955. In New York, the reputation-making Betty Parsons Gallery showed his work in 1949, and Sidney Janis followed suit a year later in an exhibition organized by Leo Castelli.

In 1954, Soulages began exhibiting with the Samuel Kootz Gallery, which played a major role in promoting abstract expressionism but also championed modern European artists. He adopted the practice of titling his works by dimension and date, and of hanging his paintings from the ceiling.

Soulages came to a new understanding of the possibilities of black paint in 1979, after struggling in vain with a canvas in his Paris studio. Throwing up his hands, he retired for the night.

The next morning, he told an interviewer for the Pompidou Center in Paris in 2009, "I saw that it wasn't the black that made the picture come alive but the light reflected on the black surfaces." He added: "The light was coming to me from the painting, I was in the painting. And what is more, the light was coming from the color that is the greatest absence of light."

For more than four decades, Soulages worked every possible variation on black in an evolving series of paintings he called "outrenoir," or "beyond black," sometimes using spoons or small rakes to create new textures in his thick slabs

of paint and evoke subtle effects of color and light.

“Some mornings, it is a silvery gray,” he told the critic Bernard Ceysson in 1979. “Sometimes, capturing the light reflected from the sea, it is blue. At other times it can be tinged a coppery brown. In fact, it always corresponds to the light that falls on it. One day, I even saw it green: There had been a storm, and there was a blaze of sun on the trees not far away.”

Pierre Jean Louis Germain Soulages was born in Rodez, in the South of France, on Dec. 24, 1919. His father, Amans, was a carriage maker who died when his son was 5, and Pierre was raised by his mother, Aglaé Zoé Julie (Corp) Soulages, and his older sister.

From an early age, he was captivated by prehistoric art, notably the cave paintings in France and Spain, and after graduating from a local lycée he traveled to Paris to study drawing with a private teacher. He was accepted by the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts but he returned to Rodez after being exposed to the curriculum. “It was everything I hated,” he told Interview.

With the outbreak of World War II he was called up for military service. After the fall of France in 1940 he went to Montpellier to study at the city’s school of fine arts, where he met and married a fellow student, Colette Llaurens. She later managed his studio and served as his liaison with museums and other institutions throughout his career.

When Nazi Germany occupied Montpellier, he secured false papers and, seeking to avoid forced labor in Germany, found work in a vineyard.

He returned to Paris after the war and showed his walnut-stain works on paper at the Salon des Surindépendants in 1947, earning the support of the prominent avant-gardist Francis Picabia and a place in several important shows in Europe.

In the United States he took part in the 1951 traveling exhibition “Advancing French Art,” and his work was included in the exhibition “Younger European Artists” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1953 and in “The New Decade” at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955.

In 1987 Soulages, who for more than 60 years worked and lived in a house in Sète that he and his wife had designed, was commissioned to make 104 windows for the Romanesque abbey church of Sainte-Foy in Conques, just north of Rodez. Rather than design stained-glass windows, he devised a series of translucent panes, framed by black steel bars,

whose variable thickness diffused and modulated the incoming light. The windows were installed in 1994.

In 2001, he became the first contemporary artist to show at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia. In 2009, on the occasion of his 90th birthday, a career retrospective opened at the Pompidou Center. In 2019, the Lévy Gorvy gallery in New York marked his 100th birthday with an exhibition, “Pierre Soulages: A Century.”

His donation of 500 works formed the basis for the Musée Soulages in Rodez, which opened in 2014. Present for the occasion, President François Hollande paid homage, calling Soulages “the world’s greatest living artist.”

Soulages, who is survived by his wife, continued to work at a brisk pace throughout his 90s.

“I only think about what I am going to do tomorrow,” he told The New York Times in 2014. “And tomorrow, I want to paint.”

This article originally appeared in [The New York Times](#).