

Asia Society Museum in New York Presents “No Limits: Zao Wou-Ki”

On view September 9, 2016–January 8, 2017

“It is not easy to break free. Everybody is bound by a tradition—I, by two.”

Zao Wou-Ki, 1964



“No Limits: Zao Wou-Ki,” co-organized by Asia Society Museum and Colby College Museum of Art, is the first retrospective of the work of Zao Wou-Ki (1920–2013) in the United States. The exhibition aims to reintroduce American audiences to the singular achievements of this pioneering Chinese-French artist, who melded eastern and western aesthetic sensibilities in his paintings, as a key figure within post-World War II abstraction.

“No Limits: Zao Wou-Ki” takes its title from the Chinese meaning of Wou-Ki, “without limitation,” a state of being that the artist embodied through his art. One of the first artists of the Chinese diaspora to achieve international recognition, Zao was born in Beijing and spent his formative years in Shanghai

and Hangzhou, where he pursued artistic study at the China Academy of Art. In 1948, he emigrated from Shanghai to Paris, where he was championed by French intellectuals and artists and in subsequent years became a major fixture in the European art world. In the 1950s and 1960s, American museums and private collectors avidly acquired his paintings, and his work was shown in numerous exhibitions including a 1968 solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art, the last American museum show of Zao’s work until now.

The importance of Zao’s work derives from his singular adaption of visual characteristics of Chinese art within twentieth-century oil-painting idioms. In Zao’s hands, abstraction reflected the encounter between two worlds and embraces both European modernism and Chinese metaphysical principles. His groundbreaking internationalist aesthetic marks him as a key figure of twentieth-century transculturalism.



“No Limits: Zao Wou-Ki” comprises 49 works in oil, ink, print, and watercolor, spanning more than six decades and includes loans from major institutions in the United States and in Europe. The exhibition is curated by Melissa Walt and Ankeney Weitz, Colby College Museum of Art, and Michelle Yun, Asia Society Museum. A fully illustrated catalogue, the definitive monograph in English on the artist, accompanies the exhibition. The exhibition will be on view at Colby College Museum of Art from February 4 through June 4, 2017.

Exhibition organization



“No Limits: Zao Wou-Ki” is organized into three sections. The first, Calligraphy is the Starting Point, shows a transitional moment in Zao’s work during the mid-1950s to mid-1960s. His early mastery of Chinese ink and brush techniques had led him to seek the challenges of painting in oil. But after several years in Paris, he looked back to his formative training as he shaped his artistic voice. “Paradoxically, it is to Paris that I owe my return to my [Chinese] roots,” Zao commented in 1961.

The second section of the exhibition, To Learn is To Create, showcases earlier works made between 1945 and 1954, a period in which Zao tapped diverse visual traditions and methods, ranging from European painters such as Paul Cézanne, Marc Chagall, and Paul Klee, to ancient Chinese bronze inscriptions, rubbings from Han-dynasty tomb decorations, and Tang- and Song-dynasty landscape paintings.

The third section, A Place to Wander, looks at his mature works across the mediums of oil, ink, and watercolor, painted between 1965 and 2007, that embrace abstraction while exploring landscape, scenery, and the forces of nature.

As a complement to the exhibition, a selection of four exquisite ceramics from Asia Society’s permanent collection of traditional Asian art will also be on view. Dating from the sixth to sixteenth centuries, they exemplify the fine craftsmanship and aesthetics of traditional Chinese art.

A number of related programs have been organized to coincide with the exhibition including a half-day symposium on Zao Wou-Ki and the legacy of international postwar abstraction on November 18, a vocal and musical performance by boundary-crossing artists Jen Shyu, Susie Ibarra, and Samita Sinha on October 1, a series of new feature and short Chinese films on November 3 to 6, and a family program on December 3.

Exhibition support

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About Asia Society Museum

Asia Society Museum presents a wide range of traditional, modern, and contemporary exhibitions of Asian and Asian American art, taking new approaches to familiar masterpieces and introducing under-recognized arts and artists. The Asia Society Museum Collection comprises a traditional art collection, composed of the initial bequests of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, and a contemporary art collection focused on new media.

Founded in 1956, Asia Society is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, educational institution headquartered in New York with state-of-the-art cultural centers and gallery spaces in Hong Kong and Houston, and offices in Los Angeles, Manila, Mumbai, San Francisco, Seoul, Shanghai, Sydney, Washington, D.C., and Zurich.

Asia Society Museum is located at 725 Park Avenue (at 70th Street), New York City. The Museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. and Friday from 11:00 A.M. to 9:00 P.M. Closed on Mondays and major holidays. General admission is \$12, seniors \$10, students \$7; free for members and persons under 16. Free admission Friday evenings, 6:00 P.M.–9:00 P.M. Find out more at AsiaSociety.org/NY.

Image captions (in order of appearance): Zao Wou-Ki. *Pavillon rouge* (Red pavilion), 1954. Oil on canvas. 25 1/2 × 21 1/4 in. (64.8 × 54 cm). Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University, Gift of Dr. Harvey Picker '36, 1994.2.3. Photography courtesy of Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University; Zao Wou-Ki. *Hommage à Chu Yun—05.05.55* (Homage to Chu Yun—05.05.55), 1955. Oil on canvas. 76 3/4 × 51 1/8 in. (195 × 130 cm). Private collection, Switzerland. Photography by Dennis Bouchard; Zao Wou-Ki. *13.01.76*, 1976. Oil on canvas. 59 × 63 3/4 in. (150 × 162 cm). Private collection, Taiwan. Rights Reserved.

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