

ZAO WOU-KI

The artistic destiny of Zao Wou-ki is not merely individual; it is intimately linked to the development of a pictorial tradition several thousand years old, a tradition that bears the mark of the written sign. Has there ever been a country where the written sign was held in such honour as in China? "In the beginning was the sign" is the primary affirmation that defines this most singular culture. In the archaic Chinese myths the Creator does not reveal himself in the "word" or in Holy Writ; he leaves traces which inspire humans to create their own divinatory or linguistic signs. These, through their architectural and figurative qualities, have given rise to a double art (calligraphy/painting) in which the man drawing and the sign drawn are one. From then on the brush becomes the passion of a whole people. Through its mediation, through the primordial rhythm of its gestures, the Chinese immerse themselves in signs which express both the vital breath animating the created universe (qi) and the internal lines inherent in all things (li).

— François Cheng

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許芥昱：趙無極畫布上的顏色與光亮

Colour and Light in the Canvases of Zao Wou-ki

By Hsu Kai-yu

Translated by Diana Yu

THE GRAND PALAIS, that famous nineteenth century building standing south of the Champs Élysées and north of the Seine, between the Arc de Triomphe and the Place de la Concorde, is so named not only for its architectural grandeur and dignity, but because its immediate neighbour to the right is the Petit Palais. Despite its royal title the building never served as the abode of any kingly personage, and with the coming of the Republic its spacious rooms with their lofty ceilings were re-furnished and converted into exhibition halls. This was no place for ordinary artists to display their talents. For a century only artists of the first order in the western world have enjoyed the honour of being sponsored by the French Ministry of Culture to hold exhibitions there. On 12 June 1981, Zao Wou-ki's (Zhao Wuji 趙無極) one-man retrospective of works covering a period of thirty years opened on the first floor, while the works of his friend, Nicolas de Staël (1914-1955), a painter who enjoyed wide popularity in France, were displayed on the ground floor of the same building.

Most of the thirty-six paintings on show in that exhibition—oils and water-and-ink—were large-scale works. The largest of them, a triptych, occupied the spacious wall facing the entrance staircase, an irresistible expanse of bright yellow accented by fat virile lines of dark brown and black. The earliest of the paintings, *Arezzo 1950*, is a canvas of soft yellows and light leaf-green tones. Yellow, a neutral colour, is like the earth, while the green, peering behind the yellow, tells of budding life. On such a background fine black lines form shapes resembling symbols (both orthographic and non-orthographic). But where have we encountered these symbols before? On some ancient stele? Or are they the traces of pictograms executed on walls by cave-men in an even more remote age? What forms are these mingled among them, tree-bark corrugations, rock fissures, a legacy of Nature's master-strokes! Yellow and green are congenial colours, not in the least menacing or strange, and standing in front of this painting I recalled the words of the French poet Henri Michaux, when as early as 1952 he wrote of Zao Wou-ki's art:

To display while concealing, to break the direct line and make it tremble, to trace in idleness the twists and turns of a walk and the doodlings of a dreaming spirit, that is what Zao Wou-ki loves; and

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then, suddenly, with the same air of festivity that enlivens the Chinese countryside, the picture appears, quivering with joy and delight in an orchard of signs.

Montrer en dissimulant, briser et faire trembler la ligne directe, tracer, en musant, les détours de la promenade et les pattes de mouche de l'esprit rêveur, voilà ce qu'aime Zao Wou-ki, et, tout à coup avec le même air de fête qui anime campagnes et villages chinois, le tableau apparaît, frémissant joyeusement et un peu drôle dans un verger de signes.

But how has this come about?

Learning from postcards

1950 was the third year of Zao Wou-ki's stay in France. A mere three years and he had achieved so much. This was because when he arrived in France he was far from empty-handed.

Zao had left China armed with fourteen years of professional training at the Hangchow School of Fine Arts, the encouragement and mentorship of many a Chinese pioneer of the western painting tradition, the success of two exhibitions, and a huge pile of postcard reproductions of famous works of western painting. These postcards were important; without them Zao would perhaps never have become the internationally acclaimed artist that he now is.

Years earlier a younger brother of Zao's father, who used to travel frequently to Europe, had brought back large numbers of these postcards after every trip, to please the young Zao. Zao's own father, a banker and a gentleman of sophisticated tastes, quite renowned in Shanghai and Hangchow, was also fond of painting and had once himself won an international award for painting. He was very much in favour of his son's studying fine arts, and though the boy's mother entertained hopes that he might one day distinguish himself in the conventional manner and become a banker like his father, it was Father's and Grandfather's wishes that prevailed. Zao was born in 1921 in Peking. When his family moved to Shanghai he was just a few months old. At home, Grandfather taught him calligraphy. He learnt to recite some traditional axioms by heart and can still vaguely recollect the gist of one: "Written characters should be animated, and the ink should be infused with life." But what does "life" mean? Later Zao reached this conclusion: a work of art must touch the viewer's heart; the first impression it makes must be an indelible one. His family owned a collection of valuable paintings, and often the elders would lay out these family treasures and point out to sons and grandchildren the merits of an ink-dot landscape by Mi Fei or a work by Zhao Mengfu. As time went by such familiarity bred a tender liking. The young Zao was unable to point out what exactly distinguished Mi Fei's art. He only realized much later that a Mi Fei landscape had a cheerful vivacity like that of the autumn sun. It sparkled through the paper. In 1979 the French writer Jean Leymarie, commenting on Zao's art, said he had combined the cheerful and vivacious qualities of Mi Fei and Ni Zan, stating at the same time that the same qualities were to be found in Cézanne. These remarks are not unfounded. The Mi Fei's were a family heirloom, while the

Cézannes had been available in the form of postcard reproductions brought home by the uncle—Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, and outstanding works by the Impressionists, the Fauvists and the Expressionists, as well as more classical masterpieces by sixteenth and seventeenth century Italian, Dutch and French painters. Zao's admiration for western painting dated from that period.

In 1935 Zao entered the Hangchow School of Fine Arts. In the traditional Chinese painting classes, students were ordered to copy works of Ming and Qing painters as a kind of discipline, a practice in which Zao participated very unenthusiastically because he believed that imitation and art were completely different things. This irritated the class master Pan Tianshou 潘天壽 so much that he nearly expelled the rebellious student. As for western painting, students had to practise drawing plaster models for three years and drawing the human body for two years before they were permitted to start on oils. Zao had no patience for such rules and before a year had gone by at the school he launched into oil painting secretly at home. When in lack of a model he would beseech his little sister to sit down and let him paint her face. In the school, most of the teachers of western painting had been trained in Belgium or France in the academic tradition, and demanded that students delineate every grin or frown on the model's face with realistic precision. Zao believed that precise representation of separate parts could not reflect the entirety of the model's presence, such an entirety being the organic unity of all the parts. Already he had been convinced by Picasso and Matisse, and felt that his own disposition was quite akin to theirs. He himself admitted that all the works displayed in his very first exhibition, which he held upon graduation in 1941 in Chungking, were modelled on this handful of European masters who had exerted such an influence on him. In spite of this, his performance attracted considerable attention in the Chinese painting scene of that time. Chinese artists were unsure of their direction within the confines of tradition, and it was not until the War of Resistance came to an end that they committed their first open act of defiance against traditional painting. On the eve of the Hangchow School of Fine Arts' return to Hangchow, the principal of the school, Lin Fengmian 林風眠, together with Ding Yan-yong 丁衍庸, Zao and others, held a joint exhibition in Chungking.

Even before he went abroad, Zao had decided to pursue the essentials of the visual experience by departing from visual resemblance, to try to make his canvas a medium for intellectual and emotional communication between viewer and work. To paint an apple that looked like an apple, or a landscape that looked like a landscape, was not enough. Already he had begun to try to make line and colour express certain things that ordinary language could not (or very often could not) easily express—a certain feeling, certain imaginations, a question—things that lie sometimes within the realm, if only relatively so, of pure beauty, or sometimes are simply the substance of life's dilemmas.

Le Moulin-Vert: taking flight

His paintings of 1950, though a first attempt made on arriving in France, were ample evidence that he had already taken flight.

Certainly it was his talent that propelled him upwards: his painting talent was his chief asset, and on top of that a talent in living and getting along with people.

These were qualities it was impossible to counterfeit. His lively spirit (which his white hairs in no way diminish), that mellow air with which he still talks, all suggest the charm he must have exerted three decades or more ago. In Chungking he had become acquainted with Vadime Elisseeff, French cultural attaché in China at that time. When Elisseeff returned to Paris in 1945 to take up the post of curator of oriental art at the Musée Cernuschi, he took with him twenty paintings by Zao and displayed them in the museum as Zao's début in France. Zao arrived in Paris on 1 April 1948, just in time for the postwar period when painters of distinction from all over western Europe were flocking to Paris. Twenty or thirty of these artists—Nicolas de Staël, Pierre Soulages, Roberto Sebastian Matta, Georges Mathieu, Hans Hartung, Alberto Giacometti, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Sam Francis, and others, met regularly, mostly at the Galerie Nina Dausset on the Rue du Dragon. Zao soon made friends with them, and was taken seriously. He went to the Grande Chaumière (the oldest atelier in Paris) to practise drawing the human body, and very soon felt himself quite at home in the art atmosphere of Paris. In less than a year, and though he was still hardly able to speak French, he won the class prize for drawing. In May 1949, having settled in Paris for barely a year, Zao held his first show. The preface of the catalogue was contributed by Bernard Dorival, curator of the Musée National Moderne, who evoked the special quality of Zao Wou-ki's art:

Chinese in their essence, modern and French in some of their aspects, the pictures of Zao Wou-ki succeed in creating a most enjoyable synthesis.

This statement is still relevant today.

It all began in the Rue du Moulin-Vert in Montparnasse, favourite haunt of Parisian writers and artists, where Zao had his first studio and home. A famous neighbour was Giacometti, from whose philosophical vision emerged elongated, emaciated figures capturing the essence of humanity. On the second anniversary of Zao's arrival in Paris, fortune knocked on the door—the famous poet Henri Michaux brought an influential gallery owner, Pierre Loeb, to see him and at one stroke Loeb bought twelve of Zao's paintings. The connection continued for eight years, through which Zao's works found a steady market in western Europe. Michaux also collaborated with Zao, publishing his own poetry and Zao's prints together in book form, each to the other's benefit. In the following two decades Zao continued to work with poets and writers, making prints to accompany Harry Roskolenko's texts, Arthur Rimbaud's poetry, André Malraux's writings and the works of many others. Malraux, who was France's Minister of Culture for many years in the 1960s, made truly outstanding contributions to the arts and letters of Europe, and also did much to boost the livelihood of writers and painters in Paris. Artists were granted low rents for residences and studios and free use of government cultural facilities. The book which Malraux and Zao co-authored, *La Tentation de l'Occident*, discussed the influences, especially the harmful influences, exerted by modern western culture on traditional Chinese and French culture. It showed Malraux's great penetration and admiration for the cultural tradition of China, and was also a factor, by no means insignificant, in Zao's swift rise to success.

For Zao, whose initiation into western painting had begun with closely observed reproductions, the works of Paul Klee became a great attraction as early as 1950, although to be exact his private devotion to Klee dated from 1951, when he had the opportunity to view Klee's paintings closely for the first time in the museums in Switzerland. Klee's use of linear symbols (which so enriched and condensed the meaning of painting) stimulated Zao to try the use of traditional Chinese symbols (written characters) in his own art. It was a new departure that coincided with some of Zao's own chief preoccupations; on the one hand, having been for so many years steeped in Chinese calligraphy, he could now re-examine the Han steles, the oracle-bone script, ancient bronze and stone inscriptions with renewed interest; and on the other hand, Klee's merging of eastern and western elements pointed Zao to an *avant-garde* direction for art in the West.

Even today Zao Wou-ki says, "My art developed very naturally and very logically. From Klee to my present style—don't you see how easy it is to comprehend?"

Yes, the earliest painting included in the Grand Palais retrospective already shows traces of Klee's influence. The teenager's ostentation has been abandoned, and unpretentious brushwork and unadorned clarity prevail. This was in line with the good old tradition of Chinese landscape painting which Zao could not erase from his memory entirely. He felt that working on his paintings (though not every one of them) was an enjoyment, and this, at least, was very much a Chinese *litteratus* painter's attitude.

In the early 1950s, Zao became keenly interested in the calligraphy found on prehistoric Chinese oracle-bones, and in the bronze and stone inscriptions. It was no coincidence that his painting style should change so dramatically. The canvas *Wind* (painted in 1954, now in the artist's own collection), a work of historical significance, is a vertical rectangle that suggests the big centre-piece hung on a Chinese wall, while the two rows of oracle-bone writing (are they bird script or tiger script?) and the dark sombre purple remind the viewer that he could well be looking at an ancient stele or reading the fragments of a message excavated from the Yin Ruins. But this is no ordinary, cold lifeless stone, for in its purplish-red hue a spiritual light flickers, bespeaking the scriptless (or scripted?) mystery of a stone plaque's Heaven-ordained message. Zao's use of symbols resembling ancient writing was complementary to his print-maker's style, producing an art which western viewers found especially interesting. As Alain Jouffroy wrote for the 1955 exhibition of Zao's lithographs and engravings in Cincinnati's Museum of Fine Arts, "The work of Zao Wou-ki shows us clearly how the Chinese vision of the universe, in which the blurred and far-off reflects the spirit of contemplation rather than the thing contemplated, has become a modern, universal vision. And men as different as Paul Klee, Mark Tobey or Henri Michaux have likewise had recourse to it." Indeed, calligraphic symbols were as much of a revelation to Zao as ancient Spanish grotto symbols were to Juan Miró.

Probing these depths tended to lead towards greater and greater mysticism. For two years (1953-1954) Zao's paintings found no buyers, because nobody understood them.

A *cul-de-sac* necessitates change—though the path Zao had taken was not purely a *cul-de-sac*.

Jonquoy: soaring

From Edgar Varèse, composer and Zao's great friend, Zao acquired a taste for traditional music as well as electronic music. A new penetration into the mysterious beauty of Nature was on its way—the analysis of sound into its basic elements by science and not via the usual musical instruments, and then the synchronization of these elements into musical pieces. Zao first met Varèse in 1955 and the two men developed a deep friendship which ended only with Varèse's death in 1964. In that decade each exerted great influence on the work of the other. The script-like symbols in Zao's paintings became larger and larger and wilder and wilder (as can be seen in a work done in October 1955, now in the Sherwin collection in New York), and then grew faint, misty 朦朧, even invisible (as in *My Country* and several other works from 1957). In *My Country*, a warm lyrical piece that expresses an exile's nostalgia for home, a shape roughly resembling the map of China occupies the entire canvas. In the upper area (which corresponds to the Shaanxi/Gansu region?) loom several heavy black forms which vaguely (but not necessarily) resemble Chinese written characters. Dense clouds hang over the north-western corner, and similar clouds, only lighter, cover eastern China and the lower Yangtze. In China sufferings were plenty. Accompanying his parents or his school, Zao had moved from place to place, and in his mind's eye his country was always engulfed in the flames of battle. Throughout that wide land gunsmoke and turmoil always prevailed, yet there were quiet places nonetheless, the patches of bright yellow and orange red shown on the painting.

Open-hearted blissful lyricism was still relatively rare in his works, and was more often outweighed by powerful pangs of emotion. Even when he painted lovely floral visions of his homeland Zao often let loose nightmarish forms on his canvases. In *Night is Stirring* (1956, title given by Michaux) the images are extremely powerful: dark shadows hang from the upper part of the painting like giant trees, their branches suddenly ablaze when they reach the area in the centre, while dark blues and blacks press hard towards the centre, the patches of light always accompanied by looming shadows. The heavy, rough-hewn symbols are back again, most prominently in the 1957 painting titled *The Two of Us*, now in Harvard's Fogg Museum. On this painting, which is of great historical significance, two half-faded Chinese characters "wu ji" 無極 (infinite)* are discernible on the right, while the shape of what appear to be two other characters looms on the left, perhaps indicating the name of the artist's wife. Zao and his wife went through an emotional crisis that year, and their works produced during that period, which was also one of great creativity, bore the obvious mark of such a crisis. In *Tempest* (painted 1957, now in the Guggenheim Museum, New York), a black beast charges madly into the canvas from upper left and is stopped dead by torrid flames, while dark clouds, pregnant with faint dark shadows (are these symbols?), close in on all four sides. In another work, completed in 1956 and now in the Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, *Mont Riven* is a pure mountain of fire in whose blazing flames innumerable tiny forms (symbols again?) dance and leap. When the fire in the artist's heart was too strong for him to bear he had to desert his home, leave Paris, and re-

*Wou-ki in the French EFEO romanization —tr.

visit America. In that country he met many painters and made friends with Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, Guston Philip, Adolph Gottlieb and Hans Hoffman. The uninhibited daring of these artists, verging on self-indulgence, gave him a new stimulus. In 1957 he produced a large work (97 by 221 cm.) in his younger brother's residence (the painting is now in the Detroit Institute of Art's collection), in which the tension, so obvious in *Tempest*, has become greatly toned down, although the confrontation of red and black pulling across a barrier of rough-hewn symbols is still quite visible.

The profusion of works produced in these last years of the 1950s is remarkable in various ways. The works have one thing in common—each canvas, no matter how dim and depressing its colour scheme, invariably contains a patch of pearly-white light. This is something more than a mere light-and-dark contrast; it is the re-emergence of "the void", that crucial element in Chinese painting. "The void" is far from being total emptiness, for it embraces all essence and all origins not plainly perceivable by man—it is the void, the state of nothingness, of Daoist philosophy. To critics in the European tradition this was highly enlightening. In F. Elgar's words, that light was the light of the east, or the light of the west shining in an eastern sky.

After having spent over a year travelling, first visiting the United States, moving from the east coast to the west coast, then going on to Hawaii, to Hong Kong where he met and married his second wife, then returning to Paris via the Middle East, Zao settled down again and moved his home to the Rue Jonquoy. This was a beautiful place which his architect and designer friends helped to create, with garden and fish pond, where the artist could work to his heart's content. His paintings became ever larger and larger. He says he never does rough sketches, never makes small paintings to magnify upon. One painting is one painting. A large painting sometimes requires to be laid on the floor as he works on it, and then he can really "walk into it", as it were. A small painting has to stay on an easel and the painter faces it, stands opposite it, never enters it; the same applies to the viewer of small paintings. Zao wants his viewers to "walk into" his paintings, and on this point he is close to Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko.

A mounting sensitivity as well as a gradual suppression of the narrative element in his art showed that Zao was moving in the direction of pure painting. Except for a few pieces that were given names primarily to commemorate some worthy event, most of his works done after 1957 are untitled—the art is there for the viewer to appreciate. Sometimes even a poet's lines seemed redundant. Some works were executed very slowly, retouched again and again, the final version appearing only after ten years had passed (the *Mont Riven* mentioned above was an example). But there were others that he completed at one sweep overnight, like *6-1-60*, now in a private collection in Paris, painted on 6 January 1960. The heart of this picture is a spread of gleaming white, and darkness surrounds it on all four sides; shadows, like those of winging vultures, appear in and out between the light and the dark, while a touch of blue makes itself visible behind the white light and conjures up dawn on the sea. It is perhaps inappropriate to describe these works of the artist in terms of natural and concrete images. Perhaps we should only say that each work of this period has a central element acting as the focus of the painting, and that there

is always the presence of a void, pregnant with spiritual meaning, which palpitates incessantly as if performing the function of the pulsating heart.

But why is it wrong to speak of Zao's art in terms of natural images? In 1961 he himself confessed that in Paris he had rediscovered China. "Certainly Paris exerted a decisive influence on me in my artistic formation, but as I developed into maturity in Paris I also gradually rediscovered China." His paintings make the principle of his pictorial construction quite clear—the artist's view of the universe is elucidated by a centrifugal movement that extends from centre to the four sides in varying modes and patterns while the principle remains unchanged. The attraction and significance of a painting is not confined by its frame, but extends into the remote and unseeable distance—or, to put it in an old Chinese way, into the realm of the imagination, inaccessible even to the brush. In fact, these canvases bear obvious landscape traces. *18-1-63*, a work painted in 1963 for Michaux, is nothing other than gleaming white waves on a beach, waves whose presence echoes a trail of white clouds in the sky, only that sky looks like a summer night sky laden with rain clouds. Both *7-6-63* and *31-1-63* are seascapes, while *18-2-63* is a picture of meadows in early spring. . . . The year 1963 marked the artist's return to Nature. In his own words: "Of course our paintings manifest Nature's phenomena, for life is encaged in concrete forms. Strictly speaking, no form is ever abstract, and any painting that depends on forms to convey thoughts and feelings is no abstract painting."

Storm, Calm, Nature

The happy peaceful days of the early 1960s brought many paintings characterized by a serene beauty. But the storm was destined to return. *29-9-64* shows clouds scurrying across the blue sky, signalling the onset of the storm. *29-1-64* shows a giant tree making its protest to an evening sky baked red by the setting sun. In the two years that followed the paintings were quieter. In *13-2-67* the sea is boiling again, and the leaping form (a dragon?) on the right hurls itself towards the blinding white light; the light surges forward, and as it does so, so does the darkening storm on the left; thunder and lightning illuminate a crag in the very moment of disintegration. Those were days in which the artist's emotions were on trial, for beginning from 1964 his wife had been ailing, her health sometimes seeming to improve but gradually worsening, until in March 1972 she died. During the periods when she was seriously ill Zao could not bring himself to plan any large-scale oil painting, and only dabbled with Chinese water-and-ink, which resulted in a number of charming works in the Chinese ink-splash landscape tradition, somewhat resembling the impromptu pieces of Ba Da Shanren 八大山人 and Shi Tao 石涛. These he continued to execute very occasionally up to 1979. Half a year after his wife's death, in a big painting painted in memory of her (200 by 525 cm., now in the Musée National d'Art Moderne), he returned to the basic tones of yellow and brown which he was so fond of in his early period. The red in the upper-left corner and the black in the upper-right are life and death at loggerheads with one another; a few dark patches in the centre and below are also thrown in, in antagonistic positions. All in all it suggests a union and a confrontation, and finally, a burial in the earth of all the joys and woes of this encounter. From that point on Zao's paintings became

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OIL, July 9, 1964
From the collection of Mrs. Ruth P. Smith, N.Y.
Courtesy of Kootz Gallery, N.Y.

Hsu Kai-yu

Professor Kai-yu Hsu, who died tragically in the fierce storms that struck Northern California in January 1982, is remembered by his colleagues, students, and friends as a man of many talents and interests. While art, classical scholarship, and pedagogy occupied much of his thoughts and time during his two and a half decades at San Francisco State University, his most tangible and lasting professional contributions may well have been in the area of modern Chinese literature.

*Kai-yu began his work in modern literature with his Ph.D. dissertation at Stanford University (1959) on the poet Wen Yiduo, who was Hsu's mentor at the National Southwest Associate University in Kunming. In 1980, Wen I-to, a revised and expanded version of this work, was published in the Twayne World Authors Series (G. K. Hall), the last book to bear Kai-yu's name as author. In the intervening two decades, Kai-yu's contributions to modern and contemporary Chinese literature—including research, translation, personal contacts and sponsorship—reflected his interests, talents, and energy level. In addition to publishing many essays and articles in English and Chinese, attending conferences all over the world, and entertaining writers from the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, Kai-yu authored three important books in the field of modern Chinese literature: *Twentieth Century Chinese Poetry: An Anthology* (Doubleday, 1963; Cornell, 1970), *The Chinese Literary Scene* (Vintage, 1975), and *Literature of the People's Republic of China* (Indiana, 1980). These works, which continue to be read, used, and enjoyed today, serve to remind us of Kai-yu Hsu's dedication to Chinese belles lettres and to the men and women whose writing, research, and translating he so admired.*

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even more liberated in spirit. Strong, rich colours intruded boldly into the quiet calm of his canvases—for calm these paintings still are, their pictorial design bearing still the ideas of landscape, with black occupying crucial points and upholding designs as daring as his ink-splash impromptu pieces (such as 13-9-73 etc.). The intrusion of rich colours brings along a strong breath of life, and yet so artfully are these colours thrown in that the overall effect is by no means jarring or disruptive.

Occasionally there re-appeared strong pangs of emotion and more agitated convulsions. More than a year after the death of his second wife, Zao painted 1-10-73 which has a pitch black upper rim suggestive of a bank of dark clouds, below which peers a little dark blue—it is a picture of a storm-ridden sky. The heavy black symbols, together with the semi-spherical dark reddish-brown shape haunting the lower region, make it quite impossible for the gleaming white patch in the centre to strike any balance between light and shade, no matter how desperately it tries. And even the intrusion of an almost colourless area, indicating the void with its spiritual significance, cannot temper the uneasiness which the entire pictorial design conjures up. *The Two of Us Again* (10-3-74, 280 by 400 cm., a large painting in the artist's own collection), has a very delicate pictorial design, the soaring black form in the upper-right corner balanced by the crouching black form in the lower-left, mesh-like black threads between them seeming to explain their close and yet remote relationship. The heat of the red and the quiet of the dark subdued red reflect certain conditions of the heart. The pictorial design is rendered complete by white areas in the background (the void in which the spirit flows) linking the various elements together, while pale greens, pale reds and light yellows sprinkled here and there lighten up the whole tone. But all in all it is a violent sight.

During these last two or three years Zao has been painting mainly quiet pictures, a representative work being 21-4-80. The mossy stones that lie under the crag by the waterside, the exuberant life on the crag, the faint hills and remote streams in the upper-right, and, what is more, that thin thread of orange-red and dark purple on the extreme left edge, which adds so much to the painting's charm—all that charm only comes through fully in the original. Another 1980 work, the large triptych hanging on the main wall of the first floor of the Grand Palais, has patches of yellowish-green that warm up the entire canvas (200 by 525 cm.), and only one relatively heavy black form looms in the lower-left corner, the rest of the black having all thinned out, as if it were the substance of smoke, or mist, or dream.

Colour and light

The opening ceremony on 12 June was divided into two sessions. The morning was reserved for guests invited in a more or less official capacity—V.I.P.'s from the Ministry of Culture, and Parisian celebrities, while artists and professionals came mainly in the afternoon. At the opening ceremony I met Zhu Dequn 朱德羣, Chen Jianzhong 陳建中, Peng Wanchi 彭萬擘 and other painters, and of course Xiong Bingming 熊秉明 was there. In a suit of light blue, with a dark blue tie, Zao moved handsomely among his guests, and we exchanged greetings. For a really good talk with him I had to wait until the morning of 25 June, when I paid him a visit at his residence on the Rue Jonquoy. The small courtyard on to which the main entrance opens justly deserves the reputation it has gained for its décor—it contains a stone

sculpture by Zao's late wife, and under a tree a small work by Henry Moore beckons to the guests. The shelves in the sitting-room were all lined with books, and vases of flowers, altogether eight of them, decorated the tables, window-ledges and staircase entrance. Zao's studio is located upstairs in the house we first entered. It has only a skylight and a window opening on to the courtyard. When Zao paints he needs to be alone. When Paris seems too noisy for him he drives for an hour and a half to another studio which he owns in the country. When he is not happy with a work in progress he turns it over and lets it stand with its face to the wall, leaving it there until his interest in it revives. Because of this some old works have had to wait several years before they are completed. He does not have the habit of inviting friends to comment on his paintings, nor does he ask them for suggestions if he gets stuck. He would rather confront the canvas alone and conceive his own solution. It is not a question of pride. He does so simply because to him artistic creation is a lonely struggle, and no one else can contribute to it. Sometimes art critics deliberately contradict him, because they want to avoid his influence; at other times they claim to find ideas in his paintings that have never entered the artist's mind. The only comment he will make on the Daoist idea of void and spirit is: "I take up my brush and paint. I paint and paint, and a painting is born. Prior to that I have no concrete or predetermined plan."

"And so your art is a natural flow, as in the natural flow of the Dao, is it not?" asked Xiong Bingming. "What do my thoughts have to do with Daoism or Confucianism? My thoughts are only engaged with the principle of void and substance on the surface of my canvas. It was you who helped me by giving it its Daoist interpretation after that long talk we had so many years ago."

Zao seems a sincerely modest man, although his is not the kind of false modesty that prevents him from expressing confidence in his own achievement. He is not concerned whether his paintings are called eastern or western, just as he knows full well that although he holds a French passport he is ultimately Chinese. All this is true and not to be debated. But he admits that what the French poet Henri Michaux, the writer Jean Leymarie and the Chinese scholar Cheng Baoyi say about his art makes a lot of sense. Cheng Baoyi has said that for Zao the artist, apart from technical experimentation and experiential exploration, the ultimate goal, so persistently pursued, has always been the authentic vision of the Spirit, for which his brush has opened up new vistas. To look at his paintings is for us to experience again the pure expression of our own personal mystery.

For Henri Michaux, Zao's art, while it is already divorced from form, is still organically linked to the flesh and bones of Nature. It is an art neither weird nor strange. The warm, flowing colours are no longer colours; they have been transformed into light, radiating, torrential light. R. Caillois said that Zao has transformed light into fire, fire into reflections of light, reflections of light into transparency, and finally, transparency into the crystallization of shimmering light. As for the artist himself, he has said he has no preference for any colour in particular. Each colour is a radiation of energy. Colours fill life in space, and at the same time colours describe light in its distribution.

And so it is perhaps in Zao's understanding and treatment of colour that we are given to see a corner of that secret mystery that is the artist's.