

PRESS RELEASE



Eloge de la lumière – In Praise of Light Pierre Soulages – Tanabe Chikuunsai IV

17 November 2021 - 27 March 2022

“But every day, perhaps, the torn fishnet
can be mended, stitch by stitch,
and this would be, in the higher space,
like sewing back up the night, star by star. . .”
Philippe Jaccottet, *Pensées sous les nuages*, Gallimard, 1983
(Translated by John Taylor)

With its new exhibition, the Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art, pays tribute to Pierre Soulages and Japan, whose masterpieces resonate with the museum's objects and with the bamboo works by Tanabe Chikuunsai IV, fourth representative of a line of exceptional basket makers.

Tenmoku bowls with iridescent reflections, “mirror black” porcelains, and lacquer objects with shimmering surfaces, worked in depth: in capturing the light cast by the night, certain works reveal and exalt the colours of the shadows.

It is in the wake of this chiaroscuro heritage that the collections of the Baur Foundation, rich in rare pearls, chose to converse with some of the masterpieces by the painter of “lustrous blacks”, Pierre Soulages. The affinities that his art has cultivated with the “uncanny silence” and “colours of darkness” associated with Japanese aesthetics, celebrated by Junichirō Tanizaki (1886-1965), in his essay *In Praise of Shadows*, though purely contingent, are no less apparent. The Japanese themselves were not mistaken; very early on they understood the serious and timeless poetry of the Aveyron artist's work. Following each step of his career since the presentation of one of his paintings at the first May Salon in Tokyo in 1951, they have been drawn to his art's chromatic contrasts, stripped of all sentimentality and figuration, to its imposing and calm graphic phrasing, and to the materials conceived and fashioned as so many supports for light. Some discern a resemblance to Far Eastern calligraphy in the lines of the “sign forms” heightened with walnut stain from the early days of the painter's career; for others, the variegated thicknesses of the “beyond blacks” suggest the depth of *makie-e* lacquers, paintings sprinkled with light. The aim of this exhibition is to offer another encounter with the Land of the Rising Sun, this time originating in the erected lines,

sound and light that pierce the forests of bamboo; the irregular “abstract sculpture” formed, in Pierre Soulages’ opinion, by the “writing of the branches in space”, is responded to by the stems and knots of the bamboo modelled in chiaroscuro by an exceptional artist who has today won international renown, Tanabe Chikuunsai IV. The heir to ancestral traditions and techniques, and the fourth representative of a prestigious line of basket makers, he works with the plant world with a new, sculptural, and luminous perspective.

Curator: Laure Schwartz-Arenales, director of the Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art

Guest curator: Philippe Boudin, director of Galerie Mingei, Paris

Scenography: Nicole Gérard with the assistance of Corinne Racaud and César Preda

Administration and coordination: Audrey Jouany Deroire

A SPACE OF QUESTIONING AND MEDITATION

“A work is given life by the way we view it. It is not limited to what it is, nor to the person who produced it; it is also constituted by the person who is looking at it. My painting is a space of questioning and meditation in which the meanings we lend it may be made and unmade”.

Pierre Soulages, 2002

“It is an immense and exceptional honour for me to present my work alongside the art of Pierre Soulages in the setting of the Far Eastern collections of the Baur Foundation. During the 1970s, when I was born, he began to produce a series of works in which the colour “black” springs to life. While black remains black, the colour does not always create the same impression and expands like an infinite universe. The blackness and the light that enter his works lead us out of this world and into another, spiritual one.

Bamboo has knots (*yo 節*) that are seen as boundaries between different worlds (*yo* also refers to the character for “world” 世). The space between the knots represents the eternal world, distinct from the one that we know. In other words, bamboo is a material that mediates between our life here below and other worlds. As a result, most of the titles of my sculptures evoke the notion of “connection” and “infinity”. Human desires, chaos, and beauty are united by a certain form of energy; my work tends to represent a world in which people are linked with both one another and nature.

I split the bamboo and, using a small knife, I carefully extract the width and thickness I need to make the strips I use (*take-higo 竹籤*). I then weave the bamboo to express the infinite connections of this world. When I do so, I am in a meditative state, totally absorbed in the creative process. I feel I am able to move from our world to a spiritual one, a place where bamboo and my heart are one.

Pierre Soulages appropriates black with intensity, he perceives its perspectives, textures, and expressions, never straying from the colour. He allows the black to emerge from the darkness and step into the light of day. In doing so, he has found a counterpart to the chaos of black by revealing all of its facets. In this life, our thought seems to have meaning, and yet what we think we know does not make sense. I find this same captivating paradox in Pierre Soulages’ representations of black”.

Tanabe Chikuunsai IV, 2021

PIERRE SOULAGES, PAINTER OF “LUSTROUS BLACKS”

OF LIGHT AND PORCELAIN

THE VASE OF SOULAGES OR SÈVRES IN THE RISING SUN

In 1999, Pierre Soulages was invited by President Jacques Chirac to design a porcelain vase produced in the workshops of the Manufacture nationale de Sèvres. Presented to the *Nihon Sumō Kyōkai* association, this vase is awarded as a trophy to the winner of the annual sumo tournament that was held in Nagoya until 2007. Having chosen a sober, classic form that had been designed in 1950 by Maurice Gensoli, Soulages refined it further by eliminating the lip and the mouldings of the foot and added a cover.

Formed by trimming, the fine grooves in a semi-matt black enamel, specially developed by the Manufacture, offered Soulages the unique opportunity to sculpt light in three dimensions, as a continuation of his pictorial research. But the light is also, and above all, acted upon by the interior of the vase – lined with a layer of 400 grams of 24-carat fine gold – by virtue of the two vertical, lateral openings. The half-disk of the cover allows rays of light to enter while the lateral disk permits them to be reflected, in accordance with the artist’s wish: “Usually, a vase is empty and dark. I wanted mine to contain light” (interview with Matthieu Séguéla, reported by Gilbert Dupuis, 2017).

To harmonise with the Japanese destination of the object, this circular shape almost literally suggests the red disk that symbolises the rising sun on the Japanese flag, and, in doing so, the legend of the goddess Amaterasu. Also discernible is a reminder of the *dohyō*, sumo’s sacred circle, a ring that the wrestlers may not cross. Or, on a more personal level, a subtle allusion to the Latin root of the artist's name: *sol agens*, or “acting sun”, an integral part of all Soulages’ work.

Fabienne Fravalo

Conservator of the decorative arts collection, Fondation Gandur pour l’Art, Geneva

THE TOOLS AND MATERIALS OF THE LIGHT

“Walnut stain has a dark, warm tone, a sort of elemental force that I like. It allows for natural transparencies and opacities that give a pleasing effect”.

Pierre Soulages

“Although he has always clearly differentiated between the work of the craftsman and that of the painter, the latter complementing the former through his own research and the intercession of chance, Soulages loves materials, tools and the involvement of the hand. He was always fond of the dark effects created by walnut stain, which catches the light while also enhancing it. He came across it in the cabinetmaker's shop on Rue Combarel (in Rodez), the craftsmen’s street where his father had his workshop. He

remembers having used it to stain a wooden nail box he made himself. He described his eagerness to paint in 1947, in his studio in Courbevoie, with this material and housepainter's brushes. He prepared the stain in large jars to give it body. Walnut stain ready to be spread on the blank paper, to be lightened by passing a blade across it. He permanently rejected the traditional tools of easel painters, bristle brushes, slender paintbrushes and tubes of paint; when painting, what he sought was thickness that he could tame, power and immediacy”.

Benoît Decron, Director of the Musée Soulages, Rodez, (Les Cahiers Soulages 02, 2018)

“THE WRITING OF THE BRANCHES IN SPACE” THE AVEYRON, SÈTE AND JAPAN...

When questioned about the start of his artistic career, Pierre Soulages – born in Rodez in 1919 – invariably refers to the silhouettes of the bare trees in the winter countryside of his childhood:

“Like Monsieur Jourdain and prose, I, without knowing it, had created abstract painting with my trees. What interested me was the writing of the branches in space, the way in which the sky became brighter between the black branches”.
Pierre Soulages, 1961

Beyond the representation of a tree, for Soulages the subject of the painting was an “abstract sculpture”, a chiaroscuro condensation of a botanical composition. Present in his early works, figurative and descriptive signs would be completely eliminated by the painter and restored in a luminous, abstract poetry. The emotion crystallised with regard to this “writing of the branches in space” nonetheless highlights the heightened awareness of the artist of the constituents of the landscape.

Pierre Soulages described in the following terms his discovery as a youth of the Mediterranean shores from the window of a train:

“Before me stretched a sort of pool of molten metal, a beautiful expanse lit by the moon: it was the Thau lagoon. I made out the silhouette of Mont Saint-Clair with the sea as the only line. I thought about Van Gogh’s words on his arrival in Arles: “It’s as beautiful as Japan”. And for me, this vision of Sète was my Japan. Deep down I decided that I would return there someday”. (Conversation with Matthieu Séguéla, “Pierre Soulages : Montpellier, c’était l’exotisme”, 1994)

It is therefore easy to imagine the intensity of his expectations, when, in January 1958, a year after being awarded the Grand Prize at the Tokyo Art Biennale, he first set foot on the archipelago. “When I saw Ryōan-ji and Kinkaku-ji in Kyoto”, he recounts, “that brought back childhood memories for me”. In his contemplation of these venerable temples, and the nature and gardens of a Kyoto winter, the painter of interiority and light recognised a part of his roots, of a childhood marked by his first drawings of silent

trees, stripped of their leaves, and the amazement he felt when visiting the Abbey of Sainte-Foy in Conques.

Laure Schwartz-Arenales

UNVEILINGS OF THE MATTER AND THE “COLOURS OF THE REVERSE”

Although each one of Pierre Soulages paintings always marks the end of a personal, unpredictable journey of listening to materials and their reactions, certain processes linked to the great tradition of Japanese lacquers can be discerned in the effects of these “chromatic unveilings”. Thus, Soulages’ “tearing” or “scraping”, in which the artist digs with a knife in the fresh paint to allow a colour previously covered with black to reappear, may be compared with the virtuoso gesture of the master lacquerer in the technique of *togidashi maki-e*, literally “revealed by polishing”. In this technique, once decorative patterns have been covered with a layer of lacquer – generally black – of the same colour as the ground, the craftsman long and delicately rubs the surface until the underlying ornamentation appears. An art founded on patience, this practice is above all a form of expertise rooted in a secular history very distant from the painter of Rodez, but the resulting brilliance, content and movement also says a great deal about the modes of appreciation of “these lustrous blacks” in Japanese aesthetics.

More generally, it seems that the importance of the reverse, *ura* (the hidden, secret, intimate dimension of things, compared to the open, exposed aspect, *omote*), which permeates all Japanese culture, is probably not extraneous to this country’s view of Pierre Soulages’ works. One of the most fascinating and “exotic” characteristics of the history of Japanese painting is the pictorial technique known as *ura-zaishiki* (the colours of the reverse): specific to the golden age of Buddhist painting in particular, with the purpose of modulating the effects of the chromatic range, it consists in applying certain colours to the back of the silk support: applied in layers of varying thickness, these pigments, which are sometimes mixed with metallic powders, either diminish or increase the relief, intensity and shine of the motifs painted on the front side of the silk. As suggested by the contemporary master of *nihonga*, Masaaki Miyasako, by its phonetics the character 裏 *ura* in the *ura-zaishiki* technique may long ago also have referred to the ideogram of the “heart” or “thought” (心 *ura*), invisible and vibrating within; and it is this that gives, as in the work of Pierre Soulages, a spiritual interiority to these hidden colours whose presence and luminosity work together, combine and reveal themselves, from the bottom or the back, towards the surface, through the fusion of the matter.

Laure Schwartz-Arenales

TANABE CHIKUUNSAI IV, MASTER OF BLACK BAMBOO

LUMINOUS CORRESPONDENCES

Everyone in Japan knows the legend of the bamboo cutter and his encounter in the mists of the early morning with the moon princess, Kaguya, a tiny presence the size of three thumbs, nestled and radiant in a bamboo cane. In this tale, which has been told since the 10th century (*Taketori monogatari* 竹取物語), the old man is attracted by the moonlight given off by the bamboo plant, thus forever binding bamboo to the birth and journey between the earth and heavens of the astral girl “with the golden hair”. Luminescent and musical, when the wind passes in waves through its tall stems, bamboo is also the muse and the symbol of literati painters; a “friend of winter”, virtuous, resistant to the unrelenting cold, it also blends with the line and spirit of the brush. It is from there, from this spiritual background that is distinctive to it, and which infuses all the fields of Japanese aesthetics, that perhaps certain affinities stem between the beyond-blacks and “solar” vase of Pierre Soulages and the shimmering baskets and “connected” installations of Tanabe Chikuunsai IV.

Visually, the journey is indeed an easy one, whether it is related to painting, lithography, weaving, trimming, or lacquer, between the enjambments of black lines, the thick brushstrokes, and the knots (*yo*), the strips (*higo*), or by means of the dark, brown, chromatic liaisons crossed by coloured and light-filled lacunae common to the works brought together in this exhibition.

Although they originate from radically different cultural histories, materials, and artistic registers, the works presented at the Baur Foundation display real convergences in their approach to darkness and light. When the light hits Tanabe’s works, they take on different expressions, some reflective, some sinking into blackness. The light passing through the gaps between the bamboo pieces moreover creates geometric shadows, the shapes of which mutate as the light source moves. The lacquer becomes incrementally more transparent when exposed to ultraviolet light, so that its colour also alters over time.

Shinya Maezaki, Associate Professor, Kyoto Women's University (extract from the exhibition catalogue).

Laure Schwartz-Arenales

THE ART OF BAMBOO IN JAPAN

Worked since prehistory by the hands of craftsmen, bamboo is closely associated with *chadō* and *senchadō*, the famous “Ways of Tea”. The Shōsō-in, the imperial treasure house in Tōdai-ji temple in Nara, is home to wickerwork pieces from the 8th and 9th centuries that were made to hold floral compositions in Buddhist temples.

Among the precious tea-related goods (*karamono*) imported from China during the Kamakura (1186–1333) and Muromachi (1333–1573) periods were many objects of great elegance made from bamboo. However, the masters of *chadō*, including Sen-no-Rikyū (1522–1591), the founder of the rustic *wabi* style, gradually turned away from them in favour of humbler objects they often created themselves.

This period of intense creativity was followed, beginning in the middle of the Edo period (1603–1868), by an unprecedented infatuation with infused *sencha* tea and an admiration for the Chinese culture of the literati, whose adherents could be found in the influential circles of Kansai region. Several basket weavers of refined taste, the *kagoshi*, were sponsored by wealthy merchants and cultured artists, and their baskets with handles made for use in *ikebana* flower arrangement met with great success. Some of these “artist-craftsmen”, such as Tanabe Chikuunsai I (1877–1937), were the pioneers of an art form that was transmitted from master to disciple. During the first quarter of the 20th century, this recognition gave rise to an artistic movement that remains active today.

The pioneers of this art were succeeded by generations of artists who strayed from tradition and functionalism and attained a high level of abstraction and secured their place in contemporary artistic creation. Perpetuating the tea and *ikebana* aesthetic, their complex pieces are sculptures in pure or extravagant forms in which different kinds of bamboo, rattan, wisteria roots, and even metal materials interact. This is the case in the work of Tanabe Takeo, born in Osaka in 1973. Having practised the techniques of his ancestors from a very young age, in 2017, three years before the death of his father Chikuunsai III, he took the name of his lineage: *Chikuunsai* means “cloud of bamboo” (竹雲齋). Drawing on this extraordinary heritage, and in constant harmony with the plant’s life cycle, the basket maker never ceases to challenge its possibilities. A virtuoso in this use of this vegetal material, and a sculptor of light, today he is winning renown worldwide as one of the leading Japanese artists of his generation.

Philippe Boudin and Laure Schwartz-Arenales

WEAVING AND SCULPTING THE BAMBOO

“Three years to split bamboo, eight years to weave it”: it takes three years to learn how to prepare bamboo and eight years to learn how to weave it into the desired shape, and for both hands to be completely imbued with the tradition. It is this repetition of the process by many artists that has kept the craft alive and resulted in the skills it requires being handed down for 150 years. Beyond formal evolutions, the basic techniques and tools have remained much the same. Tanabe uses machetes and small knives to chop bamboo, tools handed down from his great-grandfather. There is the use of water in weaving, of fire in the bending, and of the two hands to render the impossible possible.

There are several types of bamboo that Tanabe uses for his work, including Japanese timber bamboo (*madake* 真竹), black bamboo (*kurochiku* 黒竹), tiger bamboo (*torachiku* or *torafudake* 虎斑竹) which grows only on the island of Shikoku, but also bamboos exposed to hearth smoke over several decades or centuries to obtain a beautiful brown shiny patina (smoked bamboo: *susudake* 煤竹). Among them, the “phoenix tail” bamboo (*hōbichiku* 鳳尾竹) is particularly rare and valuable. Cut down in winter, the bamboo is then heated to remove the excess oil. Once the bamboo is dry, and the highest quality pieces have been selected with great care, it is split into strips (*higo*) in accordance with the dimensions required. After careful planning, weaving, assembling, and tying, the artist completes the desired form. At this stage, some works are already complete, but Tanabe finishes most of his works with lacquer to give them a characteristic shiny black or dark brown finish.

Tanabe’s most famous and recent creations are presented in this exhibition: *Mononofu*, “Samurai Spirit”, whose powerful and refined lines suggest a warrior in armour, and “Daruma” (named after one of the distinguished patriarchs of Zen Buddhism), which won the first *Mingei Bamboo Prize*. “Daruma” is made from a split form of bamboo (*kuchiku* 朽竹), which is especially appreciated for the expressiveness of its strange, distorted forms. Used by Tanabe for the handles of his baskets in particular, *kuchiku* gives his work strong originality while deeply linking it with nature and the passage of time. Finally, mention should be made of the pure black or striped works, some of which are monumental and feature openwork, that play with light (*sukashi*). Some of these, such as *Hana Mushin* (花無心), are the result of a unique partnership with Sawako Kaijima, a researcher in computer-designed architecture and engineering at Harvard University. Abstract and poetic, built on a purely mathematical and numerical basis, they venture into completely new territory that is now being explored by Tanabe Chikuunsai.

Shinya Maezaki and Laure Schwartz-Arenales

USEFUL INFORMATION

Eloge de la lumière – In Praise of Light Pierre Soulages – Tanabe Chikuunsai IV

Dates	17 November 2021 – 27 March 2022
Address	Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art Rue Munier-Romilly 8 1206 Genève – Suisse tel.: +41 22 704 32 82 website: www.fondation-baur.ch email: musee@fondationbaur.ch
Opening times	Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 2 pm to 6 pm (closed Mondays), until 8 pm when guided visits are held (see below)
Tickets	Full CHF 15.- Unemployed, disabled people and students CHF 10.-
Press contact	Leyla Caragnano, communication@fondationbaur.ch +41 79 220 56 25
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Cultural Mediation	Marie Wyss, mediation@fondationbaur.ch
Public guided visits	Wednesdays, 6.30 pm 24 November 2021 8 December 2021 16 and 26 January 2022 9 and 23 February 2022 9 and 23 March 2022
Private guided visits	Reservation required musee@fondationbaur.ch