ON APRIL 1st, 1948, Zao Wou-Ki arrived in France after a journey from Shanghai lasting thirty-three days. Zao could not have known then that the two years he planned to spend in France would stretch into a lifetime, or that he would emerge as a modern master of abstraction, heralded for his inventive and nuanced explorations in oil painting, Chinese ink, watercolour and printmaking. Zao was a young painter and art teacher in 1948; by the time of his death in 2013, he was regarded as one of the first superstar artists of the Chinese diaspora whose successful career, preceding by nearly a half-century, laid the path for artists like Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing.

“No Limits: Zao Wou-Ki” marks the first retrospective museum exhibition in America in nearly fifty years for this pivotal artist. Zao, whose life and art spanned two cultures, played a crucial role in 20th century international abstraction. Organised as a joint project of the Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine, and Asia Society Museum, New York, the exhibition highlights fifty objects, covering seven decades of Zao’s prolific professional career. Drawn from public and private collections on three continents, some of the works are being exhibited for the first time. A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition, and includes contributions that deepen our understanding of Zao Wou-Ki and his art. Essays on the interplay of media in Zao’s work and his reception in America draw on extensive archival research; others examine Zao in the context of Abstract Expressionism, and through an intimate, familial lens.

The five parts of “No Limits: Zao Wou-Ki” analyse Zao’s art historical significance in four sections of oil painting and one of works on paper. The title of each section draws its organisational concept from Zao’s own words. The first three sections trace the development of themes in his oil painting. “To Learn is to Create” focuses on early paintings from 1945–1954; “Calligraphy is the Starting Point” explores the role of Chinese calligraphy in the evolution of the artist’s visual geography; while “Painting the Invisible” shows Zao giving visual form to non-visual phenomena. The fourth section, “A Place to Wander”, presents the fully abstract images that mark the artist’s mature period. Besides his works in oil, Zao maintained a vigorous artistic practice in other media, producing a large body of works on paper through etching, aquatint, lithography, watercolour and Chinese ink. This section also includes a number of the artists’ books that Zao produced in collaboration with his wide circle of literary friends and acquaintances.

Born in Beijing in 1920, Zao Wou-Ki was the first-born in a family that would eventually number seven children (1). He received his given name, Wou-Ki (無極), meaning “without limits”, from his paternal grandfather, a Confucian scholar of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), who bestowed upon his grandson a name redolent of Daoism. The characteristics that came to mark Zao’s artistic contributions—his deep understanding of Chinese and European cultural traditions, and the ease with which he negotiated them—had their roots in Zao’s childhood. Within months of his birth, the family relocated to Nantong, near Shanghai, which was a “model” modern city that boasted many Western-style amenities and institutions—an urban archetype of the myriad forces contending in China during the first decades of the 20th century. The same forces—modern and traditional, Chinese and European—shaped Zao, too. His education, for example, included Western-style curriculum at school; while at home his grandfather oversaw a traditional Chinese curriculum, which included the Confucian classics and calligraphy. Zao learned early to move deftly between the realms that he inhabited.

In 1934, the Zao family relocated to Shanghai, China’s most modern and cosmopolitan city, where the family moved into a new contemporary home in the city’s International Settlement. The following year, Zao made the first
of many major relocations of his own life—to nearby Hangzhou and the art academy. From childhood, Zao Wou-Ki showed artistic inclinations, and a precocious commitment to making art his career. In 1935, at age fifteen, Zao enrolled at the National Hangzhou Art Academy. The academy was China’s most progressive fine arts school, then under the direction of Lin Fengmian. Zao spent six years as a student there, learning both Chinese and Western techniques. His teachers included Lin and Wu Dayu, whose own experiences came to have a profound effect on Zao. Both artists had studied painting in Paris in the early 1920s, and through their works sought to reconcile elements of Chinese and Western art. Paintings from Zao’s student and postgraduate years in China show the degree to which he shared his teachers’ interests—he preferred to paint with oils and often looked to Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and Modigliani as his models.

The Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945 upended life in China, and Zao’s privileged upbringing did not shield him from the uncertainty of those perilous years. As hostilities with Japan increased, China witnessed a mass migration of the populace, as millions sought a degree of security by moving to the country’s interior. The faculty and students of the art academy relocated to the relative safety of Chongqing in Sichuan province, where Zao spent the remainder of the war years. After graduating in 1941, Zao became a member of the academy’s teaching faculty. In Chongqing, he taught, painted, mounted his first exhibitions, and made important connections that shaped his future and career.

Zao returned to Hangzhou with the academy after the end of the war, but his sights were set on Paris, and on February 26th, 1948, Zao and his wife, Xie Jinglan, sailed for France. The course of their two-year adventure was altered by the shifting realities of post-1949 China. Zao’s father urged his son to remain in France, even though doing so came at considerable personal cost—especially in the separation from his young son, who had remained in China with Zao’s parents.

In Paris, Zao moulded his singular career between two cultures. He threw himself into the experience: French language lessons, drawing classes at La Grande Chaumière, and visits to museums and galleries filled his days. Zao also painted and experimented with new media, trying his hand at lithography and etching. Almost immediately, he connected with a number of influential circles that included artists, intellectuals and dealers. The expansive and cosmopolitan atmosphere nourished him, and provided valuable encouragement and connections (2). Success came quickly. Within months of arriving, Zao participated in his first group show and won a drawing competition. It took only a year before he had his first solo exhibition, whose catalogue included an introduction by Bernard Dorival, curator of the Musée National d’Art Moderne. The course of his career was set and the trajectory was steep.

To Learn is to Create

Early paintings reveal Zao drawing inspiration from diverse sources, traditions and materials. Spanning the years 1945–1954, “To Learn is to Create” offers works from Zao Wou-Ki’s postgraduate years in wartime Chongqing and post-war Hangzhou, through his first years in France.

As a student at the art academy and then a faculty member there, Zao took inspiration from a variety of Western influences. Post-Impressionism and modernism were of particular interest, and early works from China show him working his way through a virtual catalogue of Western stylistic idioms. Even so, Chinese elements found their way into his oeuvre in a way that underscores the complex visual landscape that he was developing.

Tennis Players from 1945 is one of Zao’s rare extant works painted in Chongqing (3). Even during wartime, it seems, Zao’s favourite sport was not far from his mind, and in Tennis Players, he turned to tennis to experiment with some of his developing ideas. Tilted ground planes, spatial disorientation and the writhing-like players themselves, all enhance the painting’s dream-like quality. That Zao admired such effects in the works of European modernists, like Marc Chagall, is unmistakable. Untitled (Wedding) (4), for instance, from 1941, evokes Chagall in its rich colours, ethereal feeling and defiance of pictorial logic. But Zao found inspiration in Chinese sources as well. In 1944, he viewed Zhang Daqian’s landmark exhibition of Dunhuang copies. Zhang’s exhibition drew attention to the remote site and its vast collection of Buddhist mural paintings. Zhang’s painted copies offered glimpses of the inventive ways in which the Dunhuang artists dealt with space, perspective and narrative content—the very principles Zao explores in this painting.

Soon after painting Tennis Players, Zao left Chongqing when the art academy returned to Hangzhou. This was a homecoming of sorts to the place where his artistic journey began. In 1946, though, he was a faculty member with his wife and young son in tow. Hangzhou, renowned for its scenic beauty, has inspired poets and painters over the centuries, and Zao was no exception. The beauty of West Lake
mesmerised him: “I watched for hours the passage of air over the calm water, the wind stirring the leaves of birches and maples” (Zao, p. 26). But for Landscape in Hangzhou, Zao elected to paint the lush scenery of the surrounding hills, in a painting that once again exposes the multiple influences at work on him (5). Zao’s admiration for Cézanne dated to his teens, as evidenced in Untitled (Still Life with Apples) from 1935–1936 (6), a youthful tribute to the French painter. For Landscape in Hangzhou, though, Zao turned his Cézanne-inflected eyes upon the nearby landscape. Amidst the hills, famously dotted with pagodas and temples, Zao painted a rather ordinary scene: hills, trees and a simple white-washed building—a teahouse or restaurant, perhaps. A sign on the building’s tile roof reads “Lake View”, in English.

The work recalls Cézanne’s own Provençal landscapes in palette and composition, but the influence of Lin Fengmian can be credited as well. Lin was director of the academy when Zao enrolled, and it was his position that Zao filled after Lin’s departure from the faculty during the academy’s years in Chongqing. Lin’s goal as artist and educator was to reconcile Chinese and Western artistic traditions, and his works frequently featured Chinese vernacular architecture amidst Fauves-inspired landscape elements—characteristics evident in Zao’s Landscape in Hangzhou.

**Calligraphy is the Starting Point**

“Calligraphy is the Starting Point” examines Zao’s use of Chinese calligraphy and brush techniques in the 1950s, as he searched for a path into abstraction. Zao commented sometime in the 1950s: “Calligraphy is the original source and only guide for my painting”. This revelation marks a pivotal moment in Zao’s artistic development—his acknowledgment of Chinese cultural traditions on his artistic DNA.

With his early mastery of calligraphy, Zao sought the challenge of other media, and found it in oil painting. And
5  Paysage à Hangzhou (Landscape in Hangzhou)
1946
Oil on canvas, 38 x 46 cm
Private collection, Switzerland
Photo: Antoine Mercier

6  Sans titre (Nature morte aux pommes), Untitled (Still Life with Apples)
1935–1936
Oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cm
Private collection, Switzerland
Photo: Antoine Mercier
yet, it was to calligraphy that he returned in the early 1950s, as he sought his own artistic voice. As a child, Zao learned to read Chinese characters, and to write them using brush and ink, under the guidance of his grandfather. But the fresh eyes with which Zao began to view calligraphy owes much to Paul Klee. Zao knew of Klee through reproductions as a student in China, and saw Klee’s work first-hand on a visit to Bern in 1951. The poetic feeling and freedom of line that Klee achieved, and his interest in employing signs and glyphs, found their way into Zao’s works. Through him, Zao began to see how to mediate the artistic traditions of China. To do so, he turned to oracle bone script (jiaguwen 甲骨文), an ancient form of Chinese script used for bronzes and divination, to reconcile the multiple sources of influence, from which emerged a new visual language that led, eventually, to abstraction.

Sometime around 1954, Zao painted Black Crowd (7). It is a dark, brooding image whose monochromatic palette and mad energy evoke ink painting of untrammelled Chinese musters of the past, but transformed. In Black Crowd, it is oil on canvas, not ink on paper, and the “characters” merely suggest calligraphy. As though caught in a vortex that animates the composition, their forms appear to shift and break apart, before dissipating altogether—something they were on the verge of doing as Zao continued to refine his artistic vision.

Painting the Invisible

In 1954, Zao’s painting entered a new phase. He considered Vent, a tall painting in sombre tones of grey, brown and black, to be his first non-descriptive painting (8): “It merely evokes the rustling of the leaves or the rippling surface of water in a passing breeze” (Zao, p. 117). The third section of the exhibition, “Painting the Invisible”, examines a new problem that Zao posed for himself—how to give visual form to non-visual phenomena: “I wanted to paint that which cannot be seen, the breath of life, the wind, movement, the life of forms” (Zao, p. 117). And he did. Wind, fire, water, space—all became challenges to be met in the studio. The result? A burst of canvases that capture the drama and energy of unseen and ineffable forces: Vent (1954), Nuage (1956), Deep Water (1957), Wind and Dust (1957).

The bravura performance of Mistral conjures the savage
Vent (Wind)
1954
Oil on canvas, 195 x 96.5 cm
Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, AM 1985-20
Photo © CNAM/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY
wind that blows through southern France (9). For Zao, the question was how to represent this energy in visual form. What earlier had been calligraphy-like forms, derived from ancient Chinese script, were here dissolved into scrawls. If Zao’s goal in Vent had been to suggest a breeze, with Mistral the drama of the composition captures the fierceness of that singular meteorological phenomenon of the work’s title.

The phase was new but it drew upon Zao’s past, and on China’s ancient cultural traditions. Zao’s education in the Chinese classics included Daoism, a bond he carried in his given name. The expression wuji (無極 “without limits”) first appears in the Dao de Jing, the principal text of Daoism dating to the 4th century BC. During the 1950s, as his works moved further from figuration, Zao was re-reading the Dao de Jing. At once poetic and enigmatic, the text lays out its philosophical principles and their relation to the forces of nature. Turning to the elements of the natural world, and the Daoist overtones they suggest, marks one more step in Zao’s reclamation of Chinese cultural traditions, and recognition of the new path (dao) they were opening for him.

A Place to Wander

Works of Zao’s mature phase, from the 1960s to the early 2000s, make up the fourth section, “A Place to Wander”. The oil paintings of his mature period draw the viewer into them, as though invited to experience the artist’s private world—a world of nature and not-nature, of space and not-space. In a 1967 interview, Zao described the invitation inherent in his paintings: “I want people to be able to stroll in my works, as I do when creating them” (Leveque, p. 19).

Even after Zao’s turn to abstraction, his paintings often recall the structural elements of traditional Chinese landscape painting. As though some vestigial landscape archetype was imprinted on his memory, elements of the physical environment coalesce in his paintings to suggest landscape, and then dissolve, only to appear later in another iteration. In 1971, Zao admitted the power landscape had over him: “I tell myself I am not a landscapist. I refuse to let the landscape into my studio. But truthfully, perhaps that is because it enters more easily than anything else” (Schneider, p. 133). The ease with which landscape swayed him is there in works from every decade of his long career: 05.03.65 For My Brother Wu Wai, 13.01.76, December 89—February 90—Quadriptych, 22.11.2002–10.12.2003.

09.07.67 invites wandering (10). Compositionally, it conjures any number of traditional Chinese landscape compositions, from the Song (960–1279), Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. Read as one might a hanging scroll, the viewer encounters intimations of land, mist and water. Zao rendered these effects in brushwork that evokes the texture strokes (cun fa 細法) that artists use to describe the surface characters of rocks, mountains, trees and water in Chinese landscape painting.

The scale of December 89—February 90—Quadriptych (11), a monumental four-panel work, makes the prospect of merging into the composition even more tempting. Zao began experimenting with multi-panel compositions in the 1960s, and in the 1980s, their scale grew increasingly larger. He described feeling “great physical joy in working with large surfaces” (Zao, p. 136)—a joy he conveys here through the work’s brilliant palette and exuberant composition. But
10 09.07.67
1967
Oil on canvas, 150 x 162 cm
Private collection, Taiwan

11 Décembre 89—Février 90—Quadriptyque
(December 89—February 90—Quadriptych)
1989–1990
Oil on canvas, overall 162 x 400 cm
Private collection, Taiwan
Photo: Jean-Louis Losi
where is Zao beckoning the viewer? Perhaps it is a Zao-ian vision of Tao Qian’s *Peach Blossom Spring*. In that 4th century fable, a lone fisherman happens upon a spring lined with blossoming peach trees. Their sight and delicious fragrance lead him to an idyllic land. Like a mirage of Tao Qian’s description, Zao hints at the spring and trees at the lower centre of the painting. Pale pink pigment swirls through the area, like the clouds of flower petals that Tao Qian describes drifting through the air. Beyond the dark interior of the cave, the fisherman emerges into a sun-drenched landscape, whose effect Zao achieves with a bright and variegated ground.

**Fragments of a Dream Place**

Zao’s facility with the Chinese brush fuelled his desire for new challenges, hence his lifelong commitment to oil painting. Throughout his career, though, Zao worked in a range of media, exploring new processes and expanding the visual realms to which they could lead him. The large body of works on paper produced during his lifetime show Zao moving nimbly across, and between, media. Whether in ink, watercolour or the various printmaking techniques that he integrated into his artistic practice, in every medium, Zao’s artistic virtuosity is on display. “Fragments of a Dream Place”, the fifth section of the exhibition, draws its designation from Zao’s desire to paint “a place of dreams where one always feels in harmony, even among restless forms and contrary forces”, with every painting a “piece of this space and this dream” (Zao, p. 158).

Working in wartime Chongqing, Zao explored the expressive potential of pencil line on paper in the drawing *Untitled (Girl with Flower)* from 1943 (12). A few years later,
he turned to the work of Rembrandt to study the 17th century master’s deft draftsmanship with reed pen and ink (13). During his first year in Paris, Zao copied a series of Rembrandt drawings, using a range of pen-and-ink techniques. The challenge proved daunting, but Zao was undeterred by Rembrandt’s dazzling command of pen and ink. In the kind of clever adaptation that became characteristic of Zao’s career, he turned to the Chinese brush to enhance his efforts.

Not until the 1970s, however, did Zao incorporate Chinese brush and ink paintings into his gallery shows. He had never fully relinquished this—his earliest—medium, but its importance in his life and artistic practice assumed new significance during a difficult time in the artist’s life during the 1960s and 1970s. As the health of his second wife, May Zao, deteriorated, he found less and less time for the long hours in the studio that his oils demanded. To maintain some creative equilibrium, Zao began to paint large-scale abstractions using Chinese ink, and found solace in the process (14). The resulting paintings show Zao’s mastery of the medium, working at his most spontaneous, as his brush dances and ink explodes across the surface of the paper.

The immediacy of pigment on paper is seen, too, in a series of sketchbooks (cartes), in which Zao recorded the landscape and scenery of his summer travels through Europe, during his early years in France (15). These hastily painted watercolours catch him working at speed, experimenting with composition and medium, in page after page of jewel-toned watercolours. These would serve as an aide-memoire of his travels, when, back in Paris, Zao returned in his mind to the places he had visited (16).
Not content with painting, Zao also explored printing techniques. He had some exposure to woodblock printing as an art student in China, but in Paris he undertook to learn the intricacies of various printing processes. In 1949, lithography became Zao’s gateway to printmaking. His initial experiment resulted in eight lithographs that brought considerable attention to Zao, still a newcomer in Paris (17). The works caught the eye of Henri Michaux, an artist and writer well connected in Parisian literary circles. Michaux was inspired to compose prose poems to accompany each image. Poems and images were published together in 1950 as *Lecture par Henri Michaux de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki*—an event that made Parisian intellectual, literary and artistic circles take notice of the newcomer.

In his prints, Zao occasionally reprised or refashioned painted compositions in a new medium. *Hydrangeas* (1953) (18), for example, is a near mirror-image of *Vase Vert* (1952), an oil painting from the previous year. For one of the lith-
18
Hortensias (Hydrangeas)
1953
Colour lithograph, image 45.1 x 58.4 cm, sheet 49.7 x 64.8 cm
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Mr and Mrs Peter Wick, 57.160
Photo © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

19
Sans titre (Funéraille), Untitled (Funeral)
1949
Oil on canvas, 87.5 x 131 cm
Private collection, Switzerland
ographs from 1949 that he published with Michaux, Zao modified the design of Untitled (Funeral), a painting from that same year (19). But mostly there were experiments—Flora and Fauna (1951) (20) is one of these. Zao’s indebtedness to Paul Klee is evident in the playful sureness of the line, and in the symbols and pictorial motifs that populate the scenery, all of which Zao framed within a pictorial border, across which figures, symbols and hieratic motifs parade. The whole effect is a dazzling spectacle of Klee-like linearity, but with a distinctly archaic feeling.

Lithography, etching, aquatint—all became arrows in Zao’s artistic quiver. So did illustrated books. The early collaboration with Henri Michaux was the first of more than five decades of collective projects that combined Zao’s images with texts by contemporary poets. Zao approached poetry as he did painting, as a place to wander: “Each word finds its place in a unified whole, enclosed in a world where one can walk around at will, stop, go back, breathe. One stumbles upon a detail and has a wonderful moment of silence, like a bit of emptiness in a painting” (Zao, p. 80).

This part of Zao’s artistic practice came to include a number of important literary figures of the 20th century, of France and beyond: Henri Michaux, André Malraux, Arthur Rimbaud, Ezra Pound, René Char, and others. Literary and intellectual circles had played a role in the establishment of Zao’s career as a young artist in Paris; he continued, and broadened, these ties through his lifelong interest in these collaborative book projects, and provided a stage for Zao’s artistic dialogue with a variety of writers.

Zao Wou-Ki’s singular career transcended boundaries. “No Limits: Zao Wou-Ki” follows his artistic development across time and media, from early works painted in China, to the experiments of his first years in France, to his fully mature abstract works. Oil painting, Chinese ink painting, prints and books are all present, highlighting the achievements of this master of modern painting. The exhibition runs at Asia Society Museum, September 9th, 2016 to January 8th, 2017, and travels to the Colby College Museum of Art, February 4th to June 4th, 2017.

Bibliography


