

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

Zao Wou-Ki, an Abstract Fusion Master

By ROBERTA SMITH SEPT. 8, 2016

The painter Zao Wou-Ki (1920-2013) is by now one of the best-known Chinese painters of the 20th century. It helped that he lived in Paris from 1948 on and that his gestural abstractions, which drew on Eastern and Western sources, enjoyed great success in Europe and the United States. By 1952 he had had solo shows in Paris and New York and went on to be collected by many museums on both continents. In New York he exhibited in the late 1950s and '60s at Samuel Kootz's gallery, an Abstract Expressionist stalwart.

“Zao Wou-Ki: No Limits” at Asia Society is the first comprehensive show of the artist's work in the United States. It is an intriguing, peripatetic, at times beautiful affair of 60 works from 1943 to 2003, with paintings on canvas and paper, watercolors and several kinds of prints. Yet Zao slips through your fingers, running hot then cold, refusing to settle down. He had an amazing facility. Even when you don't especially like a painting, you may find yourself stuck in front of it wondering, How did he do that?

This show and its catalog are a good start, a base for future curators and scholars to build on. But the goal here seems to be to outline Zao's trajectory and the multiplicity of his styles and mediums, rather than to concentrate on his best work. This conclusion is encouraged by several enticing pieces reproduced in the catalog that are not in the show, and also by a few memorable paintings that stand head and shoulders above the rest.

Michelle Yun, the Asia Society curator who organized the show — expanding on a smaller effort at the Colby College Museum of Art — would like us to see Zao as “a

master of postwar abstraction equal to the giants of the Abstract Expressionist movement.” In her catalog essay Ankeney Weitz, who co-organized the Colby show with Melissa Walt, notes that Zao’s art matured in Paris and describes him as “undoubtedly a French painter of the postwar School of Paris,” though he “never entirely let go of his Chinese training.”

Zao comes across here as an artist who brought an Asian element to Abstract Expressionism — a style already indebted to Asian art — in a reverse cross-fertilization similar to that of the Japanese Gutai group. The show confirms that throughout his life, and in whatever style, he seems to have always been more comfortable on paper than canvas, especially as his canvases grew larger. An exhibition of prints at the Cincinnati Art Museum in 1954 — his first in an American museum — is especially impressive considering that he only took up printmaking in Paris. His virtually instant affinity is evident in three 1950 lithographs made for a book of poetry by his greatest French friend, the artist and writer Henri Michaux, and nearly every other print on view.

There is a case to make that Zao did his most confident, authentic work — and cultural fusions — while still in China or during his first years in Paris, before Chinese calligraphy and landscape painting began to guide him toward abstraction around 1955. At the time he remained under the spell of Cézanne and especially Paul Klee (who was also greatly influenced by non-Western art). As Zao’s paintings start to carom stylistically toward the end of the show, you may wonder if his career is not a striking instance of talent subverted by ambition. A desire to play in the center ring may have led him to leave his true gifts undeveloped.

Zao’s desire to fuse different elements of Asian and Western cultures into a single contemporary style formed early and probably inevitably. He was born into comfort and privilege in 1920 in Beijing, and spent his early years in the city of Nantong, near the mouth of the Yangtze River on the southeast China coast. Between 1890 and 1930 Nantong was updated as a model, modern — read Western — city. It had a cinema, a sports arena and China’s first museum.

Zao attended Westernized schools there that started teaching English in kindergarten, after which his father, a banker, moved the family to Shanghai, and

into an International Style house. By then, Zao's dreamy artistic side had long been apparent; while still a teenager he was cutting images of European and American artworks out of magazines. His grandfather applied balance by insisting that Zao also have some classical Chinese education, including training in calligraphy and ink painting.

Starting in 1935 Zao spent six years at the Chinese Academy of Art in nearby Hangzhou, where he studied both Chinese and Western art and techniques; upon graduation, he taught there for several more years. In 1948, as the Communist takeover drew nigh, he went to Paris for two years of study. There, with a few brief returns to China and four months spent in New York in 1957, he remained.

The show is divided into two galleries. Zao's earlier representational works are isolated in a small gallery suffused with great intensity of feeling. Here we find small landscapes, still lifes and cityscapes, both in oil and ink. Especially good are the images of mountains and trees, usually accompanied by tiny elongated deer reminiscent of Bronze Age Greece. But nearly everything has a sprightly energy and a hypnotic power that exceeds its size and effortlessly synthesizes East and West. Some of the later ones are fairly large, like the 1954 "Tracks in the City," which suggests that Zao considered pushing them further.

Where this push might have taken him is anyone's guess, although one answer seems proffered by two large watercolors that hang adjacent: They have the airy, feral delicacy of the small, linear abstractions by the German painter Wols, another Klee acolyte, whose work goes unmentioned in the catalog. Wols died young and left plenty to do. There's also a Wolsian febrility to the exquisite etching/aquatints Zao made for a 1963 book of poems by Hubert Juin and an untitled etching/aquatint in rusts and blacks from 1963.

The large gallery begins with Zao's transitional works (including "Tracks in the City"), in which he proceeds to reintroduce nearly legible calligraphy that gradually turns abstract. Some of the best works here emphasize a fiery red, like "Red, Blue, Black" of 1957, which embeds blunt hieroglyphs in that shade, then finishes them off with fine electric drizzles of color, or the bold calligraphic five-color etching "Signs in Motion," also 1957. The red and black palette continues in the smoldering "Mistral"

(1957, in the Guggenheim's collection) and the inflamed "27.02.98," which both have a macabre witches'-Sabbath Goyaesque vibe. In other works Zao seems to take inspiration from de Kooning, Japanese gold-leaf screens and, most successfully, foggy Turner seascapes — as in the aqueous browns and grays of "18.03.85."

The best oil-on-canvas painting here is "15.04.77," which tellingly came after several outstanding works from 1972 that straightforwardly re-embrace Chinese ink painting. The large canvas is mostly white with scattered strokes of gray and black that define a high horizon seen, it seems, from the middle of a river. It has the deep, atmospheric space of Chinese landscape painting and a daring calligraphic nonchalance, but it also hints at the grittiness of a Western view of a working harbor by, say, George Bellows or André Derain. This painting balances superbly between cultures and makes you hope there are more like it.

Correction: September 17, 2016

Because of an editing error, an art review on Sept. 9 about "Zao Wou-Ki: No Limits," at Asia Society in Manhattan, using information from a 2013 New York Times obituary, misstated the year Zao was born. It was 1920, not 1921. (The obituary also misstated his birth date. It was Feb. 1, not Feb. 13.) In addition, the review misidentified the city in which he was born. While he spent his early years in Nantong, China, he was born in Beijing, not Nantong. The review also misstated the year of the earliest work in the exhibition. It is from 1943, not 1945. And it omitted a co-organizer of a show of Zao's work at the Colby College Museum of Art. In addition to Ankeney Weitz, it was organized by Melissa Walt.

"Zao Wou-Ki: No Limits" runs through Jan. 8 at Asia Society, 725 Park Avenue, at 70th Street, Manhattan; 212-327-9217, asiasociety.org.

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