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Gilles Chazal and Françoise Marquet-Zao. *Zao Wou-Ki: Watercolors and Ceramics*. Lewes, U.K.: D. Giles Ltd., 2023. 128 pp. Checklist, bibliography, and index. \$44.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781913875282.

Review by Melissa Walt, Colby College.

One first notices the luminous sweep of blue watercolor across the cover. The title hints at something new: *Zao Wou-Ki: Watercolors and Ceramics*. Leafing through the pages is akin to wandering into a museum gallery, lured by the objects on display. You find yourself charmed by what you see, by an artist perhaps unknown to you. Zao Wou-Ki? Who is Zao Wou-Ki? If you are familiar with Zao, your reaction might be: watercolors and ceramics? Not oil paintings? In short order, you learn that Zao Wou-Ki (1920-2013) is a leading figure in global abstraction. Here, though, are not the oversize oil paintings, triptychs and quadriptychs upon which Zao built his reputation. Instead, delicate tracings fill the pages. The watercolors and painted ceramics before you merely hint at Zao's outside reputation. The book, which accompanied an exhibition held at the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis, Tennessee in 2023, documents the show, introduces the artist, and hints at new avenues for study.

Zao Wou-Ki's career spanned centuries, continents, and mediums. Born and educated in China, Zao spent six-plus decades in France, where he is celebrated as a master of postwar abstraction. *Zao Wou-Ki: Watercolors and Ceramics* offers a glimpse of the expressive forms that marked the final chapter of his long career. The first artist of the Chinese diaspora to achieve global recognition, Zao's success set the stage for the surge of transnational artists of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Zao Wou-Ki rose to fame in Paris, amidst a surge of postwar artistic activity. The unique pictorial language that he developed during his early years there reflected diverse influences of time and place. Born and raised in Shanghai, Zao's formal artistic training began at age fifteen when he was admitted to the newly founded National Academy of Art in Hangzhou (now China Academy of Art). The years of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) found Zao with the academy in Chongqing, Sichuan Province, where it had relocated amid escalating hostilities with Japan. In Chongqing, Zao switched roles from student to instructor. He also helped organize an exhibition--*Joint Exhibition of Modern Painting*--in 1945. It included not only Zao's own work but that of other like-minded artists who were also seeking new forms of artistic expression.[1] It was a groundbreaking exhibition, and one that underscored the participants' indebtedness to Western modernist art.

Zao's progressive training at the Hangzhou academy, and his close relationships with its director, Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), and with Wu Dayu (1903-1988), one of his teachers, led to Zao's journey to Paris in 1948. Both older artists had studied in Europe. Accounts of their experiences overseas, combined with Zao's esteem for the works of Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Henri Matisse (1869-1954), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and other modernists, made Paris an obvious destination for the young artist. Imagined as a two-year post-graduate course of study, the trip turned into a lifetime abroad and led to a career unimagined by any Chinese artist before him.

The swiftness with which Zao found success in France is owed to several factors. Paramount was talent, but Zao's engaging personality, some degree of luck, and a wealth of connections all played their part, too. Indeed, a wide circle of friends and acquaintances opened doors and led to pivotal opportunities throughout his career, in China, Europe, and America. Zao's friends and admirers spanned an assortment of cultural circles. He met Vadime Elisseeff (1918-2002), future director of the Musée Cernuschi in Chongqing when Elisseeff was a cultural attaché for the French embassy. Poet and visual artist Henri Michaux (1899-1984) encountered Zao through Zao's printer, Edmond Desjobert (1888-1963). Michaux promptly saluted Zao with a collection of poems inspired by the young artist's designs. Friendships with the novelist and cultural minister André Malraux (1901-1976), artist Pierre Soulages (1919-2022), composer Edgard Varèse (1883-1965), architect I.M. Pei (1917-2019), and others – all had a hand in shaping the course of Zao's career in ways large and small.

Kevin Sharpe, Linda W. and S. Herbert Rhea Director of the Dixon Gallery and Gardens, describes the series of connections that led to the exhibition and catalogue in his "Friendship Forward." From a 2009 loan request by the Musée du Petit Palais, to collaborative exhibitions on French jewelry and the history of perfume, a circuitous trail eventually led Sharpe to Geneva and Françoise Marquet-Zao. Marquet-Zao, the artist's widow, was herself a curator at the Petit Palais and the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris. She currently directs the Fondation Zao Wou-Ki in Geneva. Indeed, the network of relationships and auspicious events that Sharpe narrates confirms that Zao's magic with connections and timing extends into a new century and encompasses a host of new admirers.

In "The Revival of Forms," Françoise Marquet-Zao gives a brief, intimate account of Zao's painting methods in the last decade of his life. She describes how Zao surrendered "to the sheer joy of painting" (p. 14), abandoning oil painting for watercolor. He also returned to figuration, leaving aside the singular abstract language that had been his specialty. As Marquet-Zao tells it, Zao immersed "himself in nature and this immersion becomes the very subject of the painting" (p. 14). The period also signals the reshaping of Zao's artistic practice, when he vacated his studio to paint outdoors or in the walled garden of his Paris home. However much he delighted in the natural world in this final phase, Zao's commitment to abstraction is ever present. Especially with the ceramics, Zao rendered his joy with lightness and spontaneity as brush and porcelain body connect.

Gilles Chazal contributes the volume's main essay, "Zao Wou-Ki--The Breath of Life." Chazal, former director of the Petit Palais, gives a biographical overview of Zao and his art, aimed primarily at an audience new to the artist's work. Zao's education in China included traditional subjects like the Confucian classics and calligraphy. But his schooling also reflected the

educational reforms adopted during the modernizing years of the early 20th century, when Western subjects were introduced. In other words, Zao was well-prepared for the transcultural life that lay ahead. Paris, during the post-war years, found Zao searching for a style that allowed for his fullest artistic expression as an artist. He did this by combining Western modernism with elements derived from Chinese calligraphy and painting to create a visual language of his own.

Chazal weaves together an outline of Zao's life story with quotes from the artist, which give voice to his ideas and practice. Though not a scholar of Asian art, Chazal also builds his narrative around passages from the *Daodejing* and certain Daoist concepts, especially the so-called breath (*qi*, or animating force), of the essay's title. Chazal further suggests links between Zao and traditional China's literati ideal, wherein art and poetry merge in a single individual. Elsewhere, he equates Zao to renowned eccentric Chinese painters of the 17th century.

The titular subjects of the book--watercolors and ceramics--are mentioned briefly. Watercolor was part of Zao's practice throughout his career. He even turned to monochrome ink painting in the mid-1970s, after decades of eschewing that part of his past. Ceramics, though, were new to him, at least as a mature artist. Zao described his early passion for painting in *Autoportrait*, by recalling his five-year-old self taking brush and ink to the family's 18th century dinnerware, much to his mother's dismay.[2] In 1979, Jean-Pierre Lecat, Minister of Culture, approached Zao about creating porcelain designs for the Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres. In an echo of Zao's childhood experimentation a half century earlier, he created "Diane" for a Sèvres dinner service. Zao's engagement with porcelain continued intermittently over the next thirty years. Mostly, the designs were adapted from prints or watercolors by Zao, but at Maison Bernardaud in Limoges, the artist himself painted directly on some of the bisque ware pieces.

The book, and the exhibition it commemorates, mark a new direction in Zao Wou-Ki studies. Exhibitions and publications tend to focus on Zao's oil paintings, at the expense of the wide range of mediums in which he worked: illustrated books, prints, stage sets, costume design, stained glass and tapestry. This volume is a step toward rectifying the puzzling inattention to Zao's larger oeuvre. It offers a lasting tribute to the works of Zao's dotage, amplifies the significance of his lesser-known mediums, and invites further consideration for more fully understanding Zao Wou-Ki's myriad accomplishments.

NOTES

[1] Other artists in the *Joint Exhibition of Modern Painting* included: Lin Fengmian, Wu Dayu, Guan Liang (1900-1986), Ding Yanyong (1902-1978), Pang Xunqin (1906-1985), Fang Ganmin (1906-1984), Ye Qianyu (1907-1995), and Li Zhongsheng (1912-1984). Lü Peng, *A History of Art in 20th Century China*. (New York: Charta Books, Ltd., 2010).

[2] Zao Wou-Ki and Françoise Marquet, *Autoportrait* (Paris: Édition Fayard, 1988).

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