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The president and the 'greatest living artist' in the world

By Hugh Schofield
BBC News, Paris



Things have going badly for French President Francois Hollande. Defeat in the European elections, a weak economy, low opinion polls - he really needs to burnish his image with voters. And this may just explain a trip he made last month to a museum in the south of France.

I wonder how many of you have heard of the French artist Pierre Soulages?

Probably not a lot. I've lived here nearly 20 years and I was only vaguely aware of the man. Apparently, though, he's the world's greatest living painter.

We have that on the authority of none other than President Francois Hollande, who was recently down in the southern town of Rodez opening a new museum to display the master's oeuvre.

One other rather important thing you need to know about Soulages, who incidentally is now in his mid-90s. He only ever paints in one colour. And that colour is... black.

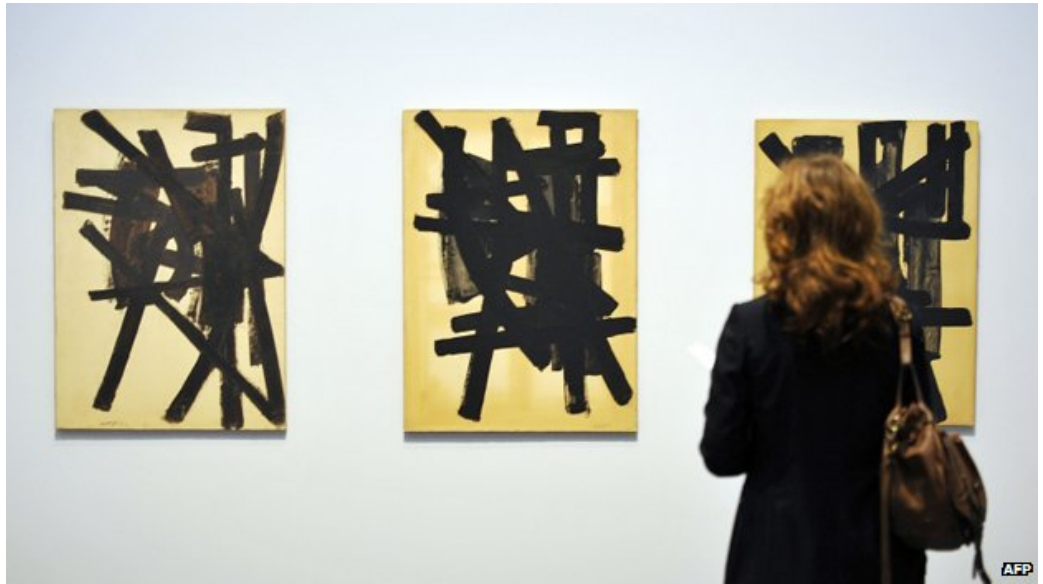
Well, that's not entirely true. At one point he did occasionally use some blue. But then he evidently decided that was a concession too many to chromatic convention. So since 1979 everything he has done has been in variations of sable, coal, pitch and jet - or as he calls it, ultrablack.

I think the idea is that if you look beyond the stripes and swirls of the all-consuming black you emerge in a new artistic world, and start seeing light, in the black.

Anyway, far be it from me to cast judgement on a painter who apparently commands large sums in the art galleries of New York.

What intrigued me was the French president's decision to pay such public and extravagant homage to a man whose existence most French people - let alone those of us who aren't French - have barely registered.

It speaks volumes about the nature of power and culture and elitism in France that the president can have imagined that a 1,000-mile round trip to pay court to this master of the noir was a worthwhile PR event.



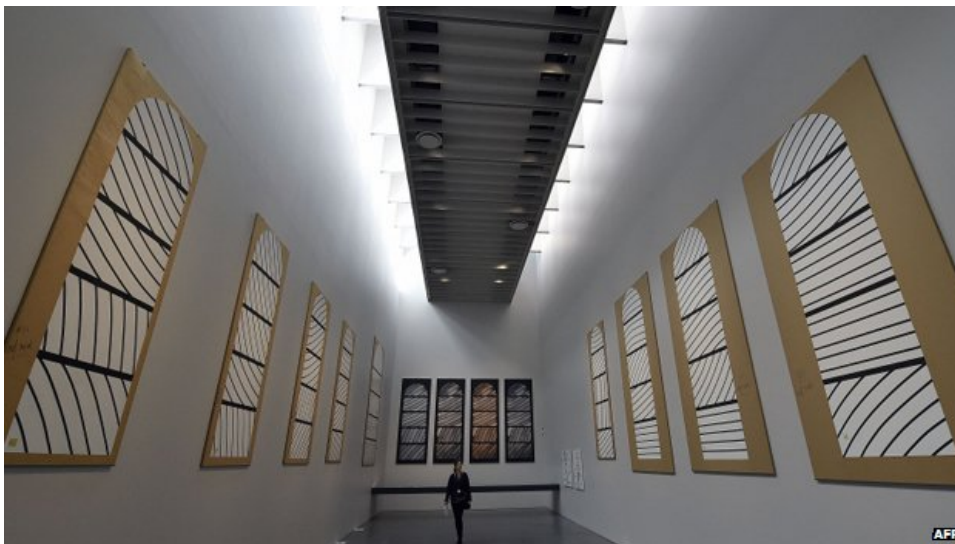
Of course, he justified it by describing Soulages as a beacon of French civilisation - a luminous example of how France still counts in the world.

But of course the irony is that in fact Soulages represents the exact opposite. Outside of an small intellectual coterie, he is unknown in the world, and even inside France, most people aren't going to take it simply on the word of the president that their painter is the best there is, and therefore they should all be proud.

Most people are going to **look at the agglomerations of black** streaks and striations, and frankly they're going to have a laugh.

I am not saying they are right to laugh at the paintings. For all I know these are genuinely innovative, challenging ways of analysing modern reality.

What I am saying is that most people, the non-elite, aren't going to get it. And it's with most people - the voters - that Hollande and the rest of the Paris political elite have long since parted ways.



It is hard to exaggerate the sullen, rancorous, bitter atmosphere in France today.

Just last week, in addition to the regular backdrop of economic misery, we had a few extras to darken the mood even further. A strike by railway workers - yes, them again, the ones that can retire at 50 - over some incomprehensible reform of the SNCF.

Bad enough, but this time it coincided with the start of the baccalaureate, so the poor teenagers had the extra worry of not knowing if they'd make it to the exam hall.

The "intermittents" have also been back on the streets. These are the workers in the arts, whose highly favourable benefit system has accumulated billions of euros of debt and accounts for fully a third of the entire annual deficit in the unemployment budget.

They're threatening to shut down the summer arts season if their privileges are tampered with.

Personally I wouldn't care two hoots if they did shut down the summer festivals. It's a bit like Soulages.



The French like to think it's all part of the country's cultural *rayonnement* shining out like a beacon, and that the whole world is watching them, jealously agog.

But are they? Have you heard of the [Uzes dance festival](#)? Or the annual [Actors' Spring](#) in Montpellier?

Out of darkness there comes the light, quipped Hollande, as he looked round the funeral canvasses of the world's "greatest living" artist.

One thing about the president - he does have a sense of humour. He was drawing a parallel between the art and his own misfortunes - and making a little joke.

The trouble is that in France these days, no-one feels the slightest inclination to laugh.