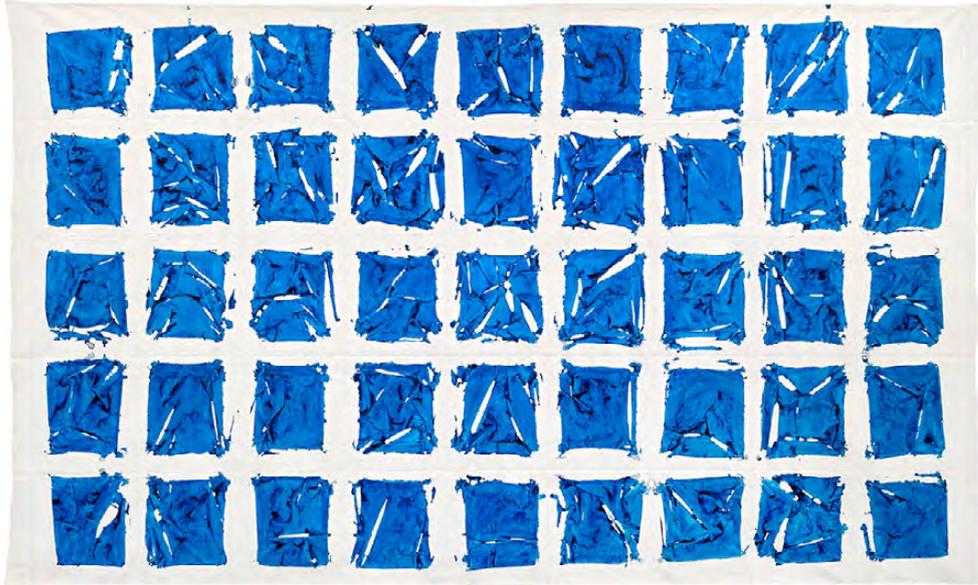


GAGOSIAN

Gagosian to Exhibit Works in Blue by Simon Hantaï

Azzurro Opens in Rome on February 2, 2024



Simon Hantaï, *Tabula*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 117 3/8 × 192 1/8 inches (298 × 488 cm) © Archives Simon Hantaï/ADAGP, Paris

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The function of color is essentially linked to light, not to matter.

—Simon Hantaï

ROME, January 24, 2024—Gagosian is pleased to announce *Azzurro*, an exhibition of paintings by Simon Hantaï (1922–2008) in Rome. Curated by Anne Baldassari, it focuses on the significance of blue in the artist’s practice, illuminating his affinity with Italy and the influence on his work of its classical painting tradition. *Azzurro* follows a major retrospective, *Simon Hantaï: The Centenary Exhibition*, at Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris (2022). It also forms part of a sequence with Gagosian’s two previous Hantaï exhibitions, *LES NOIRS DU BLANC*, *LES BLANCS DU NOIR* at Le Bourget in 2019–20, which featured black-and-white works, and *Les blancs de la couleur, la couleur du blanc* at 980 Madison Avenue, New York, in 2022, which emphasized combinations of primary and secondary colors.

Born in Bia, Hungary, Hantaï moved to Paris in 1948 and joined André Breton’s Surrealists, breaking with the group in 1955. Subsequently, he originated the *pliage* (folding) technique, in which a canvas is crumpled and knotted, painted over, and then spread out to reveal alternations between pigment and ground. After representing France at the 1982 Biennale di Venezia, Hantaï withdrew from public life, declining to exhibit new work until 1998. Following this extended isolation, he began altering a set of *pliage* paintings that he had shown in 1981, photographing them at an angle and producing prints from the distorted images. He continued to work largely in isolation until his death in 2008.

It is significant that *Azzurro* takes place in Rome; Hantaï made his first trip to Italy in 1942 with fellow students from the Academy of Fine Art in Budapest, spending time in the capital, Florence, and Siena. In 1948, while traveling on foot from Ravenna to Rome, he visited the 24th Biennale di Venezia, where he explored the work of Max Ernst and Jackson Pollock. He returned to the country for a final time in 1982. These tours cemented his admiration for Italian painters of the proto- and early Renaissance, especially Giotto and Masaccio.

Azzurro is a chromatically focused retrospective that presents examples of Hantai's distinctive *pliage* works in a chronological sequence. The exhibition starts with the early canvas *Peinture (Petit Nu)* (1949), which depicts a figure against an intense turquoise background reminiscent of Renaissance frescoes. This is followed by *Catamurons* (1964), with its folded center and multiple color layers; *Meun* (1967), which incorporates unpainted sections in its corner areas; *Étude* (1969), in which uniformly folded canvas painted monochrome blue is juxtaposed with large irregular shards of white; and *Blancs* (1974), in which colorless passages occupy more space on the canvas than accompanying fragments of blue, green, and black.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is an array of large-scale blue *Tabula* paintings (1972–76; 1980–82) that dominate the gallery's ovoid main room. The monumental scale of these works reveals each square as the result of a unique, autonomous fold; the paintings also evoke the artist's childhood memories of his mother's aprons, the rolling and folding of which produced sequences of luminous color. Prioritizing touch over vision, Hantai also imbued the *Tabula* works with references to historical artists including Matisse and Cézanne and, in their fusion of discipline and accident, to mathematical theory. The rarely seen "last studio" works (1982–85) in the final room feature unprecedented forms derived from folding and dripping, executed in balanced, vibrant color.

A further key inspiration for the artist was Pablo Picasso's Blue Period (1901–04). "For Hantai," writes Baldassari, "the same pictorial spirituality linked the Blue Period to the altarpieces and frescoes of Giotto, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, and Fra Angelico. Color was the link." He was also captivated by the centrality of the color to the Catholic Marian cult, as seen in the painting *Le Manteau de la Vierge* (1960), which remains in the collection of the Vatican Museums. "From 1960," Baldassari recounts, "with the conceptualization of 'folding as method,' the semantic association between mother's apron, blue, and folding became a structural element in Hantai's painting. It forms the signifying syntagm at the heart of his practice."

Azzurro is accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by Anne Baldassari.

Simon Hantai was born in 1922 in Bia, Hungary, and died in 2008 in Paris. Collections include the Vatican Museums, Vatican City; CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, France; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris; Ludwig Museum, Budapest; Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest; Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; and Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts, Japan. Exhibitions include *Hantai, Rétrospective*, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris (1976); *Simon Hantai 1960–1976*, CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, France (1981); 40th Biennale di Venezia (1982); *Donation Simon Hantai*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1997); *Hantai: Collections du Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne et autres collections publiques françaises*, Musée d'art moderne de Céret, France (1998); *Werke von 1960 bis 1995*, Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, Germany (1999); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2013); Villa Medici, Rome (2014); Ludwig Museum, Budapest (2014); *Par où on ne sait pas*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen, France (2020); and *The Centenary Exhibition*, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris (2022).

#SimonHantai

SIMON HANTAÏ

Azzurro

Opening reception: Friday, February 2, 6–8pm

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Via Francesco Crispi 16, Rome

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