

THE ART OF COLLECTING

Feeding a desire to make gigantic works

LE MUY, FRANCE

Southern France benefits from international trend toward monumental art

BY NAZANIN LANKARANI

The south of France, long a vacation destination for art lovers, is sprouting new attractions: foundations to display monumental works and the contents of hitherto unseen private collections.

In July the Fondation Venet, owned by the sculptor Bernar Venet, and the Domaine du Muy, owned by the Parisian gallery owner Jean-Gabriel Mitterrand and his family, opened in the photogenic countryside north and west of the Côte d'Azur.

Set to open next summer on the island of Porquerolles south of St-Tropez, the Fondation Carmignac, funded by the financier Edouard Carmignac, will house contemporary artworks from the Carmignac corporate collection.

"There is a lot of energy in the south of France now, culturally speaking," said Mr. Mitterrand, a nephew of the former French president François Mitterrand.

A number of vineyards in the region now double as contemporary sculpture parks. Among them are the Château La Coste near Aix-en-Provence, a biodynamic vineyard and sculpture park owned by the Irish property developer Paddy McKillen, and the Peyrassol vineyard in Flassans-sur-Issole.

The region already boasts respected institutions like the Matisse museum in Nice, the Jean Cocteau museum in Menton and the Fondation Maeght in Saint Paul de Vence, all within a short driving distance of each other.

The new initiatives respond to a trend in the international art market toward oversize works that has fed a desire by artists to produce, and an appetite by collectors to buy and display, monumental art.

The need for space prompted the Gagosian gallery, two years ago, to open a two-story, 17,760-square-foot exhibition



SIMON SCHWYZER/NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE/NIKI CHARITABLE ART FOUNDATION, COURTESY OF DOMAINE DU MUY

Supersized creativity

Above, a work by Niki de Saint Phalle at the Domaine du Muy in southern France. Clockwise from bottom, the Domaine du Muy's owners Edward Mitterrand, left, with his father, Jean-Gabriel; a large work in steel by Bernar Venet at the Fondation Venet in Le Muy; a chapel by Frank Stella on the grounds of the Fondation Venet; and Mr. Venet.



LEFT AND CENTER, FONDATION VENET/ARCHIVES BERNAR VENET, NEW YORK; RIGHT, FRANÇOIS BAILLE, NICE

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hall in a former hangar on the grounds of Le Bourget, a private airport outside Paris. At about the same time, the Austrian gallery owner Thaddeus Ropac opened a 50,000-square-foot display space on a former industrial site in Pantin, near Paris.

"Sculptors today gravitate toward gigantism," said Mr. Mitterrand, who this year also expanded his gallery in the Marais district of central Paris. "Galleries must adapt, if they want to preserve their relationship with the artists."

The supply-demand dynamic goes both ways, according to Edward Mitterrand, Jean-Gabriel's son, who is an art adviser in Geneva and a partner in Do-



SIMON SCHWYZER/DOMAINE DU MUY

maine du Muy.

"If collectors are building bigger exhibition spaces, we as galleries have no choice but to offer larger pieces," he said.

The inaugural exhibition at the Domaine du Muy was curated by Simon Lamunière, a former curator of Art Unlimited, the monumental works section of Art Basel. The show on the 10-acre property included works by the sculptors Pipilotti Rist, Ugo Rondinone, John Armleder, Sylvie Fleury, Niki de Saint Phalle, and François-Xavier and Claude Lalanne.

Just north of the Domaine du Muy, the Fondation Venet includes a converted 15th-century mill and a former railroad equipment factory transformed into an indoor exhibition space and workshop.

Mr. Venet, who was born in France but is based in New York, acquired the 10-acre property in 1989. It was used until now as his summer residence and local studio. He transformed it into a

sculpture park and private gallery where he can show monumental pieces that would not fit in a commercial gallery.

"For me, exhibiting in a small gallery is torture," Mr. Venet said during a recent interview at the Fondation. "I have to reduce my work to small sizes, which conveys the wrong message about the work. Here, people will see what I really do."

The site houses the artist's most sizable work to date, "Effondrement d'Arcs" (Collapse of Arcs), consisting of some 200 steel arcs weighing 200 tons, all placed in a seemingly random composition that takes up nearly half the space of the former factory.

Visitors can also admire an outdoor chapel designed by Frank Stella and Mr. Venet's private collection of art by major minimalist and conceptual artists including Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and Robert Motherwell.

Landscapes that unleash nature's glory

WILSON, FROM PAGE S5

four young Grand Tourists: the lords Pembroke, Essex, Thanet and Bolingbroke. The canvas was bought by one of the party, the Eighth Earl of Thanet.

During the six years Wilson spent in Rome, he established a thriving studio, which attracted gifted young artists including the German Adolf Friedrich Harper and the Scandinavians Johannes Wiedewelt and Johan Mandelberg, all of whom went back to their own countries and spread the Wilsonian message through their teaching posts in various academies. Harper was the first professor to teach landscape as a genre in Germany.

Having achieved international fame in the Roman art scene, Wilson returned to London in 1757 to open a new studio. Prominent among his students were Johnson Carr, William Hodges, Thomas Jones and Joseph Farington; striking works by all of them are also featured in the exhibition.

Following his Italian experiences, Wilson brought to Britain a new approach to landscape painting, which he applied chiefly to the mountainous land-

scape of his native Wales. The section of the exhibition devoted to these includes two classic images from the mid-1760s: "Llyn Cau, Cader Idris," of the volcanic lake beneath the peak of Cader Idris, in the shadow of which the artist had been born and raised, and "Snowdon from Llyn Nantlle."

Through them he contributed much to putting Wales, a country little visited until then, on the map. Among those who responded to this new enthusiasm for the region were the Romantic poets Coleridge, Shelley and Wordsworth, all of whom spent time there.

One of the founding fathers of the Royal Academy, Wilson became a familiar figure on the London artistic and intellectual scene, the witty and convivial companion of people like the writer Edmund Burke, the actor David Garrick and the fellow artists Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough. But he began to find it difficult to sell his pictures in the 1770s and he took to drink. He was reduced to selling his treasured sketchbooks to raise the coach fare for his last journey to Wales, where he was taken in by a cousin at Colomendy Hall,

Llanferres. He died there in May 1782, and was buried in the churchyard of St. Mary's at nearby Mold.

Wilson had assured the young man who bought his sketchbooks: "Depend upon it, you will live to see my pictures rise in esteem and price."

The rise in esteem was soon confirmed by the influence Wilson was to have on his greatest English successors, John Constable and William Turner.

"I recollect nothing so much as a solemn — bright — warm — fresh landscape by Wilson, which swims in my brain like a delicious dream," wrote Constable of his encounter with the Welsh artist's "Tabley House, Cheshire," which is among the canvases in the exhibition.

Constable had visited the gallery of the house, which was owned by Sir John Leicester. Recalling this experience, Constable said of Wilson: "He was one of the great appointments to shew to the world what exists in nature but which was not known till his time."

Turner, too, was an ardent admirer. As a young man he made a pilgrimage to



YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART, PAUL MELLON COLLECTION

Wales, seeking out Wilson's birthplace at Penegoes and the places that Wilson had captured for the first time in paint.

As a tribute to Wilson, Turner chose as the subject of his diploma picture at the Royal Academy in 1802 Dolbardarn Castle, one of the sites in Snowdonia that Wilson made famous.

Homeland

Wilson's paintings of rugged Welsh scenes inspired his peers as well as later generations of poets. "Snowdon from Llyn Nantlle," above, shows the countryside near the country vicarage where Wilson was born.