

The Zadkine Museum: a studio-museum

For almost forty years, between 1928 and 1967, the sculptor Ossip Zadkine and the painter Valentine Prax lived together in the house, studios, and garden located Rue d'Assas. This place, a discreet haven of peace within Montparnasse, became the Zadkine Museum in 1982, thanks to the bequest made to the City of Paris by Valentine Prax. The sculptor's wife had in fact devoted the last years of her life protecting Zadkine's legacy and preserving the atmosphere of these studios where the two artists had spent their lives and produced a large portion of their respective works. Thus, the Zadkine Museum is one of the rare places of creation that witnessed the golden age of Montparnasse and is still open to the public today.

Visitors will go through the former studios as well as the house of the sculptor. The selection of artworks on display, which includes sculptures by Zadkine, paintings by Prax and photographs, is renewed each year. The visit showcases the iconic artworks of the sculptor chronologically and allows to retrace Zadkine's career, from his early years in the cosmopolitan Paris of the avant-garde to his international triumph during the 1950s–1960s.

In the current display, special emphasis has been placed on the museum's newest acquisitions. Since one of her exceptional glass paintings was added to the collections in 2022, one room is devoted to Valentine Prax's work and her interest in the reverse glass painting technique, borrowed from folk art. The artworks created during Zadkine's American exile, from 1941 to 1945, are also given pride of place, with the display of ten plaster casts and terracotta sculptures, recently donated to the Zadkine Museum and shown in France for the first time ever since their creation.

Ossip Zadkine: from Russia to Montparnasse

Ossip Zadkine, born in 1888 in current Belarus, arrived in Paris during the autumn of 1910 at the age of 22. Following a short stint at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, he abandoned academic training in favour of the artistic excitement of Montparnasse, which had become, according to Henry Miller, “the world’s navel” for young avant-garde artists. Counting among his friends Modigliani, Blaise Cendrars, and Max Jacob, Zadkine became known for his extraordinary mastery over matter: his large wooden sculptures, directly carved from blocks, quickly piqued the interest of art-lovers and collectors. After the First World War, from which he came back wounded and diminished, the artist started to garner a certain degree of recognition and held his first solo exhibitions in France, England, and Belgium.

In the sculptor’s former studio, with its large distinctive skylights, a selection of artworks made during the 1910s–1930s is on display. It showcases the evolution of Zadkine’s art, from his *Tête héroïque [Heroic Head]* – among the oldest ones known today – to his wonderful *Tête de femme [Head of a Woman]*, recently acquired by the museum. Fascinated by the human face, Zadkine produced many variations around this motif. He simplified it until he reached a stripped-down version, keeping only essential features to make the emotion stand out. The tall wood carvings gathered in the middle of the studio illustrate the technical virtuosity of Zadkine, a master of direct carving and a passionate woodworker. Two drawings, *Couple [Couple]* and *Caserne [Barracks]*, are reminders that Zadkine also knew how to wield pen and pencil: during the First World War, he notably created deeply moving works with washes and watercolours, bearing the scars of his wartime memories.

The 1920s: from Cubism to Art Deco

The 1920s–1930s were a crucial period in Zadkine's career. From 1920, the year he held his first solo exhibition in his studio on Rue Rousselet, to 1933, the year of his first retrospective held at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, Zadkine gradually gained recognition from significant art critics and collectors. In the early 1920s, influenced by Cubism, he produced sculptures with geometric shapes leaning towards abstraction, such as *Sculpture or Formes féminines* [*Sculpture or Feminine Forms*], *L'Accordéoniste* [*The Accordion Player*], and *La Belle Servante* [*The Beautiful Servant Girl*]. However, he quickly distanced himself from this movement, deeming it too austere and believing it to be too restrictive for his own artistic nature, which was more lyrical and expressive.

At the same time, he started studying the connections between sculpture and architecture. He received several commissions for reliefs, such as the two round still lifes and *Femme et chien* [*Woman with a dog*], on display here, which were intended for the Hôtel Mayen in Paris, requested by the decorator André Groult. Zadkine explored a number of decorative effects, never shying away from colouring, lacquering, or gilding some of his works. The spectacular *Oiseau d'or* [*Golden Bird*], made to “challenge the sun” with its ovoid shape reminiscent of Brancusi, is one of the most accomplished examples of his interest in polychromy. A masterful sculptor with an overflowing inventiveness, Zadkine also used to draw constantly. During the 1920s, he produced a series of gouache drawings with bright colours and geometric figures, which garnered real success with art enthusiasts.

Valentine Prax, painter

Born in Algeria, Valentine Prax was a painter who trained at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Algiers. Upon her arrival in Paris in 1919, she met Ossip Zadkine, her studio neighbour in Rue Rousselet, who introduced her to the artistic avant-garde circles and incited her to move away from academism. After marrying in 1920, the painter and the sculptor pursued their careers autonomously, and although Zadkine admired Prax's sensitivity, he did not try to influence her. Characterised by compositions of great density, but above all by its powerful use of colour and its taste for detail, Prax's art was shown in galleries during the 1920s, where her "fresh and candid spontaneity" won visitors over. Her work started gaining recognition during the 1930s: several solo exhibitions in Europe and in the United States were then devoted to her work. Since the early 1920s, she had been specializing in glass painting — a technique that sparked renewed interest at the time, due to the Art Deco movement. This traditional craft echoed her own taste, and she naturally gravitated towards it. Reverse glass painting, a process consisting in applying paint on the side opposite to the one shown, ensured a better preservation of colours, which kept all their freshness and brightness.

The Greer donation: Zadkine and his exile to the United States from 1941 to 1945

During the Second World War, Zadkine was forced to leave France. On 20 June 1941, in Lisbon, he boarded the last boat leaving for the United States. His exile would last until August 1945. In New York, the artist settled down in Greenwich Village and rented a studio there, where he had to start over his life and work. Deeply hurting, feeling like a prisoner in a town that remained foreign to him, Zadkine experienced during this time what he felt to be the drying up of his imagination. As he returned to France, he believed that he had created very little and that those artworks were of little interest. However, he did create around fifty sculptures in his Charles Street studio. Some of them were left there when he returned to France and have remained on American soil for almost eighty years. Nine of those compositions — seven in terracotta and two in plaster — have recently been donated to the museum, and some of them are shown to the public for the first time.

Zadkine and monumental sculpture

Ever since 1914, Zadkine had been creating monumental artworks. Like his *Prométhée [Prometheus]*, shown in this room and created at a later period, they were mostly figures carved directly out of colossal tree trunks – the shape and grain of which inspired the artist and guided his work. After the Second World War, while the reconstruction of cities revived “the vocation of contemporary sculpture to become part of the public space,” Zadkine worked on several commissions for monuments. He had then the opportunity to give life to his projects, some of which, like the monument to Jarry, had been designed in the late 1930s. Among those, his most famous monument is *La Ville détruite [The Destroyed City]*, a colossal six-meter-high bronze figure, unveiled in Rotterdam on 15 May 1953. Sometimes dubbed “the *Guernica* of sculpture,” this artwork commemorates the bombing that destroyed the harbour city and condemns the horror and absurdity of war. Various monuments to Van Gogh would then follow and keep Zadkine busy for almost ten years, from 1955 to 1965. Right until the end of his career, the question of monumentality would never cease to fascinate the artist, who adapted some of his abstract artworks to take on a monumental scale, such as *La Forêt humaine [The Human Forest]*, commissioned in 1960 for the head office of the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, or *La Demeure [The Abode]*, unveiled in 1963 in Amsterdam.

Zadkine and Van Gogh

In 1956, an association from Auvers-sur-Oise commissioned Zadkine for a monument in honour of Vincent Van Gogh, who spent the last months of his life in this little town. Overcome by what he called “the Van Gogh fever,” the sculptor felt exhilarated, but he experienced doubts: “How should I approach the figure of Van Gogh to turn him into a statue? [...] How should I erect a thing that, in the open, would manage to suggest the rare and new being that was Van Gogh as well as the greatness of his new kind of painting [...]?” Standing as testament to the sculptor’s doubts and reflections, the numerous preparatory projects that have been preserved retrace the various steps of the creation process, from the initial bust to the final version, including sketches depicting Van Gogh walking, preaching, drawing, or embracing his brother Théo. Following the creation of the monument in Auvers-sur-Oise — its installation in 1961 being the subject of a photographic reportage by Daniel Frasnay —, Zadkine received other commissions from towns where the painter had lived. While both Wasmes (Belgium) and Saint-Rémy-de-Provence settled on busts, a more abstract and allegorical work was erected in 1963 to honour the Van Gogh brothers in their hometown of Zundert (Netherlands). To celebrate the 170th anniversary of the Dutch painter’s birth, the Zadkine Museum presents the “miniature crowd of Van Gogh sketches” that escorted Zadkine during the creation of those projects and have now found their way back into his studio.