

I use chance operations instead of operating according to my likes and dislikes.

—John Cage, *Tricycle*, March 1992

Born in Los Angeles in 1912, John Cage was a composer, teacher, artist, and writer who greatly influenced post-World War II music, dance, and visual arts internationally. He first studied literature at Pomona College (1928–30) before studying music composition and theory with Henry Cowell and Adolph Weiss at the New School of Social Research (1933–34) and privately with Arnold Schoenberg (1935–37), who prompted him to devote his life to music. In 1938, Cage moved to Seattle to teach at the Cornish School for Performing and Visual Arts. While at Cornish, Cage attended a lecture on Dada and Zen by Nancy Wilson Ross, his first introduction to Zen Buddhism and the eastern philosophies that would profoundly shape his creative practice. There, he also met dance prodigy Merce Cunningham, who would become his artistic collaborator and later his life partner. In 1942, Cage moved to New York City, where he lived and worked until his death in 1992.

Curated by Irene Shum, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art

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artwork John Cage, *New River Rocks and Smoke* (detail on front), 1990. Watercolor and smoke-applied soot on paper, 8 feet 9 3/4 inches x 32 feet 4 1/2 inches (2.59 x 9.87 meters). The Menil Collection, Houston, Purchased with funds provided by Dominique de Menil in honor of the 10th anniversary of the Menil Collection. © John Cage Trust. Photo detail: Adam Neese.

Collection Close-Up

John Cage



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THE MENIL COLLECTION

New River Rocks and Smoke is a monumental watercolor created in 1990 by American artist John Cage (1912–1992). Known primarily for his music compositions and influential writings on art, Cage’s visual art practice began late in his life, in 1978, and encompassed printmaking, drawing, and watercolor. Encouraged to explore a new medium, he began watercolor painting in 1983 at Mountain Lake Workshop in Giles County, Virginia, where he returned each year from 1988 to 1990 to further develop this body of work. A coda of sorts, *New River Rocks and Smoke* is his largest and last watercolor.

I think for the long scroll, I’d like to do a parade by chance, a parade of stones.

—John Cage, April 1990



Deeply influenced by eastern philosophies and thinkers like Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and D.T. Suzuki, Cage created this work using chance operations, in particular a decision-making method he adapted from the ancient Chinese text *I Ching* (also *Yijing*). Rather than imposing structure and exercising intention, he asked questions about color, placement, and brush width that he answered by computer-simulated coin tosses. For Cage, this indeterminacy reflected natural processes, and it was his deep belief that “the responsibility of the artist is to imitate nature in her manner of operation.”

Cage aspired to work with nature’s elements: earth, water, fire, air. With the help of six studio assistants, he first exposed the large paper scroll over an open fire in eight-foot sections, allowing the smoke to

deposit soot on the dampened surface, then stapled the sheet to the ground along its perimeter and left it to dry for a day and half. Next Cage traced around rocks from the nearby New River with earth-tone watercolor paint applied by feather brushes of varying sizes. Recalling the famous dry rock garden in the Zen temple Ryōanji in Kyoto, Japan, which served as a continuous source of inspiration for the artist, *New River Rocks and Smoke* includes the outlines of fifteen large stones. For Cage, they served as a metaphor, “the rock as a person, a small person in a gigantic world.” Similarly, he saw the small tears and rough edges of the paper as the embodiment of *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese aesthetic that embraces imperfection and is rooted in Buddhist teachings of impermanence. The work was acquired in 1997 on the occasion of the museum’s tenth anniversary by Dominique de Menil. This exhibition is the first time in twenty-two years it has been on display.