

JOAN MITCHELL (1925–1992)

Joan Mitchell (1925–1992) was an abstract artist whose exceptional career spanned more than four decades. She worked in a variety of mediums—including oil painting, pastel on paper, and printmaking—and is widely recognized as one of the most significant artists of the post-war era. Her approach to abstraction is distinguished for its physicality, daring use of color, and direct connections to her everyday experiences of landscape, people, poetry, music, and even her beloved dogs.

Born in Chicago on February 12, 1925, Mitchell was raised in a household that valued the arts—attending the symphony, visiting museums, and reading poetry. She began studying painting seriously at age 11, and later attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Upon graduating in 1947, she was awarded a travel fellowship that took her to France for a year, where her paintings became increasingly abstract. Returning to the United States in late 1949, Mitchell settled in New York, and within a year, she became an active participant in the “New York School” of painters and poets. Her work was exhibited in the famous “9th Street Show” in 1951, and she rapidly established a reputation as one of the leading young Abstract Expressionist painters.

In 1955, Mitchell began dividing her time between New York and France, and in 1959 she settled permanently in France, living and working in Paris, where she also developed a wide social circle of artists and writers. In 1968, she moved to Vétheuil, a small town northwest of Paris, where she worked continuously until her death in 1992. Throughout her life, she maintained strong ties to New York, traveling back and forth frequently and hosting visiting American friends in Vétheuil. Thus, Mitchell’s body of work was in dialogue with artistic developments in both France and the US, and often received different critical reception in each locale.

Over her long and varied career, defining elements of Mitchell’s world—particularly views of cities, fields, rivers, lakes, and trees—contributed to images and memories from which she worked. She once said, “I paint from remembered landscapes that I carry with me—and remembered feelings of them, which of course become transformed. I could certainly never mirror nature. I would like more to paint what it leaves me with.” For Mitchell, successful painting conveyed an idea or feeling with authenticity and an intensity that could be experienced by a viewer with or without knowledge of the inspiration behind the work. While always challenging herself to find new directions, she also saw herself as part of a long arc of art history, connected to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century painters Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and Vincent van Gogh, whose work she knew well from an early age and admired throughout her life.

Mitchell achieved significant critical and commercial success in her lifetime, exhibiting regularly in New York and Paris throughout her career. The Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, The Museum of Modern Art, and other major institutions began collecting her paintings in the 1950s.

The Whitney Museum mounted a significant exhibition of her work in 1974. In 1982, Mitchell became the first female American artist to have a solo exhibition at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris. A retrospective exhibition, *The Paintings of Joan Mitchell: Thirty-six Years of Natural Expressionism*, toured the United States in 1988 and 1989, with stops at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California; and the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

Mitchell's major awards and accomplishments include: Le Grand Prix des Arts (Peinture) of the City of Paris (1991); the Award for Painting from the French Ministry of Culture (1989); the inaugural Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement from the College Art Association of America (1988); Honorary Doctorates from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1987) and The Western College, Oxford, Ohio (1971); and the Premio Lissone, Milan (1961).

As an extension of her commitment to sustaining an environment of dedication and camaraderie among artists, Mitchell gave personal support to many young artists and writers who came to stay with her at her home in Vétheuil—sometimes for just one night, sometimes for an entire summer. Correspondence in her papers reveals that this belief in their creativity and potential often had a life-changing impact on those who spent time with her.

Following a diagnosis with cancer in 1984 and a long period during which she continued to work despite her declining health, Mitchell died in Paris on October 30, 1992.