



Joan Mitchell

JOAN MITCHELL, *Minnesota*

1980, oil on canvas (four panels)

102 1/2 x 243 inches

Joan Mitchell

Joan Mitchell was born in Chicago in 1925 and earned a BFA from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1947. In the early 1950s she participated in the vibrant downtown New York art scene and spent time with many other painters and poets. It was during this time in New York that she began to paint in a way known as Abstract Expressionism.

In 1955, she moved to the city of Paris, France, and in 1967 she moved from the city to a house in a small town near Paris called Vétheuil.

At Vétheuil she had more space to paint and was surrounded by nature. Her house sat up on a hill overlooking the River Seine. The property had many big trees and gardens in which she grew all kinds of plants and flowers, among them sunflowers, which she loved in particular. The companionship of her dogs was very important to Joan; she owned many in the course of her life and their names can often be found in the titles of her paintings.

Joan Mitchell painted throughout her entire life. In addition to oil paintings, she made drawings, especially with pastels and watercolors, and did several kinds of printmaking. Mitchell died in 1992.



Joan Mitchell, 1946, photo by Barney Rosset

Medium & Technique

Minnesota contains layered tints and hues of similar colors. Oil paint is made of pigments – substances, often dry powders, that have rich, strong color – mixed with vegetable oils. This mixture creates a paint that glides smoothly across a surface and can be applied quickly. Oil paint can take a while to dry, depending on what it is mixed with. In order to ensure the integrity of each layer of color, or to purposefully mix them, Mitchell controlled the amount of time that passed between painting each layer. Each mark in *Minnesota* was made quickly and confidently, however each was also a carefully made decision about color, placement and gesture. Mitchell used the motion of her whole body to paint this large work.

Mitchell in her New York studio, 1957, photo by Rudolph Burckhardt

Her work & *Minnesota*

When asked about her work, Joan Mitchell said: “My paintings repeat a feeling about Lake Michigan, or water, or fields...it’s more like a poem, and that’s what I want to paint.” Through abstraction, Mitchell lyrically conferred feeling onto landscape, uniting elements of visual observation and physical experience with an emotional state of mind. She painted *Minnesota*, an expansive work on four panels, in 1980. The use of multiple panels made it possible for her to create repetition on a large scale, and to insert the elements of time and change into the static medium of painting. Mitchell often moved canvases around in her studio as she painted, though the space was only wide enough for her to work on two panels at once.

Like poetry and music, *Minnesota* is structured rhythmically. Across its four panels, color and gesture are arranged in patterns of repetition and difference. The first and second panels differ in color, surface texture, and density of mark making. These differences are then mirrored in the third and fourth panels, establishing a kind of visual rhyming of near and far, of solidity and spatial distance, and of different qualities of light and surface.

The outer panels of *Minnesota* are both filled edge-to-edge with dense, interwoven brushstrokes of color. Bursting with the excitement and tension of the complementary colors yellow and lavender, these passages of the painting feel close-up, lush and overflowing. The golden orange-yellows in these panels are warm, like sunlight and heat absorbed into a surface. While these two outer panels mimic one another, they also contain inversions; yellow predominates in the first, while lavender does so in the last.

Moving from the edges of *Minnesota* to its center, space opens onto airy distance saturated with ecstatic light and space. Color repeats but shifts in hue and value: the electric yellow of the inner panels is brighter and purer, popping against its pale complement, a lavender-tinted sky blue. The center of *Minnesota* opens to sky and distance, weightlessness and floating. Although technically a warm color, this yellow feels both hot and cool, like bright sun on a cold, clear day.



Joan Mitchell in her garden in 1992, photo by David Turnley

Questions for discussion

1. Yellow is an important color in *Minnesota*. How many kinds of yellow can you find? Name an object that you associate with each kind of yellow.
2. Black plays an important role in *Minnesota*. Why do you think Mitchell placed the concentrations of black where she did? How would the painting be different if these dark areas were removed?
3. In terms of distance, what parts of this painting feel near? Far? In between?
4. What makes the four panels of *Minnesota* unified? Identify at least three specific ways.
5. Think of a place that is special to you. How does it change over time? Consider short and long periods of time, and changes to color, light, and general surroundings.

Joan Mitchell & Poetry

This poster was produced in conjunction with an exhibition of Joan Mitchell’s work at the Poetry Foundation in Chicago, which explored her relationship with poetry. Mitchell’s mother (a fiction writer, editor, and poet) was an associate editor at Poetry magazine from 1920 to 1925 and remained affiliated with the magazine for more than forty-five years. Because of her mother’s involvement in literary circles – and her love of language and poetry – Mitchell grew up in a home filled with books and often visited by poets and writers, including T.S. Eliot, Thornton Wilder, Dylan Thomas, and Edna St. Vincent Millay.

As a child, Mitchell wrote poems, including “Autumn,” published in Poetry magazine in 1935 and reprinted on this poster. Although she stopped writing soon afterwards, poems and literature would remain sources of inspiration and comfort throughout Mitchell’s life. Her library contained well-worn volumes by Rainer Maria Rilke, William Wordsworth, Frank O’Hara, James Schuyler, Jacques Dupin, Pierre Schneider, T.S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, and others. As an adult, Mitchell developed friendships with many poets and writers. She collaborated on numerous illustrated books of poetry, made pastel drawings on typed poems, and often read poems when preparing to paint. She titled several paintings after poems particularly meaningful or beautiful to her.

Although Joan Mitchell lived most of her adult life in France, her childhood memories of Lake Michigan – and the trees and vast fields of the Midwest – were always with her as part of the inner landscape that she drew upon while painting. Feelings of places, especially the Chicago of her childhood, never left; as she often said, “I carry my landscapes around with me.” Her paintings are visual distillations of feeling and experience, abstract translations of the flux and movement of the natural world, of light, color, space, and form. They transform remembered landscapes and experiences through a masterful use of color and remarkable ability to attain balance and stillness in the midst of dynamic motion. They are at once contemplative and exuberant, restless and calm, strong and fragile, defiant and tender, dissonant and unified, grounded and transcendent. They are full of intense feeling.

Like a poet, Joan Mitchell strove for precision. Her canvases contain nothing superfluous. Although her work might initially appear spontaneous and immediate, she worked slowly and deliberately, with an intense focus on the relationships of colors to one another, on the structure and space of the whole canvas, on gesture and line. Her multi-paneled paintings bear a particularly palpable kinship to poems in their structure and inherent rhythm. Like poems, her paintings are organic constructions in which each element – in this case brushstrokes rather than words – is necessary and essential, in delicate balance with those surrounding it.

Mitchell was generally averse to writing about art. She believed that paintings should be seen and not read, that they are ultimately indescribable, complete in and of themselves. As John Ashbery wrote: “Paintings *are* meaning and therefore do not have a residue of meaning which can be talked about.” Still, Mitchell did greatly admire some writing about art, and the writing she respected most was by poets: Jean Genet on Giacometti; Antonin Artaud on Van Gogh, Rilke on Cézanne.

This passage from Rilke’s Letters on Cézanne could describe Joan’s work as well as it does Cézanne’s:

As if these colors could heal one of indecision once and for all. The good conscience of these reds, these blues, their simple truthfulness, it educates you; and if you stand beneath them as acceptingly as possible, it’s as if they were doing something for you... It’s as if every place were aware of all the other places – it participates that much; that much adjustment and rejection is happening in it; that’s how each daub plays its part in maintaining equilibrium and in producing it; just as the whole picture finally keeps reality in equilibrium.

Autumn *by Joan Mitchell*

The rusty leaves crunch and crackle,
Blue haze hangs from the dimmed sky,
The fields are matted with sun-tanned stalks —
Wind rushes by.

The last red berries hang from the thorn-tree,
The last red leaves fall to the ground.
Bleakness, through the trees and bushes,
Comes without sound.

December 1935 (age 10)