



Joan Mitchell

JOAN MITCHELL, *Trees I*  
1992, color lithograph on two sheets  
57 x 82 inches, 34 + proofs



# 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.



Joan Mitchell in Vétheuil, France, circa 1984

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.

## Medium & Technique

Joan Mitchell created the *Trees* series of lithographs in collaboration with trusted friend and master printmaker Ken Tyler in Mt. Kisco, New York. Lithography is a type of printmaking that traditionally involves drawing with an oil-based medium on a stone slab. When printing, the stone is first sponged with water and then an oily ink is rolled over the drawing. The ink

naturally adheres to the oily areas and resists the wet stone. A lithographic print is then created by placing a sheet of paper on top of this inked slab and rolling both slab and paper through a large press. For *Trees I*, created in 1992, Tyler gave Mitchell flexible, textured mylar plates to draw on, rather than stone slabs. This material allowed Mitchell to create lithographs as naturally as if she were drawing with pastel on paper.



Joan Mitchell and Ken Tyler, circa 1970s

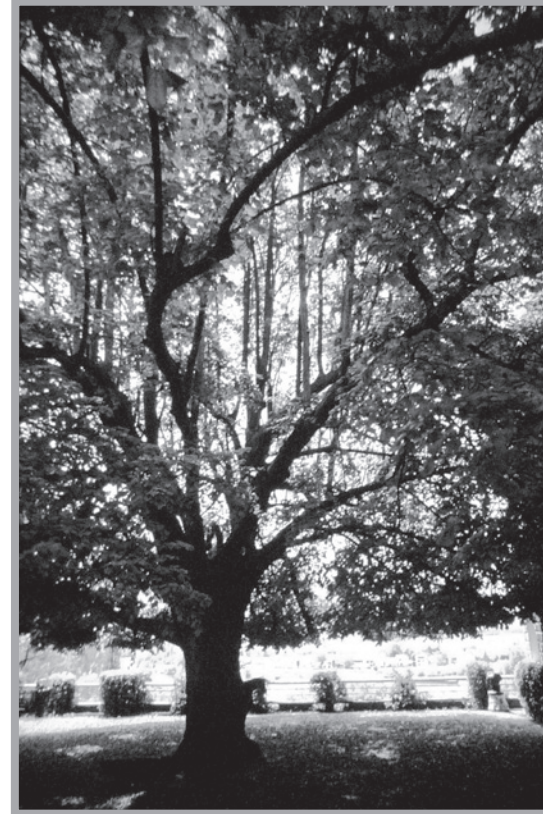
## Her work & *Trees I*

Landscapes and elements of the natural world – trees, water, sky, flowers, weather – were very important to Joan Mitchell. Her memories and feelings about places she had been, and things she had seen and experienced, fill her artwork. She felt and expressed enormous gratitude toward the landscapes that surrounded her, and one can sense her feelings for them through her artwork.

When asked by an interviewer what inspired her to paint, Mitchell replied: “When I was sick, they moved me to a room with a window and suddenly through the window I saw two fir trees in a park, and the grey sky, and the beautiful grey rain, and I was so happy. It had something to do with being alive. I could see the pine trees, and I felt I could paint. If I could see them, I felt I would paint a painting.”

Mitchell created *Trees I* just before her death in October of 1992. Although her health was failing, she was able to create a series of powerful images inspired by her memories and love of landscapes. This print is a confident, large-scale work, almost five feet tall. Ken Tyler’s advanced printing techniques assured that each layer of Mitchell’s original drawing was freshly visible. Bold gestural lines of black overlay bright yellow and red in a large diptych that is simultaneously powerful and fragile. Sections of expressive vertical lines floating in white suggest a landscape of trees in the fall, each with their own energy, and Mitchell’s gestures evoke both movement and stillness. One can sense wind blowing through swaying trees, but also the rooted verticality and stability of the trees as they reach upward.

The co-mingling of life, death and nature were on Mitchell’s mind, and she said of time spent creating art: “I become the sunflower, the lake, the tree. I no longer exist.”



Linden tree (*tilleul* in french) at Mitchell’s home in Vétheuil, France

## Questions for discussion

1. Can you find traces of Joan Mitchell’s hand in this work? Do you see any fingerprints? Can you trace any of her movements?
2. What colors did Joan Mitchell and Ken Tyler use to create this work? Can you guess which color was printed first? Second? Last? Does the overlap of these colors create any new colors? Why do you think Mitchell chose to use these colors?
3. Think about the effect of sunlight filtering through the branches and leaves of a tree. Is there any part of this print that reminds you of that kind of light?
4. How is the quality of line similar or different in the two sides of the print? What parts of the line remind you of the natural world?
5. How do the two sides of this print relate to each other? Does the work feel differently if you only look at one side and not the other?