



Joan Mitchell

JOAN MITCHELL, *La Chatière*

1960, oil on canvas

76 1/2 x 58 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 with kitten Minoulouche, ca. 1947

## Medium & Technique

Oil paint is made of pigments – substances, often dry powders that have rich, strong color – mixed with vegetable oils. Different colors of paint can be mixed together to create new colors, and oil paint can be thinned with turpentine and other liquids for a more watery, translucent effect. Joan Mitchell selected and placed the colors in *La Chatière*

very carefully, using an extensive palette of warm and cool colors and sometimes squeezing paint directly from the tube onto her canvas. Although the painting conveys a spontaneous and almost explosive feeling of energy and movement, Mitchell worked slowly and deliberately. She would stand back from the canvas and look at it for long periods of time, decide where the next mark should go, then approach the canvas to place color quickly and confidently. She used many sorts of tools and techniques, including wide and narrow brushes, rags, her fingers, and drips and splashes while painting her canvases.



New York, 1957. Photo Rudolph Burckhardt

## Her work & *La Chatière*

Joan Mitchell's artworks distill and express her feelings and memories of people, places, and things in her life that were important to her. The myriad things that comprised and moved within her environment – animals, water, the sky, trees, flowers – generated memories and images that went into her paintings. Mitchell was an abstract painter, which means she was interested in depicting the feeling or essence of something rather than the thing itself.

Mitchell lived in France when she painted *La Chatière*, titled after the French word for a cat door (the flap inserted at the base of a larger door which allows cats to come and go at will). Although her pets at that time were dogs, she had owned cats in the past and clearly had powerful memories of them. Mitchell loved animals and closely observed their nature, the way they moved, and the feeling of being in their presence.

The paint in *La Chatière* suggests movement and energy, and it also contains a sense of aggression, perhaps even violence. The dense greens and blacks at its center create a depth and backward push, in contrast to the large patch of salmon pink which comes forward and demands attention. Broad, loose strokes at the top of the painting evoke the swaying tail of a cat, while shorter and more furtive marks elsewhere evoke clawing and scratching. Yet in spite of all this energy and motion, if you look at it long enough the painting also communicates a sense of stillness, of a moment frozen in time. As Mitchell once said, a painting that works is “motion made still, like a fish trapped in ice.” The central density of the canvas is offset by the unpainted areas in each of the canvas's four corners, which provide a welcome sensation of breath, lightness, and stillness.



Cats in Joan Mitchell's studio, ca. 1947

## Questions for discussion

1. Mitchell applied paint to this canvas in many different ways. Can you find areas where she used a wide brush? A thin brush? A rag? Drips and splashes? Paint directly from the tube?
2. Mitchell painted this canvas in layers, and had to wait for the paint to dry in some areas before she could paint another layer on top of the existing layers. Can you tell which colors she applied first, second, and so on?
3. Can you think of words that describe the actions and personalities associated with cats? Can you describe any parts of this painting with the same words?
4. This painting is over six feet high, so Mitchell had to reach to apply paint to the top of the canvas. Can you sense the movement of her body in the brushstrokes?
5. How do you feel when you look at this painting? Can you identify what about the painting makes you feel this way?