



Joan Mitchell

JOAN MITCHELL, *Tilleul*

1978, oil on canvas

110 1/4 x 70 7/8 inches

Joan Mitchell

Joan Mitchell was born in Chicago in 1925 and earned a BFA from the School of 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 1968 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 Mitchell; she owned many in the course of her life and their names are sometimes found in the titles of her paintings.

Joan Mitchell painted throughout her 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, circa 1962

Her work & *Tilleul*

Joan Mitchell's artworks distill and express her feelings and memories of people, places, and things that were important to her. Animals, bodies of water, the sky, trees, flowers, and weather all informed her paintings, as did her love of poetry and music. Mitchell was an abstract artist, which means that she depicted the feeling or essence of something, or her memories of feelings, rather than creating a literal representation.

Mitchell lived in France when she painted *Tilleul*, titled after the French word for linden tree. There was a majestic linden tree in the courtyard outside her home in Vétheuil – this tree was an integral part of her daily landscape, and served as an inspiration for more than a dozen paintings and works on paper with this same title. This particular *Tilleul* painting is unique in its use of golden, radiant yellows – a color Mitchell associated with hope. Yellow seems to illuminate the work, behind and through dense layers of turquoise, blue, grey and black.

Tangled brushstrokes and powerful lines curving upward evoke a gnarled trunk and branches, and express Mitchell's deep familiarity with the feeling of being in the presence of a large linden tree. Her heightened sense of observation, receptivity, and feeling allowed her to convey what was essential, while allowing the painting to be its own "autonomous being," as Yves Michaud once described her work. Mitchell explained that, for her, making art was such a deeply immersive activity that her sense of self and distinction from other beings dissolved: "I become the sunflower, the lake, the tree. I no longer exist."



Linden tree at Mitchell's Vétheuil home, photo by Robert Freson, 1983

Medium & Technique

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. 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 *Tilleul* very carefully, using both warm and cool colors. Although the painting's predominant gestural vertical brushstrokes convey a sense of spontaneous growth and movement, Mitchell worked slowly and deliberately. Each mark was made in careful consideration of its relationship to the painting as a whole.

Paint, brushes and tools in Mitchell's Vétheuil studio, photo by Robert Freson, 1983

Questions for discussion

1. What colors do you see in this painting? Can you find multiple shades of the same color?
2. How do you feel when you look at this painting? What about the painting makes you feel this way?
3. The title of this painting, *Tilleul*, refers to the linden tree on Joan Mitchell's property. Does anything about the painting remind you of a tree? Why do you think she gave it this title?
4. This painting is over nine feet tall. Why do you think Mitchell made it so large? Would it have the same effect if it were smaller? Can you sense the movement of her body in the brushstrokes?
5. Mitchell painted parts of this canvas in layers, and had to wait for 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?
6. List five words that come to mind when you look at *Tilleul*.