JOAN MITCHELL, *Minnesota*
1980, oil on canvas (four panels)
102 1/2 x 243 inches
Joan Mitchell

Joan Mitchell was born in Chicago in 1926 and earned a BFA from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1947. In the early 1950s she participated in Abstract Expressionism and firmly confirmed her way onto landscape, uniting elements of visual observation and natural surroundings in an emotional state of mind. She painted Minneota, an expansive work on four panels, in 1980. The use of multiple panels made it possible for her to build up thick layers of paint 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 on.

As a child, Mitchell wrote poems, in "Autumn," published in Poetry magazine. This quote is from her poem in 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 and literature would remain sources of inspiration and comfort throughout Mitchell’s life.

Questions for discussion

1. Yellow is an important color in Minneota. 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 Minneota. 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 Minneota 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.

Her work & Minneota

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’m after.” Through abstract forms, Mitchell lyrically conferred feeling onto landscape, uniting elements of visual observation and natural surroundings. During her entire life, Mitchell created a vocabulary, a personal language and poetry – Mitchell grew up in a home filled with books, posters, and literature that explored her relationship with poetry. Mitchell’s work (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, posters, and poetry readings by poets Jean Cocteau,蘩ciel, Arthur Rimbaud, T.S. Eliot, Thornton Wilder, Dylan Thomas, and Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Mitchell in her New York studio, 1957, photo by Barney Rosent

Medium & Technique

Minneota 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 paste 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 hesitation that passed between painting each layer. Each mark in Minneota was made quickly and confidently, however each mark was also carefully made decision about color, placement and gesture. Mitchell used the motion of her whole body to paint this large work.

Mitchell in her garden in 1991, photo by David Tunley

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, posters, and poetry readings by poets Jean Cocteau, T.S. Eliot, Thornton Wilder, Dylan Thomas, and Edna St. Vincent Millay.

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“...as if those colors could have led one of induction none and fro all. To the good continuous of those ribs, those blue, their simple truthfulness, it educates you; and you stand beneath them as attempted 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 SUCH plays its part in maintaining equilibrium and in producing it, as just as the whole pattern fairly reality in equilibrium.”

Winter by Joan Mitchell

The rusty leaves crumble 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. Blackness, through the trees and bushes, Comes without sound.  

Chimera 1935 (age 10)

Image of Joan Mitchell is © Estate of Joan Mitchell.