



Joan Mitchell

JOAN MITCHELL, *Trees*  
1990-1991, oil on canvas (diptych)  
94 1/2 x 157 1/2 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.



Joan Mitchell in her Vétheuil studio, photo by David Boeno, 1983

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.

## Her work & *Trees*

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, permeate her artwork. She felt enormous gratitude toward the landscapes that surrounded her, and often expressed this gratitude through her work. Mitchell had a particular affection for trees, and many of her paintings, drawings and prints are related to them. In an interview about the inspirations for her work, Mitchell said: “I’m trying to remember what I felt about a certain cypress tree and I feel if I remember it, it will last me quite a long time.”

Mitchell painted this diptych, *Trees*, between 1990 and 1991, near the end of her life. Its two large canvases are filled with confident, energetic strokes created in a wide range of colors and gestures. Some areas of the painting evoke trees swaying in windy weather, while others exude a sense of quiet stillness and rooted, upward growth. Rather than depicting trees’ outward appearance, Mitchell has conveyed a profound understanding of their fundamental qualities: the life force they contain, the ways they move in weather, their presence and energy, and their relations to each other in the landscape. The co-mingling of life, death and nature were on Mitchell’s mind, and she said of the motivating role of her environment: “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.”

Some areas of the painting are dense with multiple layers of paint, while others are more airy and luminous. Warm blues are offset by cool pale oranges, and dense vertical strokes coexist with spacious calligraphic gestures. Splashes of white and pale beige paint are reminiscent of rain drops, or dripping tree sap. Throughout this lyrical evocation of trees, there is a pronounced awareness of paint itself as a sumptuous physical material, as well as a medium with great expressive powers.



Mitchell walking among trees at her home in Vétheuil, France, photo by Edouard Boubat, 1984

## 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 *Trees* very carefully, using an extensive palette of warm and cool colors and a wide variety of gestures. Although the painting conveys a spontaneous and almost explosive feeling of energy and movement, Mitchell worked slowly and deliberately. She would stand back from each 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. Mitchell used the motion of her whole body to paint this large work, which is almost eight feet tall and over thirteen feet wide.

## Questions for discussion

1. Can you identify at least five different gestures that Mitchell made with her brush when creating *Trees*? Imagine that you are making these marks with your own hand and paintbrush: how does it feel to make each gesture? Do some movements feel more natural to you than others?
2. What colors do you see in this painting? Can you find multiple shades of the same color?
3. Can you find areas of the painting where Mitchell has used white, tan, or beige paint? Why do you think she painted these areas, rather than leaving the canvas unpainted?
4. This painting is a diptych, which means it was painted on two separate canvases placed next to each other. Why do you think Mitchell painted this on two canvases? How are the marks on the canvases similar to each other, and how are they different? Does the painting feel different if you only look at one panel and not the other?
5. What kinds of weather does this painting seem to portray? And what season of the year (spring, summer, fall, or winter) does it most remind you of?
6. If this painting could make sounds, what kind of sounds do you think it would make?