



Joan Mitchell

JOAN MITCHELL, *Merci*

1992, oil on canvas diptych

110 1/4 x 141 1/2 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 1950's 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, 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 high 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 throughout 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 different kinds of printmaking. She died in 1992.



Joan Mitchell, 1992
Photo by Marabeth Cohen-Tyler

Her work & *Merci*

“I work out of several feelings. Hopefully something to do with love...love of the river, love of the doggies...” *Merci* (1992), which means “thank you” in French, is one of the latest and most concise paintings in Mitchell’s body of work. To feel gratitude is to recognize one’s reliance upon things outside of oneself; for Mitchell it was a way of connecting with nature and the things she loved. She said, “Van Gogh...gives gratitude to the sunflower because it exists. I give gratitude to trees because they exist, or to [dogs, the river, flowers], and that’s all my painting is about.”

Merci’s elevated passages of electric color have significant weight, yet attain lightness through the balance of other formal elements: of warm and cool colors, of color against white canvas, of vertical brushstrokes that follow the path of gravity and organic, knotted brushstrokes that float. The size and fluidity of the gestures indicate a physical rigor and sense of urgency; Mitchell was ill and knew she had little time left to paint. Saturated, brightly colored orange and blue brushstrokes connect with the empty white ground on which they float by areas of desaturated color in each panel - lavender on the left and a faint blue on the right.

One can imagine that Joan Mitchell, in painting *Merci*, may have experienced a perfected sense of freedom and release, the kind that is attained by pushing mind and body to the extent of their powers. *Merci* is an expression of gratitude, but also an offering. *Merci* presents the gift of resolution and an experience of looking that harmonizes opposing forces: gravity and lightness, being and nothing, cohesion and disintegration.



Joan Mitchell and one of her German Shepherds, ca. 1982

Medium & Technique



New York, 1957. Photo Rudolph Burckhardt

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. In *Merci* this is very important because Mitchell was able to place color quickly over a large area of the surface. The large, unbroken brushstrokes indicate that Mitchell was making marks that reflect the physical limits of her own body.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you feel a sense of balance within *Merci*? How does Mitchell achieve this?
2. How does Mitchell layer and combine warm and cool colors? What is the resulting effect of these combinations?
3. If you wanted to express gratitude through a painting, what colors would you use? Why?
4. Compare the brushstrokes between the cobalt blue areas on the left and right panels. How do they differ? How do the differing brushstrokes give the blue area of color a different feeling or personality?