

## Expressive Mark-Making and the Art of Joan Mitchell

Developed by Maia Cruz Palileo and Brittany Lynn

Edited by Saul Chernick

### THEME

This lesson introduces students to the artwork of Joan Mitchell and uses examples of her work as a springboard to teach the concept of abstract mark-making. This lesson can be incorporated into larger curricular units on a variety of themes including abstraction, mark making, painting, art history, etc.

### DURATION

This lesson can be customized for a 60 or 90 minute period based on the educator's needs.

### AGES

Grades 4-8

### MATERIALS

- » Pencils or pens (for answering worksheets)
- » Roll of craft paper to cover tables and/or hang on walls
- » Various drawing materials (recommendations below)
  - » charcoal
  - » colored pencils
  - » oil pastels
  - » permanent markers
  - » sidewalk chalk or soft pastels

### HANDOUTS

- » Small group worksheet: see page 4.
- » Word cards: Prepare cards with words that cannot be literally illustrated but can be expressed through abstract marks. Examples (Musical, Energetic, Quiet, Brash, Athletic, etc.)

### RESOURCES

- » While two Joan Mitchell images are included in the handout we recommend supplementing these with additional images of artworks by Joan Mitchell and other Abstract Expressionist painters such as Willem De Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Franz Kline, or Jackson Pollock.

**LEARNER OBJECTIVES** (i.e. what students will learn through the process of creating)

**Learn about the art world and practice using interpretive skills**

- » Through observing, discussing and recording their observations of Joan Mitchell's paintings, students will:
  - » Gain a basic introduction to Mitchell's work
  - » Examine the qualities of her abstract marks
  - » Speculate about the physical gestures used to create them

**Developing craft and self-expression**

- » By using abstract marks to represent non-visual concepts, students will:
  - » Learn that the gesture of a mark can convey feelings and ideas
  - » Experiment with a variety of drawing mediums

**Learning to collaborate**

- » Through working in groups, students will:
  - » Engage in creative collaboration by responding organically to each other's marks
  - » Learn to negotiate the collaborative process by ensuring that everyone in the group has opportunities to express themselves equally

**STUDENT OUTCOME** (i.e. what students will create)

- » Students will collaborate in small groups to complete the small group worksheet. This handout is designed to present Mitchell's artwork and create space for students to exchange their candid impressions amongst each other before sharing with the class.
- » Students will select word cards from a deck and create abstract marks on craft paper to represent them. Small groups will fill their craft papers, in whatever manner they choose, with a range of experimental marks.

**LESSON TIMETABLE**

<b>20 Min</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
	Small groups fill out worksheets (10 min)
	Small groups share out their responses, teacher responds to student comments and reviews relevant vocabulary and concepts (10 min)
<b>10 Min</b>	<b>Demonstration</b>
	Explains drawing exercise and models the process
	Discuss collaborative process: Create ground rules for working together and brainstorm ways to respond creatively to each other's marks
<b>25 Min</b>	<b>Worktime</b>
	Distribute materials and assist students as needed
<b>5 Min</b>	<b>Clean Up</b>
	Supervise clean up as needed
<b>10 Min</b>	<b>Group Reflection</b>
	Use reflective questions to guide discussion

**VOCABULARY**

**Abstract**

Pictures that do not show recognizable things; often convey feelings or mood

**Abstract Expressionism**

An artistic style popularized in the 1950s in which artists use abstract line, shape, color and texture to show feelings and moods

**Mark-Making**

Varied ways of making marks, lines, and textures

**Gesture**

The motions used to achieve different kinds of marks

**Collaboration**

Working together as a team, responding creatively to each other's work

## INTRODUCTION

- » Divide students into small groups, distribute handouts, help groups as needed.
- » When the small groups conclude:
  - » Review basic biographical information about Mitchell
  - » Review any vocabulary words unfamiliar to the students.
- » Ask the questions posed in the handout one by one giving representatives from each group turns to share out.
- » Explain that the objective for the day will be to work like Abstract Expressionists by making abstract marks to express feelings and ideas.

## DEMONSTRATION

- » Describe the exercise:
  - » A member of each group selects a word card for the table and each student interprets it with their own abstract marks.
  - » When the group is ready for a new card, someone new will select it. Participants are encouraged to choose new colors and/or mediums for each new word.
  - » Each group will share a large sheet of paper. They are encouraged to think about how they will share the space and consider the entire drawing area.
- » Model the process of interpreting a word from the deck in abstract marks. Take suggestions from the students and show more than one way to interpret any given word.
- » Introduce any unfamiliar mediums
- » Guide students in creating ground rules for collaborating. Suggest ways they can work responsively to each other's marks. Examples may include periodically rotating seats or choosing colors that compliment the marks already present.

**CRITERIA** (i.e. the things you want your students to be mindful of as they work—this can be shared with them right before they begin working)

- » Be thoughtful about the gestures you use to express a word, be prepared to explain your decisions.
- » Please do not draw recognizable things like faces, animals and trees. Use abstract marks only.
- » Think about the entire drawing surface, decide as a group when your piece is finished.

## REFLECTION

- » What words might have inspired these marks? What do you see that makes you say that? Can the artist reveal the word?
- » Let's look at your drawing in relationship to pieces by Mitchell, what similarities and differences do you see?
- » What were the signs that helped your group decide that the drawing was finished?

## TASKS FOR ASSISTANT

In environments where the Lead Teacher has an Assistant Teacher supporting them we recommend adding specific tasks for them into a your lesson plans and sharing them beforehand. Here's an example of this:

- » Help prepare all materials for distribution and cover tables with craft paper
- » Circulate the tables to ensure each group is on task
- » Review key vocabulary terms with each group
- » Monitor the word card deck
- » Hang artworks for display during clean up

## TASKS FOR COUNSELORS

In environments where the Lead Teacher has the support from community partner staff such as "group leaders" and "counselors" we recommend adding specific tasks for them into a your lesson plans and sharing them beforehand. Here's an example of this:

- » Seat students and divide them into small groups
- » Assist with handing out materials and replenishing supplies as needed
- » Help settle disputes between students should any arise
- » Circulate to students that focus better with a counselor nearby

## Worksheet

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### Expressive Mark-Making and the Art of Joan Mitchell

#### DIRECTIONS

Your group will have **10 minutes** to complete this worksheet.

Please follow these instructions carefully:

One person will volunteer to be the **reader**. The reader will read the instructions, information and questions out loud to the group.

One person will volunteer to be the **image sharer**. The image sharer will hold the images up so everyone can see.

One person will volunteer to be the **writer**. The writer will record your group's answers.

1. While the reader reads the introduction out loud, the image sharer will hold the image or pass it in front of the group to make sure everyone has a chance to examine them.
2. The reader will read each discussion question and give the group time to discuss before going on to the next.
3. The writer will write the group's responses under each question.

## Worksheet

### Expressive Mark-Making and the Art of Joan Mitchell

#### INTRODUCTION

Who was Joan Mitchell?

Joan Mitchell (1925-1992) was a visual artist known for her paintings, drawings, and prints. She grew up in Chicago and eventually studied art there too. As a youth, she participated in many sports and activities and even became a competitive figure skater. She is known to have had a life-long love of dogs, the outdoors, and poetry. As an adult she made many trips to France and eventually moved there.

Mitchell made **abstract art**. The word abstract has a lot of meanings but here's the definition that's most useful for today's lesson: **Abstract images are pictures that do not show recognizable things.**

In the 1950s Mitchell was part of a group of painters called the **Abstract Expressionists**. They were called this because they used abstract art to express their emotions. Instead of showing the world as it normally appears, they used line, shape, color and texture to show feelings and moods.

In order to recognize artworks in the Abstract Expressionist style keep an eye out for:

- » Brushstrokes, drips and splatters that are added on purpose
- » Marks that show how the artist moved the brush or pencil around (these are also known as gestures)
- » Pictures that express a feelings and emotions without showing recognizable things



Joan Mitchell in her New York studio, 1957.  
Photo by Rudolph Burckhardt.

## Worksheet

### Expressive Mark-Making and the Art of Joan Mitchell

#### QUESTIONS

(there are no right or wrong answers, only observations)

1. List 5 words that describe the lines in these paintings.
2. These artworks are as big as one of the walls in this room. Can you describe some of the physical motions that you think the artist had to do to make the marks you see in the paintings?
3. What words would you use to describe the mood or feeling you get from the paintings? List them.

Painting 1

Painting 2



## Worksheet

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Expressive Mark-Making and the Art of Joan Mitchell

### PAINTING 1:

*Untitled*, 1962, oil on canvas, 63 3/4 x 51 1/8 inches.





## Worksheet

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Expressive Mark-Making and the Art of Joan Mitchell

### PAINTING 2:

*Cercando un Ago*, 1957, oil on canvas, 95 x 88 1/8 inches.

