



Joan Mitchell

JOAN MITCHELL, *Beauvais*

1986, oil on canvas diptych  
110 1/4 x 157 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.



Lake Michigan, 1946. Photo Barney Rosset

## Her work & *Beauvais*

Joan Mitchell's artworks communicate, through color and gesture, the feelings and memories of people, places and things in her life that were important to her. She said, "My paintings repeat a feeling about Lake Michigan, or water, or fields...it's more like a poem...and that's what I want to paint." The myriad things that comprised and moved within her landscapes - water, sky, trees, flowers, dogs - created images and memories that all went into her paintings.

*Beauvais*, titled after a town north of Paris that has a well-known gothic cathedral, is a large painting that evokes a vivid landscape with an expansive sense of space. White brushstrokes around the edges of each panel, mingled with a bright, soft yellow, create an atmospheric sensation of weather, water and sky permeated with light.

The paint in *Beauvais* suggests matter in flux between physical states. Oranges, greens and browns seem more solid and anchored in the foreground. The areas of blue paint push forward as well, yet lead like passages back into and beyond the painting. The blues feel permeable, calling to mind a material through which light, objects, or bodies may pass: perhaps solid like a lens or colored glass, liquid like a body of water, or open like air and sky.



Vétheuil, 1984. Photo Édouard Boubat

## Medium & Technique

Oil paint is made of pigments - substances, often dry powders, that have rich, strong color - mixed with vegetable oils. Colors are very carefully selected and placed in *Beauvais*. Joan Mitchell would stand back from the canvas and look for long periods of time, decide where the next mark should go, then approach the canvas to place color quickly and confidently. Each mark she made reflects the movement of her arm and body. The arc of her arm can be seen in the brushstrokes in many of her paintings, especially at the top where she was extending her reach.



New York, 1957. Photo Rudolph Burckhardt

## Questions for discussion

1. List five words that come to mind when you look at *Beauvais*.
2. Which colors make the painting feel warm? Which make it feel cool?
3. Which colors seem to come forward and which seem to recede?
4. Imagine a landscape. Try to identify every part of it that you can.
5. Identify several different kinds of weather. What colors do you associate with each?