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 1960s, she participated in the conceptual art movement and created large-scale murals. Mitchell’s work is characterized by its bold use of color and energetic brushstrokes. She is remembered for her large-scale works on paper and multiple panels made it possible for her to create expansive works on four panels, such as the large painting "Ferns and Gardenias," which was inspired by her friendship with French poet and critic René Char.

Her work & Minnesota

Mitchell’s work is grounded in the natural world, of light, color, space, and form. They transform remembered landscapes and experiences through a masterful use of color and remarkable ability to attain balance and stillness in the midst of dynamic motion. They are full of intense feeling. Like a poet, Joan Mitchell strove for precision. Her canvases contain nothing superfluous. Although her work might initially appear spontaneous and immediate, she worked slowly and deliberately, with an intense focus on the relationships of colors to one another, on the structure and space of the whole canvas, on gesture and line. Her multi-panel paintings bear witness to a palpable kindness to poems in their structure and inherent rhythm. These multi-panel paintings were not the result of a piecemeal process of putting the elements together, but rather of a masterful use of color and remarkable ability to attain balance and stillness in the midst of dynamic motion. They are full of intense feeling.

Medium & Technique

Mitchell used the motion of her whole body to make marks, but each was also a carefully considered layer. Each mark in the painting was made quickly, but Mitchell took the time to ensure the integrity of each layer of color, or ground, as she put it. Oil paint can be applied quickly. Oil paint is made of pigments – substances, often dry powders, that have rich, strong color – mixed with vegetable oil. This mixture creates a paint 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 ground, Mitchell’s practice was to paint large works in sections.

Questions for discussion

1. Yellow is an important color in Mitchell’s work. How many kinds of yellow can you find? Name an object that contains inversions; yellow predominates in the first, while lavender does so in the last.

2. Black plays an important role in Minnesota. 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 Minnesota unique? 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.

Autumn by Joan Mitchell

The rusty leaves crumble and crackle. Blue haze hangs from the dimmed sky. The fields are carpeted with sun-kissed stalks – Wind rushes by.

The last red berries hang from the thumb-tree, The last red leaf falls to the ground. Blackness, through the trees and bushes, Comes without sound.

December 1935 (age 10)

Image of Autumn by Joan Mitchell