



Joan Mitchell

JOAN MITCHELL, *Untitled*

1992, pastel on paper

29 1/2 x 21 3/4 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 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.

In 1955, she moved to the city of Paris, France, and in 1967 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 Joan; she owned many in the course of her life and their names can often be found in the titles of her paintings.



Joan Mitchell with her dogs, photo by Edouard Boubat, 1984

Joan Mitchell painted throughout her entire life. In addition to oil paintings, she made drawings, especially with pastels and watercolors, and did several kinds of printmaking. Mitchell died in 1992.

Medium & Technique

Pastels are made of powdered pigments – substances, often dry powders that have rich, strong color – compressed with a binding agent into sticks, much like chalk. There are various types of pastels, including dry pastels, which can be either soft or hard, and oil pastels, which are more buttery and dense. Mitchell preferred traditional materials, so she used high quality dry soft pastels in her drawings on paper in order to achieve the richness of color so important to her work. The dry softness of this medium allowed her to create areas of texture, smudged transparency and bold opaque lines. The powdery, ephemeral, and delicate nature of the pastel is inseparable from the lyrical quality of the work.

Pastels in Mitchell's studio, 1979



Her work & *Untitled*

William Wordsworth, a poet whom Joan Mitchell admired immensely, said that poems were “powerful emotions recollected in tranquility.” The same words could be used to describe Mitchell’s artwork, including this untitled pastel drawing, which she created in the last year of her life. It unites the seemingly opposite sensations of intense emotion and quiet tranquility.

While this pastel drawing retains the sense of gesture and movement that permeate Mitchell’s paintings, it also presents a gentleness and delicacy, a more heightened sense of fragility, than paint on canvas can convey. Her lines feel simultaneously agitated and controlled, tactile and optical, energetic and still. Forms seem to emerge and dissolve simultaneously, hovering around a dense central core. While some areas are densely layered with multiple colors – often blended and smudged by Mitchell’s fingertips – others feel luminous and airy. The tooth of the paper is visible, and one can almost sense the paper breathing around the areas of dense color, its white surface activated by its relation to the colors.

Mitchell was an abstract artist; she did not intend for this pastel to “look like” a specific place, person, or thing. Instead she was interested in feelings, and memories of feelings related to a place, a tree, a flower, a friend, her dogs, Lake Michigan. This work certainly evokes natural forms – one can easily detect the sensations of trees and landscapes. Its blues evoke skies and water, its greens grass, trees, and other vegetation. It could also suggest, through its vertical format and dense central mass, a human portrait. But more strongly than any allusion to the literal world, it exudes intense and dense emotion and feeling.



Joan Mitchell in studio, photo by David Boeno, 1983

Questions for discussion

1. Which different colors of pastel did Joan Mitchell use in this drawing? Can you guess which colors she applied to the paper first? Can you find areas where she blended colors with her fingers?
2. Can you imagine the movement of Mitchell’s hand as she made this drawing? Choose a colored line and describe how it moves your gaze around the drawing. Does it lead your eyes up, down, diagonally, across and/or in curves?
3. Some parts of this pastel are dense with marks, while others are virtually empty. Why might Mitchell have composed her drawing this way? Can you find areas where she layered white on top of other colors? Why do you think she did this?
4. What feelings do you think Joan Mitchell was trying to express? What do you see that makes you think that?
5. This piece is untitled. If you could give it a title, what would it be, and why?