



## 15 Morris Louis

1912 – 1962 American

### 1-53

Magna on canvas, on verso initialed, titled twice, dated Spring 1962 on the gallery labels and inscribed with the Beyeler inventory #6044 on the gallery label and variously 79 ½ x 10 ¼ in, 201.9 x 26 cm

#### PROVENANCE

André Emmerich Gallery, New York  
 Waddington Galleries, London  
 Kasmin Ltd., London  
 Waddington Galleries, London  
 Charles Gordon, London  
 Waddington Galleries, London  
 Galerie Beyeler, Basel, circa 1971 – 1972  
*Impressionist and Modern Painting and Sculpture, Contemporary Art*, Sotheby & Co., London, July 2, 1975, lot 115  
 Paolo Cantini, New York  
 Waddington Fine Art, Montreal  
 Acquired from the above by the present Prominent Private Collection, Montreal, 1979

#### LITERATURE

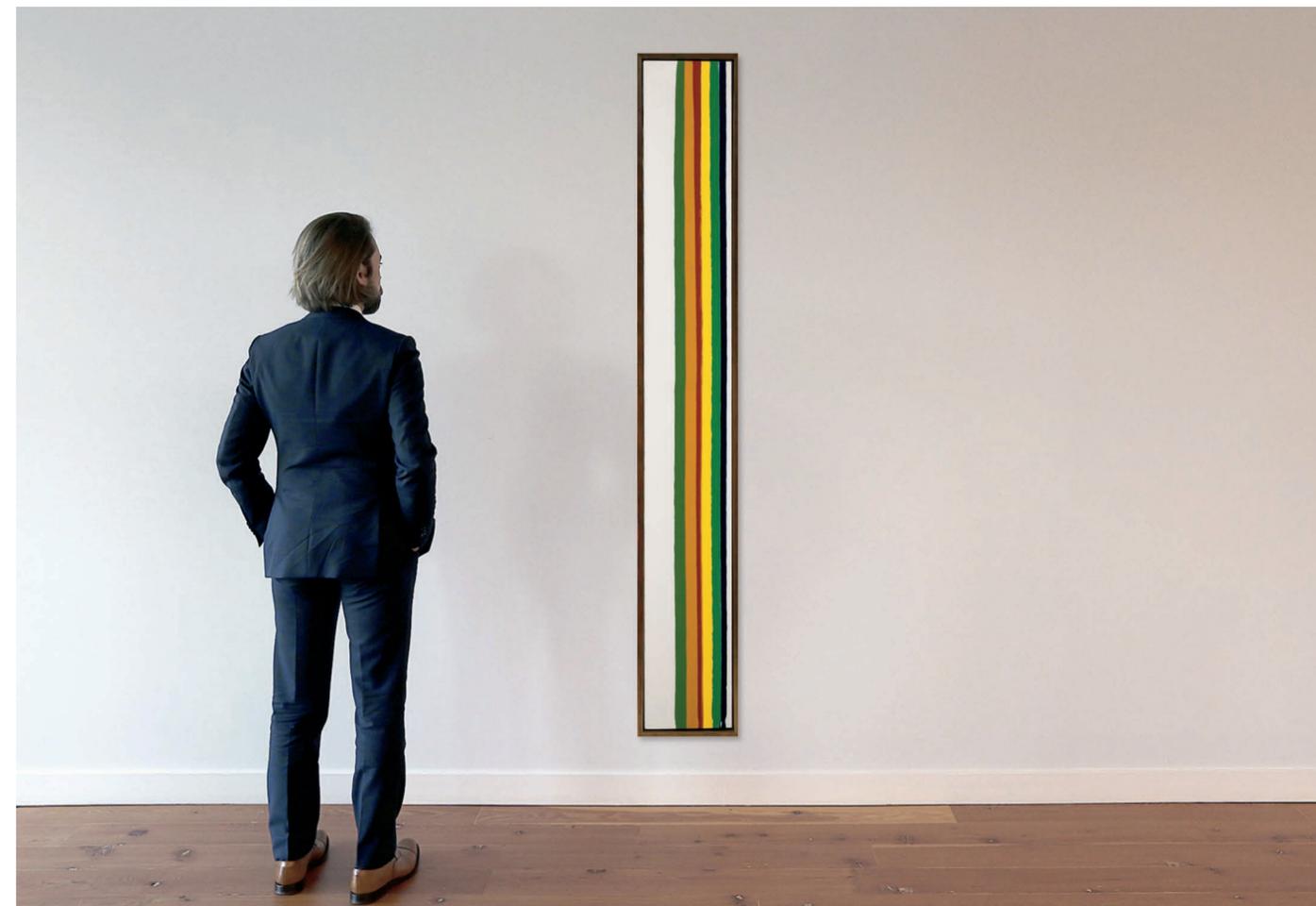
Diane Upright, *Morris Louis: The Complete Paintings*, 1985, reproduced page 188, listed pages 239 and 245, catalogue #613

Morris Louis is concerned with the particular kind of visual excitement that only colour can create. His pictures are sensuous and hedonistic, involved with the careful relation of hues.... He does not choose his hues according to any apparent scheme, but the differing widths, densities, and brightness of the colour bands are adjusted to this end.... The soft edges of his paint-soaked forms are contrasted with the regularity of the designs.

—IRVING SANDLER<sup>1</sup>

ALTHOUGH ONLY TEN INCHES in width, this slender painting from the artist's final year is quite simply a *tour de force* of luminous colour and assured composition. Morris Louis's 1-53 is from the artist's highly prized final series, the *Stripe* paintings. Initially referred to by the artist as "pillars or columns," these works are considered amongst his finest. The *Stripe* paintings present vertical bands of colour compactly arranged into an undisrupted spectrum. Blake Gopnik, art critic for the *Washington Post*, described them as "undiluted colours which glow like petrified rainbows... lines drawn across a surface, coloured lines so big, and so devoid of any telltale signs of human making. They're more like immaculately rendered pictures of the artist's mark, hugely magnified."<sup>2</sup>

The *Stripe* paintings mark the culmination of Louis's career, painted in the final months before his death on September 7, 1962. With its snugly painted linear strips, arranged one alongside the next, 1-53 is distinguished by both the range of colours, the complex overlapping of the six chromatic bands, and the tight cropping on all sides. Here each colour is soaked into the very fibre of untreated canvas, the bands of brilliant pigment



in counterpoint to a near-equal area of raw fabric. The bright columns of colour are not uniform—each hue seemingly determining its width. A deep red is the narrowest, followed by black over blue, intermingled with broader expanses of green, ochre and yellow. These stripes are not just bundled together; the relative area of each hue is in a delicate rhythmic balance across what presents as a multiplicity of individual colours.

*Stripe* paintings are held in museums such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, and the Tel Aviv Museum, to name but a few. Each painting in a series that numbered 230 is a contrapuntal display of the artist's mastery of pictorial splendour, with a newly asserted sense of overall control. While Louis's technique is veiled in secrecy, there is speculation that some of this new-found control was the result of "daubers," long sticks wrapped at the end with cheesecloth, used as both a delivery mechanism for colour to the canvas and to guide the medium as it cascaded down the full length of the canvas.

1-53 belongs to this group of paintings. Using this method, the width of each stripe could be controlled to some degree, allowing

each colour a continuous near-straight border with its neighbours. John Elderfield in his 1986 MOMA exhibition catalogue described the abutted and overlapping stripes as creating an "illusion of an almost corrugated surface, [something] Louis simply breaks up, punctuating close-value warm hues with one or two stripes that are darker... from the opposite side of the spectrum... to create an overall optical flicker." Louis was equally interested in the varying degrees of transparency, translucency and opacity of each colour. Wrote Elderfield, "The smaller size of these pictures renders the weave of the canvas more visible; as a result the colour seems right in the weave as quite never before."<sup>3</sup> Although barely perceptible to the naked eye, certain colours recede while others begin to float, introducing chromatic vibrations.

The closely cropped top and bottom edges of 1-53 are similar to the astonishingly beautiful *No. 11* (1961), in the collection of the de Young/Legion of Honor, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The composition of both works highlights the confidence of Louis in 1961 – 1962. Cropping the top and bottom was an issue of considerable dispute with the artist's most vocal and influential supporter, Clement Greenberg. While they agreed

on the usefulness of active cropping at the sides, they disagreed about this treatment for the top and bottom. Greenberg preferred a margin, whereas Louis felt that his pictures were better when cropped on all sides.

As a testament to Greenberg's influence, of the total 230 *Stripe* paintings, only 26 were cropped, or marked to be cropped, according to Louis's original intentions, making 1-53 part of a very small sub-group of the series. The close cropping unleashes several unique characteristics. It precludes the colour bands being read as the product of drawing and is responsible for the apparent increased velocity as stripes descend, which in turn reinforces the vertical reading of the paint surface. We are encouraged to grasp all the stripes, all at once, a kaleidoscope of colour. The opposite stance, a horizontal reading from side to side, remains, allowing for the more intimate discovery of individual colour relationships. Again, Elderfield points out the overall prismatic effect, "as if Louis rearranges the spectrum at will and presents us not with stripes of colour but with a multicoloured beam of light."<sup>4</sup>

Louis's medium Magna was an oil-miscible acrylic resin paint that contained the pigment, an acrylic resin medium and a stabilizing agent to keep the pigment and resin in suspension. It could be thinned in one of two ways—with turpentine or by the addition of resin; each method created a differing result. Turpentine produced a matte surface to the colours, while the resin heightened the gloss, providing the mature artist with a full palette of options. In 1960, the manufacturer Bocour Artists Colors even began to produce a specific formulation of Magna in gallon tins rather than tubes for Louis and his artistic confidant Kenneth Noland. Leonard Bocour, as requested, reduced the beeswax content to produce a 50/50 mix of resin and turpentine with the consistency of molasses, which enhanced the malleability and control essential to the success of the *Stripe* pictures.

Though Louis was known as an intensely private artist, choosing to live in Washington, DC, rather than New York, Greenberg quickly became part of his inner circle after being introduced by Noland. Greenberg visited Washington twice a year, the two regularly exchanged letters, and in 1961 to 1962, Louis began traveling to New York once a month. Greenberg visited Louis in Washington in late March 1962 and was confronted by the new sophisticated group of *Stripe* paintings to which 1-53 belongs. "As usual, your paintings continue to haunt me," Greenberg wrote. "But it is the first time I felt they were beyond my eye. Which, for me, means everything."<sup>5</sup> Greenberg had also written a year earlier with the following encouragement for Louis's increasingly

slender canvases: "I find that the smaller you paint lately, the more pungent your pictures get.... Leaving less bare canvas on either side strengthens the picture, makes it more emphatic."<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising then that Greenberg, when invited to lead the Emma Lake Artists' Workshop in 1962, placed Louis's new paintings front and centre for discussion and debate. Louis's influence was immediate on the artists who attended the workshop, including that year Montreal artist Guido Molinari. Greenberg followed up by providing the catalogue introduction for *Three New American Painters: Louis, Noland, Olitski*, presented at the Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, in January 1963, just four months after the artist's death. That same year, *Morris Louis, 1912 - 1962: Memorial Exhibition of Paintings from 1954 - 1960* was also presented at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. And in 1968, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa organized a solo exhibition of the artist's work.

In 1962, Louis was at the height of his artistic abilities and his output of *Stripe* canvases grew threefold. The colour combinations were sophisticated; waterfalls of colour cascade from top to bottom of each painting, creating luminous rainbows of light from seemingly incompatible hues. The result so clear in 1-53 is almost musical, a beautiful melody, expertly rendered from notes and stanzas that when first encountered have a resistant dissonance, the shock of something truly new.

We thank Gary Dufour, adjunct associate professor at the University of Western Australia, for contributing the above essay. A modern and contemporary art specialist, Dufour was formerly the senior curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery (1988 - 1995) and chief curator /deputy director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia (1995 - 2013).

1. Irving Sandler, "New York Letter," *Art International*, no. 5 (October 1961): 56.
2. Blake Gopnik, "Morris Louis: A Painter of a Different Stripe," *Washington Post*, November 12, 2006, 85-86.
3. John Elderfield, *Morris Louis* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986), exhibition catalogue, 74.
4. *Ibid.*, 80.
5. Greenberg to Morris Louis, March 23, 1962, Morris Louis Archives, quoted in Diane Upright, *Morris Louis: The Complete Paintings* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1985), 29.
6. Greenberg to Morris Louis, May 3, 1961, quoted in *ibid.*, 27.

**ESTIMATE: \$400,000 - 600,000**

