



17 Joan Mitchell

1925 – 1992 American

Untitled

oil on canvas, circa 1949
47 × 37 ¼ in, 119.4 × 94.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of Sally Perry, sister of the Artist,
Santa Barbara, California
By descent within the family
Private Collection, New York

LITERATURE

“Sunday Home Tour,” *Santa Barbara News-Press*,
January 31, 1965, page B8, a photo of this painting
reproduced in Sally Perry’s home in Santa Barbara

“WHAT EXCITES ME as I paint is what one color is doing to another and what they are both doing in terms of space and doing to each other,” the painter Joan Mitchell once told an interviewer. “I don’t get excited from an idea. I get feeling from the outside and I get moved by their colors together on a flat surface.”¹ In *Untitled*, Mitchell layers a jumble of biomorphic shapes against a grey background in a manner that blends still life and landscape formats. Scooped and hollowed but almost mystically inert in their solidity, the shapes variously recall a shell, an egg, two hooded figures, and the moon. Confident, muscular planes of colour extend these objects out of observable bounds, interlacing them in and out of the hazy surround. Spectral and vivacious, this early canvas was painted when Mitchell was only 24 and functions like a studio in and of itself. Here is Mitchell lining up her painterly tricks, thinking and feeling her way through brushy and modeled passages of paint, taking glee in troubling the figure/ground relationships that would define her paintings for the rest of her life.

Mitchell’s spatial virtuosity was informed by an extraordinary early cultural education. She was born into a wealthy Chicago

family, and her and her sister Sally’s childhood brimmed with literature, art and sport—the tutelage guided equally by her mother, a poet and editor of *Poetry* magazine, and her father, a dermatologist and Sunday painter. The Art Institute of Chicago, with its meandering galleries and impressive collection of French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, was at the centre of this early education. She began taking weekend classes at the museum in second grade, analyzing the strokes and composition of painters such as Georges Seurat, Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh and Claude Monet.² But of Europe’s modern masters who inspired her, it was van Gogh who Mitchell singled out in a 1979 interview with the art critic Eleanor Munro, calling him her “first passion.”³ His fervent use of colour and irreverent, visible brush-strokes to capture the emotional timbre of landscape have a direct connection to Mitchell’s mature canvases, which she steadily spun from a range of emotional states, points in time and landscapes in recollection.

At 12 and on her father’s urging, Mitchell declared her intention to become a painter. Rigorous study followed in adult art classes through her high-school years, and after a short stint at Smith College, she decided to enroll as a full-time art student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (hereafter SAIC). While her first two summers of college were spent painting *en plein air* at SAIC’s summer school, Ox-Bow in Saugatuck, on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, her last two summers of college were spent in Guanajuato, Mexico. Mexico was a popular destination during the war years for modern American artists, and provided the occasion for Mitchell to briefly meet two towering figures in the contemporaneous art pantheon, the muralists José Clemente Orozco and David Siqueiros. The effect of these two social realist painters on a university art student steeped in European modernism might be surprising, yet recent scholarship has demonstrated that the formal contributions of the Mexican muralists to American abstraction were as important as the lessons of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European modernists.⁴



Joan Mitchell (right) with her sister Sally Perry in Santa Barbara, 1976



Joan Mitchell with her sister Sally Perry in France, 1976



In 1948, Mitchell sailed to Paris on a coveted SAIC scholarship and spent time there in a cold, dim studio grappling with the legacy and spatial lessons of the living European giants: Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. Informed by Surrealism, Cubism and Futurism, she progressed vigorously through figures, still lifes and landscapes, first in Paris and later in a better-lit studio in the Mediterranean town of Le Lavendou. She described her work during this period, 1948–1949, as “moving Cubistically, whatever you would call it, into abstraction.”⁵ As *Untitled* demonstrates, Mitchell loosens the hard geometry of a Cubist grid, cracking it open to reveal surging jigsaw puzzles that intertwined with their surroundings. The blacks, whites, charcoals, pewters and olive greens endow the painting with a quality by turns man-made and organic, while the hazy grey landscape is punctuated by canary yellow accents that introduce a sunny element into an otherwise staid colour scheme. Mitchell gifted the painting to her sister Sally, who hung it in the living room of her California home.

At the end of 1949, Mitchell returned to the United States and immersed herself in the newly ascendant Abstract Expressionist milieu (also called the New York School). She befriended the

sweet, hard-edged painter Franz Kline and the more lyrically inclined contrarian Willem de Kooning, as well as a younger brood of painters and poets who would eventually come to be known as the Second Generation. This new geography and social scene coincided with her last figural painting. Within a year, she had been marked for success by her inclusion in the infamous *Ninth Street Show*, an invitational exhibition of works by 60 abstract artists held in a vacated storefront in 1951 that became a turning point for American gestural abstraction. She premiered her first New York solo exhibition in early 1952 with a suite of heroic-sized paintings at the New Gallery, which a critic for *ARTnews* praised as a “savagely debut.”⁶

By the late 1950s, Mitchell was exhibiting widely: in New York, in other regional art centres in the US, in European cities, including Paris, Bern, Milan, Munich and Venice, as well as in São Paulo and Osaka. She moved back to France full time in 1960 and remained there for the rest of her life. Mitchell’s paintings continued to expand over the next 30 years, becoming bigger, looser and more confident as strokes, drips and pats of primary and earthen colours continued to push and pull against each other in

fierce and rhythmic frustrations of figure and ground—an abiding interest already on display in the spirited manner in which *Untitled* questions the nature of interior and exterior space.

We thank Erin Kimmel for contributing the above essay. Kimmel is an art writer and PhD candidate in art history at Stony Brook University. She recently authored a catalogue essay for the Joan Mitchell retrospective exhibition that opens in September 2021 at SFMOMA and will travel to the Baltimore Museum of Art in spring 2022 as well as to the Louis Vuitton Foundation, Paris, in 2023.

1. Joan Mitchell, transcript of an interview by Yves Michaud, 7 August 1989, with Mitchell’s edits, Joan Mitchell Foundation, New York; published in French translation as Yves Michaud, “Entretiens,” *Joan Mitchell*, ed. Daniel Abadie and Henry-Claude Cousseau, trans. Xavier Carrère (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994), 29–31.

2. Sarah Robert’s translation; original in French: “J’ai appris à Chicago, à l’Art Institute. Quand j’étais jeune, les leçons avaient lieu dans le sous-sol de l’institut, sous les salles du musée. Et dans

les salles, Seurat, Cézanne, van Gogh, Lautrec, Monet... Quand j’étais enfant, je croyais que toute la peinture était française à cause des noms.” Philippe Dagen, “La fureur de Joan Mitchell,” in *Le Monde*, August 2–3, 1992, 11.

3. Joan Mitchell, interview by Eleanor Munro, “Joan Mitchell,” transcript by Pat King, [1977], box 31, folder 25, 23, Eleanor Munro Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

4. For an overview of this argument, see Barbara Haskell, ed., *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2020).

5. Joan Mitchell, interview by Linda Nochlin, Archives of American Art, oral history, April 16, 1986.

6. Betty Holiday, “Reviews and Previews. Joan Mitchell,” *ARTnews* 50 (January 1952): 46.

ESTIMATE: \$250,000 – 350,000