



City Landscape

1955

by Joan Mitchell

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education

Division of Teacher Programs

The Crown Family Educator Resource Center

ART
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Joan Mitchell (American, 1925–1992)

City Landscape, 1955

Oil on linen

80 x 80 in. (203.2 x 203.2 cm)

Gift of Society for Contemporary American Art,
1958.193

Joan Mitchell was born in Chicago in 1926. Encouraged by her parents, she developed a love of poetry and art at a young age. She studied at Smith College (1942–1944) before attending the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1944–1949) where she began her formal art training. In Chicago, she was introduced to the late 19th- and early 20th-century paintings of Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Vasily Kandinsky, and Henri Matisse on view in the museum. Influenced by their work, Mitchell produced mostly **figurative** work until her first move to New York in 1947 when she saw the abstract paintings of artists such as Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. These artists, who came to be known as **Abstract Expressionists**, were developing a style that relied on abstraction and dynamic application of paint to convey strong emotional and self-expressive content. In 1951, Mitchell's recent work was included in the groundbreaking **Ninth Street Show**, establishing her as one of the few female painters from the **New York School** to gain critical and public acclaim. Beginning in 1955, Mitchell spent her winters painting in New York and her summers in Paris. In 1959, she moved to Paris and later settled in the town of Vétheuil, about an hour outside of the city, where she lived until her death in 1992.

During the early 1950s, the decade in which *City Landscape* was produced, Mitchell created many paintings that suggest urban environments. With its pulsating strands and slashes of bright color, the work evokes memories of bustling cities that Mitchell recalled from her travels in the American Midwest. In *City Landscape*, all the nerves of a vibrant city seem gathered in a tangled mass of pale pink, scarlet, mustard, **sienna**, and black pigments which are counterbalanced by vertical strokes and drips. White blocklike forms in both the foreground and background stabilize the throbbing center. The effect is not unlike that of city streets and surrounding architecture, where the activity of moving traffic and pedestrians surges between the solid structure of buildings.

Although strongly influenced by Abstract Expressionism, Mitchell did not consider herself an **action painter** like **Jackson Pollock**, the leader of the movement, who relied on chance in creating his “drip paintings.” While Mitchell shared with Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists a **gestural** and **painterly** technique, she conceived of her paintings less as spontaneous acts than deliberate and controlled transpositions of her memories of landscapes or cityscapes and of her frame of mind at the time. In describing her working process, Mitchell stated that she painted from a distance—physically positioning herself at a distance from her large canvases while planning her next brushstroke. Pollock, on the other hand, spoke of the importance of “literally being in the painting” by setting the canvas on the floor, walking above and around it, and dripping, pouring, or flinging paint onto the surface. Works of other Abstract Expressionists also evoke cities or city life, such as De Kooning (whose *Excavation* is in the Art Institute's permanent collection) and Kline, whose paintings suggest bridges and buildings. The rich, varied palette and more calculated structure, however, distinguish Mitchell's interpretation of the urban scene from that of her contemporaries.

Glossary

Abstract Expressionism (the New York School): the art movement characterized by monumental canvases and a bold new visual vocabulary and technique that emerged in New York after World War II; the first American style to have worldwide impact. Inspired by Surrealism's emphasis on the unconscious, Abstract Expressionist artists sought spontaneous personal expression through dynamic applications of paint. Innovative approaches included the poured, dripped, or splattered pigment of Jackson Pollock who used house-painters' brushes and Mark Rothko's application of stained color with sponges or soaked cloth.

action painting: a style of painting in which paint is spontaneously dribbled, splashed, or smeared onto the canvas rather than being carefully applied; emphasizes the physical act of painting as essential to the finished work

figurative: describes artwork that is representational or derived from real objects

gestural: of or relating to the movement of the body to express an idea, sentiment, or attitude; in the application of paint, the use of sweeping, expansive movements in which the actions of the artist's hand are evident. Abstract Expressionist painting, with its expressive brushwork, is often described as gestural.

Jackson Pollock: influential American painter and a major figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement; best known for his "drip paintings"

Ninth Street Show: a historic exhibition held in 1951, conceived and organized by artists, representing the post-war New York avant-garde, known as the New York School

painterly: a style of painting marked by openness of form, with shapes distinguished by variations of color rather than by outline or contour. There are often visible brushstrokes with a rough impasto or thick surface.

sienna: a natural yellow-brown pigment

Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

- Have your students spend some time looking at *City Landscape* without telling them the title of the work. Have students discuss the artwork beginning with basic compositional elements. How has the artist used different types of lines? Shapes? Colors? How do these elements direct your eye around the painting? How do you think the artist made this painting? What tools and/or techniques did she use? (large/small brushes, dripping paint, layering paint, scraping, etc.) What is the subject of the painting you are looking at? What clues are given in the painting that makes you say that?
- Have your students look at the painting for a short period of time and write down 3 adjectives to describe what they see. Share with the rest of the class. Next, have students write a sentence about the painting using their 3 adjectives. Have students take turns reading their sentence to the class creating a class poem.
- Joan Mitchell often painted landscapes or cityscapes based on her memories of the place. Have your students choose a place that they have visited to be the subject of a painting. Before beginning the painting, have your students write a brief paragraph describing the place (sights, sounds, smells, tastes) and/or how they felt during their visit. They should be as descriptive as possible. Next have students paint their remembered place based on what they have written. Students should experiment with different paint, tools, and painting techniques to complete their work. Their descriptive paragraph can be used as a label and/or artist statement.
- *City Landscape* is composed of many small, gestural brushstrokes, like a flurry of unreadable handwriting. After looking at *City Landscape* and discussing the mark-making and brushstrokes, have students select a favorite poem or song lyric or write something of their own. Using ink and brush or calligraphy pens, have students write out their selection while thinking of their handwriting as a form of mark-making. Will they make some words bigger than others? Will certain lines overlap or be written one on top of the other? How does their brushwork relate to the content of the poem/lyrics? Remind students to use the entire sheet of paper for their composition. Display completed artwork and lead the students in a discussion of their work.
- Joan Mitchell made figurative paintings until she moved to New York in 1947 and first saw the work of Abstract Expressionists like Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, whose gestural abstraction greatly influenced the direction of her work. After looking at examples of de Kooning and Kline's work alongside Mitchell's, ask students to consider

the importance of influence and inspiration in making art. What is the difference between influence and copying? Ask students who influences or inspires them in their own lives? Have students research an artist that interests them and make an artwork influenced by the artist. Ask them to consider what changes they will make to that artist's style and subject matter to make it their own.

Joan Mitchell, *City Landscape*, 1955.

Produced by the Department of Museum Education
The Art Institute of Chicago

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