

Student of Light

The unexpected gift of a set of watercolors would change Sam Francis—and the face of contemporary American painting—forever.

The remarkable painting career of Sam Francis began with a plane crash in Arizona. It was 1944, and, a year earlier, mid-way through his undergraduate studies at the University of California at Berkeley, Francis had joined the US Army Air Corps.

Pursuing a lifelong dream of flying, he hoped to run reconnaissance missions during World War II, but when a plane he was piloting in a training exercise crashed, Francis sustained a spinal injury so severe that he was hospitalized for the next three years.

During his lengthy convalescence, he was given a set of watercolors and encouraged to paint as a therapeutic distraction. It was a gift that would change his life.

Luminous Explorations

Confined on his back, with all but his head and arms immobilized, Francis became a devoted student of light, scrutinizing every pattern of daylight on the ceiling. He memorized the color processes of sunrise and sunset. He watched and he

Painted, experimenting with washes and brushstrokes, seeking the best techniques to translate the visual and emotional energies of light as he perceived them.

The luminosity that Francis was able to achieve in those early watercolors profoundly affected his working methods. A defining innovation of many of his later large-scale

works was his perfection of a near-translucent application of oil paint to mimic the vibrant, limpid washes of watercolor.

In 1948, Francis was well enough to return to UC Berkeley, this time as an art major; while there, he began exhibiting his work. Both the curriculum of the art program, and the activity of the larger San Francisco art scene, reflected the influence of Abstract Expressionism.

Francis's paintings at that time were large-scale explorations of light and color in which the entire surface of the composition was activated. His work from this period is often included in Color Field discussions, but unlike the clear shapes and pure multiforms of Rothko's atmospheric color planes, Francis's large monochromes depicted animated, hive-like spaces, with textured surfaces resembling brain tissue, or tightly packed petals or platelets.

Final Courage

In 1950, Francis completed his art degree and moved to Paris, where he

Photo courtesy of Sam Francis Foundation, California



Sam Francis (American, 1923–1994)

1923

June 25, 1923

Born Samuel Lewis Francis in San Mateo, California

1941-43

Studies botany, psychology and medicine at UC Berkeley

1943

Begins service in the US Army Air Corps, training as a fighter pilot

1944

Suffers a severe spinal injury during an emergency landing; begins painting

1945-48

Continues painting during convalescence with increasing interest in light and color

1948-50

Returns to UC Berkeley, studies studio art and art history

1950

Moves to Paris; influenced by Bonnard, Matisse and, most of all, Monet



Pure Color

Sam Francis' bold and atmospheric abstract compositions, such as *Untitled* (1973, watercolor and gouache on paper, 14x10³/₄), depict highly activated planes laced with richly expressive color.

1994

1955
First major museum exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland

1956
Described by *Time* as "the hottest American painter in Paris"; exhibits at MoMa

1957
Travels to Japan and paints a large auditorium mural for Sogetsu School in Tokyo

1961
Hospitalized with tuberculosis of kidneys for a year; paints many watercolors

1970-1985
Travels extensively and paints prolifically; commissioned for large-scale work

1986
Marries his fifth wife, the painter Margaret Smith, with whom he has his fourth child

November 4, 1994
Dies of prostate cancer in Santa Monica, California


was exposed to many important and lasting influences: Monet's "Water Lilies"; the glowing watercolors of Cezanne; and the expressive use of color in the works of Bonnard and Matisse. He began showing his work in major exhibitions and became an almost instant international success.

In the mid-1950s, he traveled extensively in Japan, where he was compelled by the symbolic significance of negative space in Asian paintings. The effects of this decade of travel on his work included paintings in vastly different styles, and a steadily increasing use of white space—from pieces in which

negative space is used to activate calligraphic lines or biomorphic forms, to "edge" paintings in which color appears only as a slim frame or window onto an energizing void.

Francis never settled on a single style; he was in pursuit of a pure understanding of light and color, and opened himself to as many inspirations as possible. A host of influences informed his paintings—one sees his two years of study in botany, medicine and psychology; his lifelong love of literature and philosophy; his attraction to Zen Buddhism; his love of flight; and his love of nature in the light and life force emanating from

his work. One sees, as well, a human being who wanted more time.

In the last year of his life, when illness robbed him of the use of his right arm, Francis grew dejected because he could no longer paint. Then, in a final burst of courage and devotion to the activity that had saved his life, he began to paint with his left hand, awkwardly, and without the comfort of knowing what kind of work might come from such a clumsy instrument. But he had to try. He completed 150 paintings. 

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