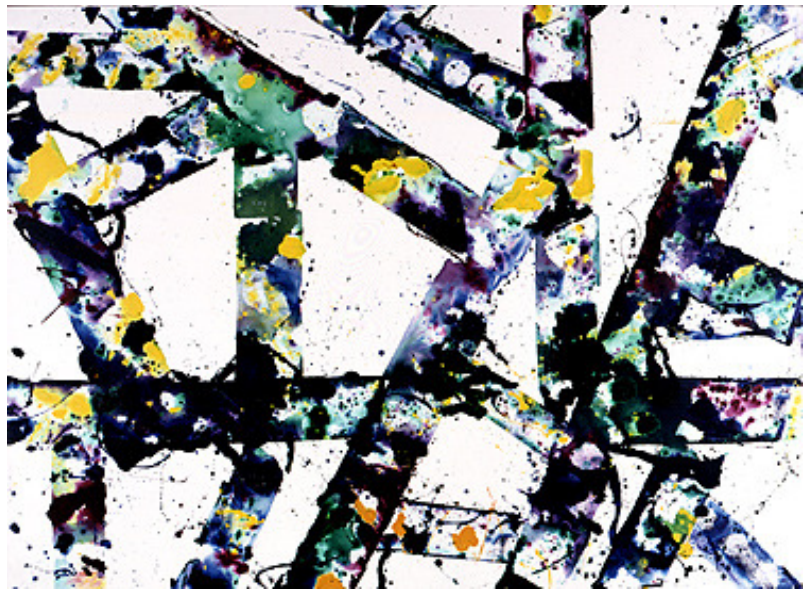


SAM FRANCIS

In the Anderson Collection

Sam Francis
The Beaubourg, 1977
oil on canvas
86 3/4" x 118 1/4"



The California artist Sam Francis was born in 1923 in San Mateo. He turned to art as a form of therapy while recovering from injuries sustained in a plane crash in 1943 while serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps. While in the hospital, Francis was given a box of paints to relieve his frustration and boredom. Painting thus became for him “a way back to life.”¹ He continued to paint after recovering, and after earning a Masters degree in Fine Arts from the University of California Berkeley, set off for Paris in 1950, where he encountered the work of artists such as Claude Monet, Paul Cezanne, Henri Matisse, and Pierre Bonnard, absorbing the French tradition of color and light. After exhibiting in Paris and establishing a reputation there, he moved back to California, skipping, it has been noted, the New York art world altogether. He would nonetheless be grouped with the Abstract Expressionist school, though his work has more affinity with the Californian variant of Abstract Expressionism associated with the artists Clifford Still and Mark Rothko.

After living in Europe and then in Japan, Francis returned to California, settling in Santa Monica in 1962, where he would reside until his death in 1994, although he maintained studios in Europe and Japan throughout his career. He seems to have considered the Californian environment important to his work, “Los Angeles is the best for me to light in my work,” he would state in an interview. “New York light is hard. Paris light is a beautiful cerulean gray. But Los Angeles light is clear and bright even in haze. I bring all my pictures here and look at them in the Los Angeles light.”²

While Francis’s first works in Paris were devoid of color, inspired perhaps by the gray light of Paris winters, in 1951 he reintroduced color into his work, and in 1952 began making his ‘saturated paintings,’ works based on the intensity of color.

Francis’s earliest paintings in the Anderson Collection, *Red in Red* (1955) and *Deep Blue, Yellow, Red* (1956) are related to the saturated color paintings of 1952-1953. Virtually monochromatic, these paintings center on a single high keyed dominant color and are based on an ‘all over’ cellular composition. *Red in Red* is a bit unusual because it suggests a landscape: a

yellow sun in the upper left hand corner of the painting, a black ground, and a red sky in which a lighter red cloud formation floats.

A series of works from 1957-1959 marks the introduction of literary subject matter into Francis's abstractions. Based on a chapter in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* in which Ishmael relates his fear of the whiteness of the great whale, these works also indicate the symbolic meaning that white has come to represent for the artist. A work on paper in the Anderson Collection, *Study for Moby Dick, No. 2 (1959)* is related to two paintings, *The Whiteness of the Whale* (1957) and *Moby Dick* (1958).

In the 1960s and early 1970s, after Francis had returned to California, the white centers of his compositions grow larger and larger, as in the lithograph *Speck (1971)*. Here, white acts as an almost centrifugal force, pushing color to the outer edges of the canvas.

Once again, in the 1970s, Francis began to fill the empty centers of his canvases with splashes and stripes of color, often utilizing quasi-geometric structures such as grid forms and more random "beam" paintings. Large works such as *The Beaubourg (1977)*, were painted on the floor so that Francis could walk around them as he painted. Using a wet roller to apply broad tracks of color across the surface, he then built on this compositional scaffolding, often standing on a ladder to drip paint onto the canvas below. In *Beaubourg Painting* a variety of techniques are apparent as sharp edges contrast with fluid borders, and thick paint is juxtaposed with very thin, watery paint. Pools and splatters of saturated color energize the picture plane creating an active tension between its staid underlying structure of the canvas and its more spontaneous, whimsically rendered surface.

In 1971 Francis began to undergo intensive Jungian analysis, and from the mid-70s began to explore certain formal archetypal structures that he uncovered during the course of his immersion in the theories of Jung. In work from this period he investigated symbols such as mandalas, spirals, and crosses, all of which express ideas of unity, wholeness, and completeness. *Untitled (1978)*, a lithograph, may be placed among these works. A blue mandala-like structure is overlaid with a layer of more random drips and splatters. For Jung the mandala represented the path to the center, the core of the individual, a path Sam Francis had long associated with the practice of painting itself.

Michelle Meyers, 1989; Gwen Allen, updated 2002
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1. Peter Selz, *Sam Francis*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1975.

2. Quoted in Peter Selz. "Sam Francis: The Last Abstract Expressionist" *San Francisco Examiner Magazine*, July 24, 1994