



Sam Francis
(American, 1923 – 1994)

Biography

Sam Francis (1923–1994) was an influential American Abstract Expressionist known for his vibrant use of color and light. He was one of the first post-World War II American artists to achieve international acclaim, producing thousands of paintings, prints, monotypes, and works on paper now held in major collections around the world.

Born in California, Francis began painting while recovering from a spinal injury sustained during military service. This early experience marked the beginning of a lifelong pursuit of visual expression. After earning an art degree from the University of California, Berkeley in 1950, he moved to Paris, a decision that would profoundly shape his career. Immersing himself in European art and culture, Francis studied Monet's *Water Lilies* and formed lasting connections with the Matisse family, Joan Mitchell, Jean-Paul Riopelle, and Al Held. His impact was so notable that *Time Magazine* called him "*the hottest American painter in Paris.*"

Over the following four decades, Francis maintained studios in Paris, Bern, Tokyo, Mexico City, New York, and various cities in California. These travels exposed him to a wide range of artistic traditions, from French Impressionism to Japanese and Chinese ink painting, New York Abstract Expressionism, and West Coast Color Field painting. These influences coalesced into a personal style marked by gestural abstraction and an ongoing exploration of color and movement.

Francis is perhaps best known for his spontaneous, expressive technique. He worked in oil, watercolor, and an array of acrylics, sometimes all within the same piece, using splashes, drips, and sweeping strokes. His approach reflected not only his emotional state but also his philosophical and intellectual interests. He was fascinated by how color and form could express both fleeting energy and deeper truths.

Although often grouped with second-generation Abstract Expressionists, Francis resisted strict artistic labels. He reinvented the act of painting for himself, blending technical innovation with instinct. He frequently experimented with materials, using solvent-based Magna, commercial emulsions, and custom-mixed paints. He also played with the interaction of oil and acrylic paints, allowing their different drying times and textures to shape the final image. His printmaking practice mirrored this same curiosity, with careful attention to color selection and constant refinement of visual themes.

Outside of his studio work, Francis had wide-ranging interests. He was deeply involved in scientific and environmental research, supported early renewable energy initiatives, and invested in medical research, including efforts to combat AIDS. Francis explored creativity not just through art but also through technology, psychology, and medicine, seeking to understand how imagination, experimentation, and intuition drive human progress.

In 1962, Francis returned to California, setting up a studio in Santa Monica and later in Venice. From the 1960s onward, he developed a distinct method of “gestic drippings,” applying paint with swirling, dynamic gestures that captured his evolving emotional and intellectual states.

Until his death in 1994, Francis remained a prolific and experimental artist. His legacy lives on through his vivid, emotionally resonant works and his ongoing influence on contemporary art. More than just a painter, Sam Francis was a thinker, innovator, and explorer who constantly pushed the boundaries of what creativity could mean.

Selected Collections

Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA
Including: *White Line* (1960), *For Rudd* (1963), *Bright Speck* (1963) and *Flying Love* (1963)
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, Hawaii
Including: *Black and Red* (1950)
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA
Including: *Blue Spanish Shawl* (1954), *Hurrah for the Red, White and Blue* (1961) and *Meteorite* (1986)
General Services Administration, U.S. Federal Building, Anchorage, Alaska, USA
Including: *Spring Thaw* (1980),
Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, USA
Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, USA
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, USA
Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, USA
San Francisco International Airport, Collection of the City and County of San Francisco, San Francisco, USA
Including: *Untitled Triptych* (1980–82)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, USA
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, USA
Perez Art Museum, Miami, USA

Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA
New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, USA
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, USA
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, USA
The Mint Museum Uptown, Charlotte, USA
Including: *Untitled (Seafirst)* (1979)
The Menil Collection, Houston, USA
Musée des beaux-arts de l'Ontario/Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada
Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal/Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montréal, Canada
Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec City, Canada
Albertina Kunst Museum Palais, Vienna, Austria
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark
Including: *Big Red II* (1979)
Centre Pompidou, Paris, France
Fonds national d'art contemporain at Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes, Rennes, France
Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France
Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble, France
Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany
Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany
Neue Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany
Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany
World Conference Center, Bonn, Germany
Museum Jan van der Togt, Amstelveen, The Netherlands
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands
Henie-Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, Norway
Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, Spain
Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden
Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Switzerland
Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel, Switzerland
Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom
Ulster Museum, Belfast, United Kingdom
Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Hiroshima, Japan
Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo, Japan
Including: *Coral Branch* (1971)
Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan
Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, Japan
National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, Japan
Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan
Sezon Museum of Modern Art, Karuizawa, Nagano, Japan
Son Eun Arts and Cultural Foundation, Seoul, South Korea
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

2022	Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, USA	1999-2001	<i>Retrospective: Sam Francis: Paintings 1947-1990</i> , travelling exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Menil Collection, Houston, Texas, USA; Konsthall Malmö, Malmö, Sweden; the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain; Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, Italy
2021	Musée Matisse, Nice, France	1997	<i>Sam Francis: The Archetypal Image</i> , travelling exhibition, Frederick M. Weisman Museum of Art, Pepperdine University, Malibu, USA: The Fundacion Caja de Madrid, Madrid, Spain
2020	American Contemporary Art Gallery, Munich, Germany	1995	<i>The Last Paintings of Sam Francis</i> , 152 small paintings (painted June through August 1994, at his Santa Monica house studio), The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA
2018	Centre Pompidou, Metz, France	1975/77	<i>Art in Progress</i> , Louisiana Museum of Art, Humlebaek, Denmark; Centre Pompidou, Paris, France; Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden
2017	<i>Sam Francis & Friends - Ting, Appel, Alechinsky</i> , Museum Jan van der Togt, Amstelveen, the Netherlands <i>Abstract Expressionism</i> , Royal Academy of Arts, London, United Kingdom	1972/3	The Whitney Museum of American Art and Stanford University Museum of Art, New York City
2016	The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada <i>Drawing, Dreaming and Desire, works on paper by Sam Francis</i> , Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, USA	1969/71	Solo, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA
2015	<i>La Nouvelle Presentation des Collections Modernes, 1905-1965</i> , Centre Pompidou, Paris, France Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, Charlotte, USA	1968	Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Paris, France
2014	<i>Sam Francis, Five Decades of Abstract Expressionism from California Collections</i> , Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, USA	1967	<i>Retrospective</i> , travelling exhibition, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; University Art Museum, Berkeley; San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, USA
2013	<i>Renard Collection</i> , Fondation Beijeler, Basel, Switzerland	1959/61	Solo, travelling exhibition, Kunsthalle, Bern, Switzerland; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden Solo, travelling exhibition, Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena; San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, USA
2010	Danubiana Art Museum, Bratislava, Slovak Republic	1956	<i>12 Americans</i> , Museum of Modern Art, New York City, USA
2009	<i>California Calling</i> , Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, USA		
2006	Kunstmuseum Bern, Switzerland		