



Media only: Laura Baptiste (202) 633-8494
Amy Hutchins (202) 633-8497

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Smithsonian American Art Museum Presents the First Major Examination of Color Field Painting

Washington, D.C. is the only east coast city to host this landmark exhibition

“Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975,” on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum Feb. 29 through May 26, is the first full-scale exhibition to examine the sources, meaning and impact of the Color Field movement. Paintings from this period constitute one of the crowning achievements of postwar American abstract art. “Color as Field,” organized by the American Federation of Arts, offers an opportunity to re-evaluate this important aspect of 20th-century painting.

Color Field painting, which emerged in the United States in the 1950s, is characterized by pouring, staining, spraying or painting thinned paint onto raw canvas to create vast chromatic expanses. The exhibition includes 39 beautiful and impressively scaled paintings by such major figures as Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski. “Color as Field” presents a remarkable opportunity for viewers to fully comprehend the aims of these artists, view their finest works in close relation to each other and experience the beauty and visual magnetism of their handling of space and color. Karen Wilkin, a specialist in 20th-century modernism who has published widely on this period, is the curator of the exhibition; Joanna Marsh, The James Dicke curator of contemporary art at the museum, is the coordinating curator in Washington.

“I am delighted that the Smithsonian American Art Museum is presenting this important and long overdue assessment of the Color Field movement,” said Elizabeth Broun, the museum’s Margaret and Terry Stent Director. “In particular, Washingtonians will enjoy seeing beloved local artists Gene Davis, Sam Gilliam, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland in the company of other great Color Field painters.”

The exhibition is organized in three sections that examine the origins of Color Field painting, its pioneers and the later practitioners who pushed the boundaries of painting.

The exhibition begins with work by Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and other Abstract Expressionists who favored expanses of pure color. The thinly painted, economical canvases of Rothko and Newman, as well as paintings by Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell and Clyfford Still, are primarily concerned with color relationships.

The next section focuses on the artists first associated with Color Field painting: Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland and Olitski. Frankenthaler first began staining thin, luminous paint into raw canvas in the early 1950s, adopting Jackson Pollock's technique of all-over poured pigment but without the gestural drawing marks. Frankenthaler's way of simultaneously painting and drawing with delicate washes on unprimed canvas—famously described by Louis as “the bridge between Pollock and what was possible”—pointed the way to a new kind of American abstraction based on expanses of radiant, unmodulated hues.

Louis and Noland soon responded to the possibilities of Frankenthaler's method, each exploring the structural possibilities of all-overness, clarity and symmetry, as well as the expressive possibilities of color. By the early 1960s, even more extreme ideas were probed by their friend Olitski, in his seamless floods of sprayed color.

“This exhibition presents some of the most exquisite Color Field paintings, many of which are from private collections and therefore rarely seen, and is a wonderful opportunity to witness the conversation that was taking place in the 1950s and 1960s among the giants of Color Field painting—Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland and Olitski,” said Marsh.

In the 1960s, these painters, along with many of their colleagues, quickly adopted and exploited the properties of newly developed acrylic paint after initially working with thinned-out oil paint. The rapidly changing technology of acrylic permitted large expanses of color to be both intense and very thin, which allowed the Color Field painters to experiment with extremes of economy and clarity in their paint handling. This resulted in the characteristic freshness and apparent directness of the best work of the period.

The exhibition concludes with a selection of paintings from the 1960s to the mid-1970s by Jack Bush, Davis, Friedel Dzubas, Gilliam, Larry Poons and Frank Stella. These artists continued to explore the expressive possibilities of large expanses of color. Many of these painters were linked to the Color Field movement by the influential critic Clement Greenberg, who was the curator of the 1964 exhibition “Post Painterly Abstraction” that helped to define Color Field painting.

Public Programs

Exhibition curator Wilkin will present an illustrated talk, “Color as ‘Cool’: After Abstract Expressionism” Saturday, May 3 at 3 p.m. Additional related programs include a family day Saturday, March 8, from 1 to 4 p.m.; an illustrated talk, “New Materials, Aging Art,” by Mark Golden of Golden Artist Colors Inc. and Mark Gottsegen of the Art Materials Information and Education Network of the Intermuseum Conservation Association Saturday, March 29 at 3 p.m., which is presented in

conjunction with the Lunder Conservation Center; and a gallery talk with museum curator Marsh Wednesday, April 2 at 5:30 p.m. Complete program descriptions are available online at americanart.si.edu.

Publication

The fully illustrated 127-page catalog, published by the American Federation of Arts in association with Yale University Press, includes essays by Wilkin and Carl Belz, director emeritus of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, who has organized a number of important exhibitions of artists associated with the Color Field movement. It is available for \$32.95 (softcover) in the museum store.

Tour

After closing in Washington, the final stop for the tour is the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, Tenn. (June 20 – Sept. 21).

Credit

“Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975” is organized by the American Federation of Arts. This exhibition is made possible, in part, by grants from the Henry Luce Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts as part of American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius. The exhibition’s presentation at the Smithsonian American Art Museum is made possible by the Gene Davis Memorial Fund; Golden Artist Colors; Oriana and Arnold McKinnon; Betty A. and Lloyd G. Schermer; Mike Wilkins and Sheila Duignan; and the Smithsonian Council for American Art.

About American Federation of Arts

The American Federation of Arts is a nonprofit institution that organizes art exhibitions for presentation in museums around the world, publishes exhibition catalogs, and develops educational materials and programs.

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,000 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building, a dazzling showcase for American art and portraiture, is located at Eighth and F streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Metrorail station: Gallery Place/Chinatown (Red, Yellow and Green lines). Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Recorded museum information: (202) 633-7970. Web sites: americanart.si.edu and reynoldscenter.org.

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Note to editors: Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 633-8530 for the password. Additional information about the exhibition is available from the museum’s online press room at americanart.si.edu/press.