



# Joan Mitchell: Lady Painter

*By Patricia Albers*

**Joan Mitchell: Lady Painter** By Patricia Albers

“Gee, Joan, if only you were French and male and dead.” —New York art dealer to Joan Mitchell, the 1950s

She was a steel heiress from the Midwest—Chicago and Lake Forest (her grandfather built Chicago’s bridges and worked for Andrew Carnegie). She was a daughter of the American Revolution—Anglo-Saxon, Republican, Episcopalian.

She was tough, disciplined, courageous, dazzling, and went up against the masculine art world at its most entrenched, made her way in it, and disproved their notion that women couldn’t paint.

*Joan Mitchell* is the first full-scale biography of the abstract expressionist painter who came of age in the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s; a portrait of an outrageous artist and her struggling artist world, painters making their way in the second part of America’s twentieth century.

As a young girl she was a champion figure skater, and though she lacked balance and coordination, accomplished one athletic triumph after another, until giving up competitive skating to become a painter.

Mitchell saw people and things in color; color and emotion were the same to her. She said, “I use the past to make my pic[tures] and I want all of it and even you and me in candlelight on the train and every ‘lover’ I’ve ever had—every friend—nothing closed out. It’s all part of me and I want to confront it and sleep with it—the dreams—and paint it.”

Her work had an unerring sense of formal rectitude, daring, and discipline, as well as delicacy, grace, and awkwardness.

Mitchell exuded a young, smoky, tough glamour and was thought of as “sexy as hell.”

Albers writes about how Mitchell married her girlhood pal, Barnet Rosset, Jr.—scion of a financier who was head of Chicago’s Metropolitan Trust and partner of Jimmy Roosevelt. Rosset went on to buy Grove Press in 1951, at Mitchell’s urging, and to publish Henry Miller, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, et al., making Grove into the great avant-garde publishing house of its time.

Mitchell’s life was messy and reckless: in New York and East Hampton carousing with de Kooning, Frank O’Hara, James Schuyler, Jane Freilicher, Franz Kline, Helen Frankenthaler, and others; going to clambakes, cocktail parties, softball games—and living an entirely different existence in Paris and Vétheuil.

Mitchell’s inner life embraced a world beyond her own craft, especially literature . . . her compositions were informed by imagined landscapes or feelings about places.

In *Joan Mitchell*, Patricia Albers brilliantly reconstructs the painter’s large and impassioned life: her growing prominence as an artist; her marriage and affairs; her friendships with poets and painters; her extraordinary work.

*Joan Mitchell* re-creates the times, the people, and her worlds from the 1920s through the 1990s and brings it all spectacularly to life.

### **Joan Mitchell: Lady Painter By Patricia Albers Bibliography**

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"Patricia Albers has written a book about Mitchell that I cannot imagine will ever be improved upon, so graceful and incisive is her account of the artist's hellbent life and lyric art."  
(New York Times)

"Like Mitchell's vast canvases, Albers's impressive book ought to be experienced in the morning, 'for it can animate the entire day.'" (New Yorker)

"No complete account of Mitchell's life could be pleasant. Albers...doesn't flinch. Her thoroughly researched book details Mitchell's alcoholism, depression, sexual exploits, foul-mouthed arguments, violent outbursts and general rudeness. Angry artists aren't exactly rare, but Mitchell is surely in the hall of champions." (Los Angeles Times)

"Electrifying. . . Patricia Albers emulates Mitchell's painterly mission to conjoin "accuracy and intensity" in this transfixing and justly revealing portrait."  
—Booklist (starred)

"Patricia Albers vividly chronicles the artist's journey from her wealthy upbringing in Chicago to her defiant student days at Smith College, and as a young painter at the Art Institute of Chicago. . . Vibrantly written and carefully researched. . . Albers constructs a fluid, energetic narrative of Mitchell's complicated life and work."  
—*Publishers Weekly*

### About the Author

**Patricia Albers** is the author of *Shadows, Fire, Snow: The Life of Tina Modotti*. Her articles have appeared in newspapers, art journals, and museum catalogs. She has curated many exhibitions, among them Tina Modotti and the Mexican Renaissance. She lives in Mountain View, California.

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One of Joan's favorite haunts, the smoke-and stale beer-perfumed San Remo had black- and- white tiled floors, a pressed-tin ceiling, a dark-mirrored bar, and a clientele that included James Agee, Miles Davis, Judith Malina, Tennessee Williams, and young New York poets.

There painter Jane Freilicher used to observe Joan and Mike across the room—she in jeans and the talismanic long leather coat— smoking, drinking, huddling conspiratorially over a little table, and looking “very French New Wave.”

Besides painting, jazz held the two rapt. A connoisseur of early jazz—Louis Armstrong, Buck Clayton, Bessie Smith—Mike knew everything and everybody, while Joan dug, above all, Charlie Parker, Ella Fitzgerald, and that fabulous “B. Holiday woman.” Jazz had seduced her with its urban cast, moody romanticism, blend of discipline and instinct, and aura of freedom and authenticity. Trombonist and painter Howard Kanovitz (to whom she introduced Beethoven's late quartets) saw distinctly, however, that Joan

wasn't really *there* as far as I was concerned. She was a square, and we were hip. A very clear distinction as far as I was concerned. Although Joan smoked some grass like everybody else, that didn't make her hip . . . Mike Goldberg was hip. And Miles Forst was hip. And Ray Parker was hip . . . [But] Joan didn't have rhythm in her soul.

She did have a near-mystical feeling for paint. Squeezed by the class she was taking at NYU (Painting of the Early Middle Ages), three weekly sessions with Fried, and a chockablock social life, Joan nonetheless painted hard all that fall. Loading her brushes with blacks, whites, ochres, blues, and reds, she was producing muscular, jostling canvases rife with ambiguities, complexities, and urban tensions, using Hofmannesque push and pull. By the first of the year, Joan had what she considered sixteen decent paintings, fifteen of them squarish and around six by seven feet, and one, *Cross Section of a Bridge*, six and a half by nearly ten feet. In early January these went to the New Gallery, where they were installed by consultant Leo Castelli.

Two flights above the Algonquin Hotel's Oak Room restaurant, the New Gallery occupied the top floor at 63 West Forty-fourth Street. Up on Fifty-seventh Street, Betty Parsons had invented the white-box gallery, but the New Gallery retained the staid gray walls and abbreviated neoclassical decor of an earlier day. A modest outpost of the art world in the theater district, it lacked the cachet of a Fifty-seventh Street venue, yet, with the *New Yorker* a block away and Times Square just to the west, it enjoyed a little scene of its own. The cast party of the popular Broadway play *I Am a Camera*, starring Julie Harris, took place at the New Gallery during Joan's show.

Her opening threw the artist into a panic but turned out okay. Marion and Jimmie flew in for the event, but, more important, her fellow downtown artists came out in force. Grace perceived "a fantastic display of youthful talent and virtuosity, without the real thing," but others who felt Joan had been slow to assimilate avant-garde thinking now lavished praise upon her. John Gruen found her a "remarkable artist, full of fire and sweeping gestures," and Mimi saw her as "full of talent and drive— articulate, as though [she] were ripe with intention to hold the sun in [her] orbit as long as possible." The older men also took notice. One day Pollock strode into the New Gallery, stared hard at her paintings, then turned heel without uttering a word. According to Tom Hess, writing in 1976, another (unnamed) Abstract Expressionist elder

proclaimed ruefully that it had taken him eighteen years to get to where Joan Mitchell had arrived in as many months. He didn't intend it as a compliment. He felt that the situation had changed so drastically between 1947 and 1950 . . . that younger artists could make direct contact with new ideas almost as soon as they came off the easel. Looking back, however, it becomes clear that it was a compliment; Mitchell didn't jump on a bandwagon; she made tough decisions and she stuck to them. It took courage, skill, and a fierce delight in competition.

Most of Joan's paintings bore the names of places or place concepts: *East Side*, *Le Lavandou*, *Guanajuato*, *Coastline*, *Midwest 5 P.M.* These she bestowed after the work was completed. Her *34th St. and 7th Ave.*, for instance, got its title when Surrealist Max Ernst blurted out as he stood before it during the installation: "Oh! But this is Thirty-fourth Street, at the corner of Seventh Avenue!"

Hired by the ever-attentive Barney to write a thousand-word essay for Joan's announcement, Ernst's pal, literary man Nicolas Calas, saw the work's grounding in the material world as a relief after other avant-garde painters' suffocating insistence upon expressing their feelings. For Calas, a Mitchell painting derived its meaning as much from shrewd omission as from subtle observation: fragmented and heterogeneous, it

was “endlessly interrupted” yet forever becoming. (Not only had Barney persuaded Calas to produce this first important essay on Joan’s work, but also he paid for the announcement on which it appeared, and he personally documented the show using his old Rolleiflex.)

Joan also garnered three brief but generally positive critical notices. Betty Holliday of *ArtNews* praised her “savage debut” (what looked savage then looks lyrical today), while *New York Times* critic Stuart Preston looked favorably on the paintings’ fast-paced shapes and serial explosiveness even as he detected a certain shrillness and monotony. And Paul Brach, writing for *Art Digest*, singled out *Cross Section of a Bridge*, Joan’s first self-consciously important canvas, for its “tense tendons of perpetual energy” and “wide arc-shaped chain reaction of spasmodic energies.” Reflecting New York School attitudes about putting oneself on canvas, he heralded the show as “the appearance of a new personality in abstract painting.”

As usual in those days, nothing sold. Shortly after the show closed, however, the gallery’s co-owner, Eugene Thaw, visited the small yet elegant apartment of twenty-four-year-old William Rubin, then a conductor in training but later chief curator of painting and sculpture at the New York Museum of Modern Art. There hung a Mitchell, Rubin’s first serious art purchase, made directly from the artist, paid for in fifty-or seventy-dollar installments, and financed, in part, by the sale of two fine prewar clarinets.

On the heels of her show, Joan more or less cut Thaw dead: “She already knew she was a star.” Indeed, she was quickly elected to membership in the Club, the mark of approval that mattered to her more than anything else. A month later she participated in a Club panel about Abstract Expressionism, alongside Grace Hartigan, Alfred Leslie, painter Larry Rivers, and poet Frank O’Hara—a bunch of kids (the oldest, Grace, turning thirty the following day) sharing their tremendous excitement about what was still to come.

In her third semester of graduate study that spring, Joan took latemedieval art and advanced French at NYU and audited Wallace Fowlie’s course on Marcel Proust at the New School. Fowlie’s class coincided with her slow plow through the final volume of the “absolutely marvelous” *In Search of Lost Time*, which she was reading in the original French.

There were many reasons for Joan to adore Proust’s novel, including its sensuousness, luminosity, poetic language, psychological subtlety, intense opticality, and inward and outward focus. Beginning with the opening episode of the narrator’s traumatic bedtime separation from his mother, she would have seen her own childhood self in the work’s ultrasensitive protagonist. Moreover, reading Proust made her even more acutely aware of music’s capacity for delicious magnification and confusion of desire. When the novelist’s character Swann hears a stirring little musical phrase as he is falling in love, that ineffable phrase—“airy and perfumed”—unseals an otherwise inaccessible part of him and amplifies his being.

At novel’s end, Proust’s narrator discovers the secret of the bliss he first felt when, against his habit, he had tasted a madeleine soaked in linden tea that whisked him back to childhood Sunday mornings in the country. This slipping outside time explains, Proust writes, “why it was that my anxiety on the subject of my death had ceased at the moment when I had unconsciously recognised the taste of the little madeleine, since the being which at that moment I had been was an extra temporal being and therefore unalarmed by the vicissitudes of the future.” The only way to grasp and make meaningful the past, which is all that truly belongs to us, he realizes, is through art made from one’s resurrected past. Similarly, the memory of a feeling, transformed as she painted, would become the basis for Joan’s work. She would think of painting—“not motion . . . not in time”—as a way of forgetting death: “I am alive, we are alive, we are not aware of what is coming next.” Moreover, for Mitchell as for Proust, art had the power to transform pain into beauty and to make sense of the messes we call our lives.

Not infrequently the insomniac Joan read all night. Besides Proust, she devoured novels by Faulkner and Joyce as well as the brilliant six-volume autobiography of Irish playwright and socialist Sean O'Casey. She also kept up with newsmagazines and the *Times* (and always held strong opinions about current events). But, above all, poetry still held her rapt. She dipped into Valéry, reread Baudelaire, knew much of Verlaine by heart, and discovered what proved to be an abiding passion for Prague-born Rainer Maria Rilke.

Rilke's woundedness, yearning for transcendence, feeling that ordinary life is not real life, and love of trees and stars deeply moved her. So too did his vulnerability to the external world: witness the scene in Rilke's autobiographical novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (which she read many times) in which the narrator remembers dining in his family's banquet hall as a child:

You sat there as if you had disintegrated—totally without will, without consciousness, without pleasure, without defense. You were like an empty space. I remember that at first this state of annihilation almost made me feel nauseated; it brought on a kind of seasickness, which I only overcame by stretching out my leg until my foot touched the knee of my father, who was sitting opposite me.

Moreover, Rilke looked to painting, especially Cézanne's, as a model for poetry. In late 1907, the writer visited the Paris Salon d'Automne nearly every day, seeking to memorize the work of the Post-Impressionist, whose discipline, nuance, precision, and chromatic emotion he emulated. Having visually devoured the blues that dominate Cézanne's late work, Rilke wrote, in *Letters on Cézanne* (another Joan favorite), of "an ancient Egyptian shadow blue" seen while crossing the Place de la Concorde, of the "wet dark blue" in a certain van Gogh, of the "hermetic blue" of a Rodin watercolor, of "the dense waxy blue of the Pompeiian wall paintings," and of "a kind of thunderstorm blue" in a work by the Master of Aix—fabulous stuff for the future painter of *Hudson River Day Line*, *Blue Territory*, and *La Grande Vallée*, among myriad triumphs of blueness.

Joan's no-credit course on Proust that spring took her far afield from the practical considerations that had led her to pursue an MFA. As her relationship with Mike frayed and married life with Barney retreated into the past, her determination to gain financial independence had waned. That June she wrapped up her coursework with straight As and received an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She never got a teaching job, however. Instead, she kept living on the monthly stipend from her parents, peevishly because she hated having to answer in any way to Jimmie and Marion, even though she begrudged Sally the larger checks she received because she had children. At the same time Joan tried to hide from her fellow artists how very privileged she was. Still, her claims to struggle along on one hundred dollars a month like everyone else met with raised eyebrows and mostly unspoken resentment. It did not escape notice that she could afford the Studio Building; that she never stinted on liquor, paint, or analysis; that her leather trench coat was beautifully tailored; that she didn't have to take day jobs and thus enjoyed the luxury of time. In fact, the only clock Joan was punching was Fried's: three sessions a week, plus a new seven-member "neurotics club" that caused her to feel "the most collective" she had ever felt—no exception made for the Artists' Club.

Joan relied on Fried more than ever. After two years, her psychoanalysis remained a central element in her life. Joan's dependence struck Evans one midday when he met her at Tenth Street after her regular session with Fried up on Riverside Drive. Having wiggled out of her dress slacks, Joan was pattering around in her

underwear when she dropped the news that, Fried having decided that sleeping with Evans was unhealthy for her, they could no longer have sex.

“Well, I’m sorry because I— are we allowed to be friends?”

“Oh, yes, yes, yes.”

More discussion, then: “I’ll leave now, because you seem very confused.”

In a sense, Evans was relieved by Joan’s announcement. Their relationship was going nowhere, and he needed to get his life together. He told himself he didn’t care.

“Marisol would like to sleep with you.”

A Paris-born artist of Venezuelan parentage studying at Hofmann’s, Marisol Escobar would shoot to fame in the sixties for her witty assemblage portraits viewed as Pop Art. Famously elegant, silent, and beautiful—the “first girl artist with glamour,” as Andy Warhol once put it—she would later have affairs with both Bill de Kooning and Mike Goldberg. (Joan’s astringent comment regarding the latter: “I imagine with all the crotch sharing, N.Y. will soon be like one incestuous royal family.”) Evans responded to Joan’s matchmaking attempt: “This is happening so fast, Joan. You lost a lover, and now you’re playing my pimp.” That went down badly.

The Village tom-toms lost no time in spreading the news. Two days later, Alfred Leslie’s ex-lover Naomi Bosworth knocked at Evans’s door, and thus began another drop-the-hanky love affair. One night Evans took Naomi for a ride on the Staten Island ferry and caught a bad cold. Afterward they returned to her place. When his cold worsened the following evening, Naomi phoned her doctor uncle, who walked in, glowered at the young man in his niece’s bed, applied a mustard plaster to his chest, and ordered rest. After he departed, Naomi too left for class. Then the phone rang: Joan.

“What are you doing over there?”

“Why are you interested?”

“I’m with Mike, and, if you don’t get out of there, I’m going to go home with Mike.”

“You’ve been going home with Mike a thousand times. When I get well, I’ll see you, and we’ll have a drink. Right now, I need a cup of tea.”

Half an hour later, Joan let herself into Naomi’s apartment, stripped, and forced Evans to make love, mustard plaster or no. Then they squabbled over whether or not she would have to lie to Fried. Evans too was in analysis, but he considered Joan’s reliance on her analyst, not unlike the reliance of her younger self on her father, extremely unhealthy.

No doubt Edrita’s method of issuing injunctions did inhibit Joan’s progress, because it simultaneously replicated her father’s directive manner and gave her the warm, intimate attention she craved. When Fried decided that she should stop having sex with Evans, Joan felt compelled to fulfill that prescription as a step on the path to mental health, yet, like a child testing her parent, also acted defiantly, rashly asserting her own will by dashing over to Naomi’s apartment and forcing Evans to succumb to her lust. Still she remained deferential to Fried, her only hope, she felt, of overcoming her defective psychological birth. At stake was



nothing less than a second chance at personality development.

## **Users Review**

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