

# MARKET FILE

## THE BUSINESS OF ART

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### ARTIST DOSSIER:

# Sam Francis

BY SARAH P. HANSON

WHEN SAM FRANCIS'S SIX-FOOT ABSTRACT OIL on canvas *Middle Blue*, 1957, made \$6,354,500 at Christie's New York this past May, it confirmed the artist's place in the pantheon of abstract painters commanding multimillion-dollar prices. Francis has never wielded quite the market power of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, although his prints and works on paper have long earned respectable sums. His paintings, however, have increased in art-historical cachet and value over the past decade, which has seen 9 of his top 10 auction prices. »

Sam Francis in a 1959 portrait taken by Eliane Boardman in New York.



"It's a very healthy blue-chip market," says Robert Manley, the director of postwar and contemporary art at Christie's, which has auctioned 7 of Francis's top 10 lots. "His major paintings are setting record prices, and his more prolific output from later on is selling very well, at high percentage rates and often above estimate." Moreover, Manley adds, demand from a broad collecting base has been sustained by the regular appearance of quality works at auction and on the secondary market, through dozens of dealers with longstanding relationships with the artist's studio and estate.

Born in San Mateo, California, in 1923, Francis took up painting after suffering a spinal injury while in the U.S. Army Air Corps. He studied in 1947 with David Park in San Francisco, where he also attended shows of the nascent Abstract Expressionist movement. Upon completing his MA at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1950, Francis moved to Paris, where he fell in with the tachist Michel Tapié and began painting the all-over canvases for which he is known. He spent the 1950s based in that city; Nina Dausset presented his first solo exhibition in 1952. A 1957 visit to Japan introduced the artist to traditions of brush painting and Zen Buddhism, which would resonate with him for many years. He returned to California in 1962 and over the next decade showed with several dealers, including Martha Jackson, in New York.

Peripatetic throughout his life, romantically as well as geographically—he was married five times and

had four children—Francis maintained workspaces at various times in Paris, New York, Bern, Tokyo, and California (Santa Monica, Venice, Palo Alto), absorbing the light and landscape of each milieu. "His environment affected him a lot," says Debra Burchett-Lere, editor of a catalogue raisonné that the University of California Press is publishing next fall. "His works are very oriented to nature."

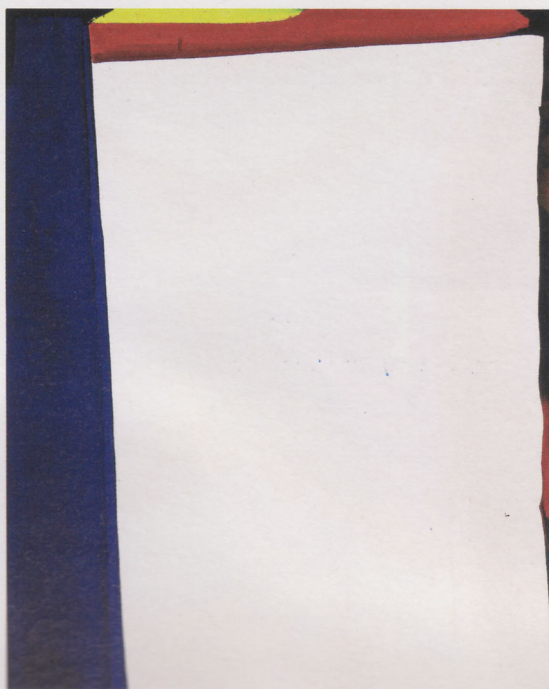
Because of his loose skeins of color and drifting amoeboid shapes, Francis is generally tagged as an Abstract Expressionist, but his shimmering play of light and hue owes more to the French Impressionists than to the New York School (he was particularly taken, in Paris, with Monet's *Nymphéas* at the Orangerie). The artist himself shrugged off the Ab-Ex label. And partly because he spent the crucial years of the 1950s in Paris rather than New York, his prices have lagged behind those of the movement's slightly older standard-bearers Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko. While a 1950s Kline might sell for between \$7 million and \$8 million, for instance, for Francis "until recently the high-water marks were between \$1 million and \$3 million," notes Manley. "It's only this past

season that they have gone over \$6 million." Francis nevertheless saw considerable success during his lifetime: "The minimum he earned a year even since the early 1950s, was \$1 million," says Fred Nicholas, a Los Angeles attorney who knew the artist for decades and was executor of his estate.

Manley attributes this rise in fortune in part to a general increase in interest in 1950s abstract works—Adolph Gottlieb, Joan Mitchell, and Robert Motherwell have all recently seen records—and in part to Francis's particular appeal. Because of the variety of his influences—from Matisse to Minimalism to traditional ink painting—"some of his works have a very tough, rigorous quality, and others are just gorgeous and decorative in the best sense," says Manley, "which makes him appealing to a wide range of collectors." These are internationally diverse, reflecting Francis's early fame in Europe and in Japan, and include Eli Broad, who won *Grey*, 1954, for \$3.66 million after a bidding battle at Christie's in 2009.

The past decade has seen consignments of rare-to-market canvases

from such venerable sources as the late Los Angeles collector Betty Freeman, a noted patron of the artist. These include some of Francis's highly sought-after works from the 1950s and early '60s, when he honed his singular vision, marrying biomorphic shapes with luminous washes of color. Among these, the oils on canvas command the highest prices: This June the 1955 oil *Deep Blue and Black* nearly quadrupled its high estimate to fetch SF2.7 million (\$2,416,561) at Galerie Kornfeld, of Bern. Also desirable, though seen infrequently, are the early '60s "Blue Balls" paintings, with their tumescent blooms of Francis's signature color. »



From top: Francis Bacon, 1958 watercolor and gouache *Blue and Black*, at L & M Auction, Bern. Also Francis' graphic work, Ab-Ex theme, *He Embraces*, 1964-65, unframed, acrylic on paper, which sold at this past Jun



### From the Files

+ Seven of the top 10 prices for Francis's prints were achieved from 1989 to '90, when Japanese collectors pushed an untitled monotype to a record \$66,456 at Sotheby's Tokyo in April 1990.

+ Francis was in the legendary "12 Americans" exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1956 and in Clement Greenberg's 1964 "Post-

painterly Abstraction" show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

+ This fall his work can be seen in MoMA's "Abstract Expressionist New York" and in a display of prints from 1975 through '78 at Galerie Jean Fournier, in Paris, through November 27.

+ Two of his children, Shingo and Augustus Francis, are also painters.

Francis's mid-to-late '60s output is typified by two series, "Bright Ring" and "Edge," in which he gradually shifted his blobs and trails to the perimeter of the paper or canvas. Historically, these paintings have been less favored, selling for around \$100,000 or less. The latter series "is tough for most people because it's so much blank space," says Lee Spiro, director of Leslie Sacks Fine Art, in Los Angeles, which deals in the artist's prints. Spiro points out, however, that these works anticipate both Minimalism and Light and Space.

From the early 1970s until his death, Francis tightened the compositions of the paintings into increasingly dense nets and grids. His mature works top out at around \$500,000 to \$600,000. "I think there is really a lot of growth potential, and it's starting to happen with works from the late period in a selective fashion. It's all about the quality," says Dorsey Waxter, of New York's Greenberg Van Doren, which—along with more than a dozen other galleries, including Gallery Delaive, of Amsterdam; L & M Arts, of New York and Los Angeles; Nantenshi, of Tokyo; Novak Contemporary Art, of Los Angeles; and Guy Pieters, of St.-Paul-de-Vence, France—sells Francis's work on the secondary market.

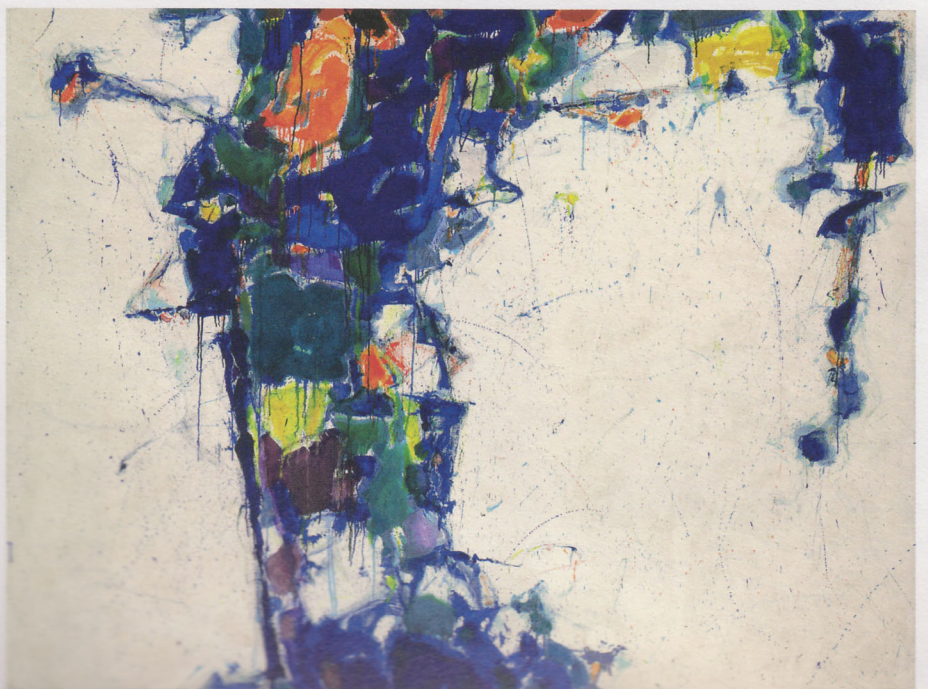
Francis was one of the first major abstract painters to delve into prints, and he produced them throughout his 45-year career. Consequently, a considerable number are on the market, and their prices, unlike those for his paintings, have risen only slightly over the past decade. This, despite the fact that Francis lavished as much attention

on his multiples as he did on his paintings. "When I am working with these prints, I am the paper, I am the paint, I am the machine," he once said. He used the major print shops—Universal Limited Art Editions, Emil Matthieu, Tamarind, and Gemini G.E.L.—and opened his own, the Litho Shop, in L.A. in the early '70s. "It didn't matter if it was a canvas or a piece of paper or a print process, everything was dealt with equally as its own work of art," says Burchett-Lere, who was director at Gemini during the '80s.

Francis's best prints can overcome the handicap of general oversupply, going for between \$20,000 and \$30,000, according to Mary S. Bartow, Sotheby's senior vice president for prints. "We put maybe five in our sales a season, but we get many, many more inquiries," she says. Here again, the preference is for early works, followed by those from the mid to late 1980s, and price is usually commensurate with size—some of the prints top six feet. Examples of the 1960 lithograph *The White Line* (edition of 75), which isolates a charged center stripe, fare well at auction, fetching from the mid \$20,000s to the low \$50,000s, depending on the condition and the edition number, and they do even better on the private market, according to Galerie Kornfeld's Christine Stauffer, going for \$60,000 to \$80,000.

So far, though, prints haven't seen the appreciation that Francis's paintings have. "It's a separate market. It hasn't dribbled down yet," says Bartow. Adds Novak, "Prices are irrationally low. You can pick up a beautiful lithograph from the 1970s for less than \$5,000." The best buys, according to Bartow, may be intaglios.

Meanwhile, the consensus is that Francis's paintings haven't peaked and should increase in price as supply tightens. "The market has been fairly gradual, which to me is a good thing," says Manley, adding that the artist's "major works have historically been undervalued, and they have not only held their value but increased, even over the last two years." Opportunities to acquire a Francis are on the horizon. In November, Christie's will offer *Blue Composition*, 1952–54, estimated at f \$1.5 million to \$2 million. 田



From top: *Variant B*, unique watercolor and aquatint on paper, from a series of 1960s; *Middle Blue*, record-breaking \$6.35 million, sold at Christie's in 2007.