

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ACQUIRES

IMPORTANT WASHINGTON COLOR SCHOOL PAINTINGS

Washington, D.C. -- Major paintings by leading Washington Color School artists of two generations -- Morris Louis and Sam Gilliam -- have been acquired by the National Gallery of Art, director Earl A. Powell III announced today. Typical of the school, both are grand in scale and fluid in the use of luminous color.

Louis' epic Beth Chaf (1959), measuring approximately 11.5 x 8.5 feet, is a vast work of overlapping tones creating a sense of immense lushness. Gilliam's Relative (1969) is a gracefully draped, three-dimensional canvas of flowing pattern and richly atmospheric, jewel-like hues.

Beth Chaf, now hanging in the East Building's concourse level, is a partial and promised gift of Gisela and Dennis Alter. Relative, an anonymous gift, is located on the upper level of the East Building.

"We are enormously pleased to have added these superlative works, both created in Washington, to our nation's collection," said Powell. "These important works by master colorists can now be seen alongside the paintings of their predecessors of the New York school: Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko."

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Morris Louis (1912-1962), along with Kenneth Noland, was a pioneer in the development of the Washington School of color field painting. Following the abstract expressionists, these artists made brilliant new use of the technique of staining a raw canvas with thin veils of paint on a large scale. Louis' contribution was creating effects of great subtlety and control with an exhilarating color palette. To achieve these qualities, he developed a technique of pouring thinned paint onto a canvas loosely tacked to a stretcher leaning against a wall.

In Beth Chaf, titled with Hebrew letters, the transparent layering of rich color is among the most beautiful of Louis' so-called "Veils." This style, in which veils of finger-like or broad fields of color seem to be simultaneously overlaid and merged, dates from 1954 and 1958 to 1959. Louis likened it to the "continuity of simple pattern and slow motion." In Beth Chaf, he creates a form of fluid lightness while evoking a powerful, monolithic presence. The image was chosen as the catalogue cover for the Museum of Modern Art's landmark retrospective of Louis' work in 1986, four years after his death.

Born in Baltimore, Louis graduated from the Maryland Institute of Fine and Applied Arts in 1932. By the early 1950s, he had gained modest success as a painter and teacher in Washington, D.C. A legendary influence on his work was a visit with critic Clement Greenberg to the studio of Helen Frankenthaler in 1953. Louis was enchanted by her painting Mountains and Sea of 1952 (now hanging at the National Gallery on loan from the artist), a raw canvas stained with paint to produce a highly lyrical composition. The technique then dominated his career.

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In Relative, Sam Gilliam reinvents the idea of beautifully painted drapery by producing similar effects with an entire canvas. He employs a rich palette dissolving from rose to aquamarine, contrasted with splashes of brilliant orange. The work dates from a crucial phase of the artist's career: the early years when he began to manipulate the canvas to exploit its flexible properties as a major structural quality in his work. The innovation brought the artist to national prominence.

With this process, Gilliam first stained and poured paint over a large expanse of canvas. He then folded it while still wet to form an object that would hang loosely on the wall. The light feeling and graceful shape of Relative defy the qualities of its heavy, huge canvas, measuring 10 x 13.5 feet in completed form.

A resident of Washington, D.C., Gilliam was born in 1933 in Tupelo, Mississippi. He came to prominence during the later 1960s after having received a B.A. and M.A. from the University of Louisville. From the late 1950s to 1963, at the time of his first professional one-man show in Washington, Gilliam's work consisted mostly of figurative abstractions, strong and brooding in character.

Following his move to Washington in 1962, Gilliam became familiar with the achievements of the Washington Color School of painters and quickly became an exponent of color field painting. The development of his shaped canvases took the stained paint technique a step further.

In addition to Relative, the National Gallery owns one screenprint by Gilliam. The collection includes two paintings by Louis -- Beta Kappa (1961) and 133 (1962) --

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representing the other major styles of the artist's career: his so-called "Unfurleds," diagonal bands of dripped color dating from 1960-1961; and the refined, clear-hued "Stripes" of 1961-1962.

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