



Today's Masterpiece: Sam Gilliam, Jr., [*Untitled*](#), 2001. Screenprint. Gift of Estelle and Martin Karlin. 2008.239.



Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute with Doc Brown on Virtual SDMA**. I'm your host, **Michael Brown**, Curator of European Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month at 10:00 a.m. to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

Today's masterpiece is Sam Gilliam's brilliant screenprint, made in 2001 for New York's Lincoln Center, which currently serves as a centerpiece of the new display in Visible Vaults on the Museum's first floor.

The commission for the Lincoln Center Festival screen print, from an edition of 108 signed impressions, was part of a decades-long program in support of the Lincoln Center's commitment to contemporary visual art, which began with works by Jasper Johns, Henry Moore, and Marc Chagall. Other artists in the print and poster series include Andy Warhol, Helen Frankenthaler, and Chuck Close. In his screen print, Gilliam references his use of the palette knife and rake to manipulate pigment within interlocking abstracted blocks of color, reminiscent of his sculptural approach to his draped paintings earlier in his career.

Gilliam was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1933, but soon relocated to Louisville, Kentucky with his parents and seven siblings. Growing up, Gilliam was a precocious draftsman, eventually earning admission to the newly desegregated University of Louisville, where he was among the University's first generation of Black graduates. After service in the US Army from 1956-58, which included a transformative Airborne division assignment in Japan, Gilliam returned to his alma mater to complete his MFA. As a fellowship student, he worked in the art library and as the slide projectionist for art history classes, immersing himself in Michelangelo, Goya, Tiepolo, and especially the early Renaissance frescoes of Giotto, marveling at the immersive spaces they created by blending painting, sculpture, and architecture.

Instrumental in Gilliam's training was a group of European artists displaced after World War II, including Carl Crodel, a Holocaust survivor and acquaintance of Henri Matisse and Paul Klee. Crodel and Gilliam discovered a shared passion for the music of Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and Count Basie. This underlying musical interest would continue to inform Gilliam's artistic practice well into his later career, especially in the work of jazz saxophonist John Coltrane. As Gilliam describes it, music served as "a reservoir of thought in me that allowed me to build, to enjoy, to be free."

Teaching high school students was a necessity of life for Gilliam and his family, which had settled permanently in Washington, D.C. by 1962. He became a leading innovator of the Washington Color School, a movement that emerged alongside abstract painting trends in New York City. A crucial moment occurred in 1964 with the touring show



“Post-Painterly Abstraction,” which also included pioneers such as Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland, and Ellsworth Kelly.

Gilliam set himself apart from other American abstract painters by “orchestrating the canvas,” as he called it: allowing wet paint to move across the surface and folding the canvas to create improvised printed images within the composition. The physical action in the process brings to mind Frankenthaler and Jackson Pollock, but Gilliam was the first artist to do away with the canvas stretcher altogether, hanging draped unframed abstract canvases in endlessly variable undulating forms.

This radical approach purposefully shifted his art beyond painting into the sculptural, and beyond, into what Gilliam called “color architecture.” It was as though he had taken the flat blocks of color his beloved Giotto employed in the Arena Chapel 700 years earlier and stripped away the stone and mortar of the architecture beneath to allow the color forms to ebb and flow freely.

This has been Masterpiece Minute, thanks as always for listening here on Virtual SDMA!



Today's masterpiece: Sam Gilliam, Jr. [*Untitled*](#) (Lincoln Center's Festival), 2001. Serigraph on wove paper, 69 of 108. Gift of Estelle and Martin Karlin, 2008.239.