



**Today's Masterpiece:** Kay WalkingStick, [\*Untitled \(from the Emblem series\)\*](#), 1980.  
Acrylic and wax on paper on board. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Taubman, 1982.76.



Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute on Virtual SDMA**. I'm your host, **Rachel Jans**, Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month for a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

How does an artist take the language of geometric abstraction to make a meaningful and even emotional connection? In Kay WalkingStick's early work from the 1970s and early '80s—exemplified by a piece from her *Emblem* series in SDMA's collection—traditional materials and meticulous technique come together, creating work that is as much about surface and structure as it is about memory and mourning. Today, we'll explore how WalkingStick's innovative use of materials and forms shaped a searingly resonant visual vocabulary.

Kay WalkingStick is a celebrated artist, widely recognized for her focus on the American landscape. Born in 1935 in Syracuse, New York, she is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, with both Cherokee and Anglo heritage. While she is known for her landscape paintings, her early career was deeply rooted in minimalism, emerging from the dynamic New York art scene of the 1960s and '70s. She earned an MFA in painting from the Pratt Institute in 1975, marking the beginning of a career that would eventually bridge abstraction and the natural world.

The work we're considering today fits the minimal vocabulary that dominated the art scene at the time. Created in 1980 it measures two feet by two feet, and at first glance, it seems to be a purely black painting. Its dark surface appears dense and mysterious.

Let's take a moment to really observe. The surface reveals a rich, deep texture. In fact, WalkingStick's process involved layering paint with great care to create this tactile quality. In the late 1970s, she began to add saponified wax to her acrylic paint, drawing inspiration from the encaustic surfaces of artists like Brice Marden and Jasper Johns—techniques that trace their origins back to ancient Greek and Roman painting, as well as the Fayum mummy portraits from Egypt.

WalkingStick built up her canvas with precision, starting with a double-layered base for strength. She then applied multiple coats of paint mixed with wax. At the center of the painting is an outline of a triangle-- incised into the thick surface -- with two of the triangle's sides embellished with arcing lines. If you look closely, you will begin to see outlines of red emerge from below the lines cut into the surface. They create a haunting depth, evoking layers of history and meaning. They also suggest a wound.

This work carries forward the curved linear elements from WalkingStick's powerful *Chief Joseph Series* from 1976, which consists of 36 small rectangular canvases. That series centers on the tragic journey of Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce in 1877,



during which he refused to cede his people's land to the U.S. government and led them on a catastrophic journey from Oregon toward Canada.

As she noted of the series, "The pieces were about tragedy, they were very static and very dark, especially the black ones. The black ones really did it for me, more so than the other colors."

After nearly ten years, WalkingStick's focus on geometry, surface, and the exploration of mourning gave way to a new phase in her work. She credits a visit to La Jolla and a stay in Durango, Colorado, as pivotal moments that inspired this shift, leading her to focus on the North American landscape. As she described it, "*I went from a dark studio in New York City to the great outdoors... and so I combined abstraction paintings with those based on the visual world.*"

Thanks for listening. This has been **Rachel Jans**, Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at The San Diego Museum of Art.



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