

Exhibition: *Sam Francis and Japan: Emptiness Overflowing*

Dates: April 9–July 16, 2023

Location: BCAM, Level 2



(Image captions on page 4)

(Los Angeles—January 30, 2023) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Sam Francis and Japan: Emptiness Overflowing*, the first exhibition to explore the practice of American artist Sam Francis (1923–1994) in relation to historic and contemporary Japanese art and aesthetics. Presenting works by Francis alongside Japanese art, both pre-modern and contemporary, the exhibition introduces a new way of looking at the artist’s work that emphasizes his aesthetic sense and his intellectual exchange with artists in Japan.

Comprising over 80 works largely from LACMA’s collection, *Sam Francis and Japan* includes landmark paintings and prints by Francis such as *Towards Disappearance* (1957–58) and *Meteorite* (1986) as well as a number of works from the museum’s Prints and Drawings and Japanese Art departments that will be on public view for the first time. Juxtapositions of works by Francis and historic Japanese works illustrate the pictorial and philosophical affinities they share, particularly the Japanese concept of “ma,” the dynamic between form and non-form. The exhibition also presents works by contemporary Japanese artists whom Francis knew from his extensive time in Japan, including many associated with the Gutai and Mono-Ha artist movements of the 1950s and ’60s. Archival material lent by the Sam Francis Foundation and the Getty Research Institute accompany the artworks.

Sam Francis and Japan was curated by Hollis Goodall, curator of Japanese Art at LACMA; Leslie Jones, curator of Prints and Drawings at LACMA; and Richard Speer, independent scholar and curator.

“This exhibition is the first to place Sam Francis’s work side-by-side with Japanese art, which allows visitors as well as art specialists to see aspects of commonality and distinction, and to gain a deeper understanding of Japanese aesthetic terms,” said

Goodall and Jones. “LACMA’s encyclopedic collection and cross-departmental expertise made it possible to re-appraise the work of Francis in this new context.”

“It’s exciting to share this groundbreaking look at Sam Francis in L.A., where he lived and worked for many years,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. “Like Sam, LACMA and Los Angeles have deep connections to East Asia, and this exhibition highlights the beauty and possibility in a lifetime of artistic exchange.”

Exhibition Background

Western and Eastern aesthetics engage in a profound intercultural dialogue in the work of Sam Francis. While he is most often associated with abstract expressionism, his bold use of white space and fluid and gestural application of paint also evoke the aesthetics of East Asian art and calligraphy.

Beginning in the 1950s, Francis traveled extensively and immersed himself in artist communities in New York, Paris, and elsewhere. In Paris, he encountered members of the Japanese avant-garde art group Gutai, and continued to exchange ideas with them for decades. In 1955 Francis exhibited at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, and he first traveled to Japan in 1957 when he was commissioned to create a mural for the headquarters of the Sōgetsu school of flower arranging. Francis’s images had an immediate sense of familiarity to connoisseurs from Japan who proposed that he grasped Japanese aesthetics, including art critic Yonekura Mamoru, who described Francis’s white space as “an emptiness overflowing.”

Francis stayed in Japan for extended periods in the 1960 and '70s, deepening his lifelong affinity for Japanese art and his intellectual exchange with Japanese artists. Exhibition co-curator Richard Speer said, “Through a charmed symbiosis of shared aesthetic motifs, overlapping philosophical concerns, easy personal rapports, and mutually beneficial interests in the commercial realm, Francis and a core group of Japanese compatriots found in one another kindred spirits who would nurture one another’s creativity for the duration of their lives.”

Exhibition Organization

Sam Francis and Japan is presented in a series of five galleries, each with its own focus. The first gallery compares works by Francis with historic Japanese paintings to highlight their undeniable visual similarities. The works in this gallery help illustrate the concepts of “ma” and “yohaku” in visual art, and their influence on Francis’s practice. Ma refers to a gap between forms, and yohaku describes a larger open space that is both visually weighty and ambiguous. In Yamaguchi Sōken’s screens, *Flowers and Plants of the Four Seasons* (late 18th–early 19th century), open space fills the surface, differentiated as ground or sky only through placement of painted objects. Similarly, in Francis’s *Spleen (Red)* (1971), open space between painted forms is undefined as to its extent or depth.

The second and third galleries reflect Francis's interest in contemporary as well as historic Japanese art. From the mid-1950s through the '70s in Japan, artists associated with the groups Mono-Ha ("the school of things") and Gutai ("concrete") experimented with radically new ways of creating art with an emphasis on concept, materials, and, in the case of Gutai, process. Francis knew and exhibited with many of these artists in Tokyo. This gallery demonstrates their shared interest in bold and fluid color, circular forms, and experimentation with scale. Works on view here by Shiraga Kazuo, Atsuko Tanaka, Shimamoto Shōzō, and others represent a rare public exhibition of art by the Gutai group at a Los Angeles museum since 1959.

A fourth gallery explores the connection between Francis's work and East Asian calligraphy, suggested by his preference for fluid mediums as well as his gestural application and tendency to work on the horizontal plane, rather than vertically on a wall or easel. Francis was one of many Western artists of the mid-20th century (especially those associated with abstract expressionism) who were drawn to East Asian calligraphy as a form of gestural expression, while at the same time abstract expressionism intrigued experimental calligraphers in Japan. Francis incorporated the qualities of calligraphy he observed into his paintings and prints, such as maintaining a sense of flow, as in Kasumi Bunsho's *Ten Thousand Years* (1992).

The final gallery presents Francis's series of Edge paintings and prints, in which his use of space finds its most radical expression. Space seems to be the very subject of a large untitled painting from 1969 in which the white is "framed" by varicolored edges. While space traditionally suggests absence (or the void) in Western art, Francis seems instead to suggest its presence, thereby relating to the Japanese notion of yohaku. In Francis's prints where brushwork moves inward from the edge, there is a direct relationship with compositional formulas seen in traditional East Asian ink painting.

Digital Publication

This exhibition is accompanied by a supplementary digital publication *Japan Crazed: Cross-Cultural Expression in the Works of Sam Francis and Other Postwar Artists at LACMA*. The publication begins with a narrative chronology of Francis's connections to Japan and contains a discussion of the work of twenty-eight other artists in LACMA's collection inspired to one degree or another by Japanese aesthetics and culture. This publication is available at lacma.org/publications.

Credit

This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with the Sam Francis Foundation.

Bank of America is the presenting sponsor of *Sam Francis and Japan: Emptiness Overflowing*.



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About LACMA

Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of more than 149,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

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Press Contact: press@lacma.org

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