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SAM FRANCIS: THE ARTIST'S MATERIALS

Review by Christian Scheidemann

Sam Francis: The Artist's Materials
By Debra Burchett-Lere and Aneta Zebala
The Getty Conservation Institute
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Sam Francis is the fifth volume in the Artist's Materials series; this is an ongoing exemplary, in-depth study combining artistic development, studio practice, and scientific research on modern artists. The series has been published by the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) over the past nine years. Previous books in this series include Willem de Kooning (Lake, 2010), Jean Paul Riopelle (Corbeil, Helwig, Poulin, 2011), Lucio Fontana (Gottschaller, 2012), and Hans Hoffman (Rogalla, 2016). More of these publications are in the works.

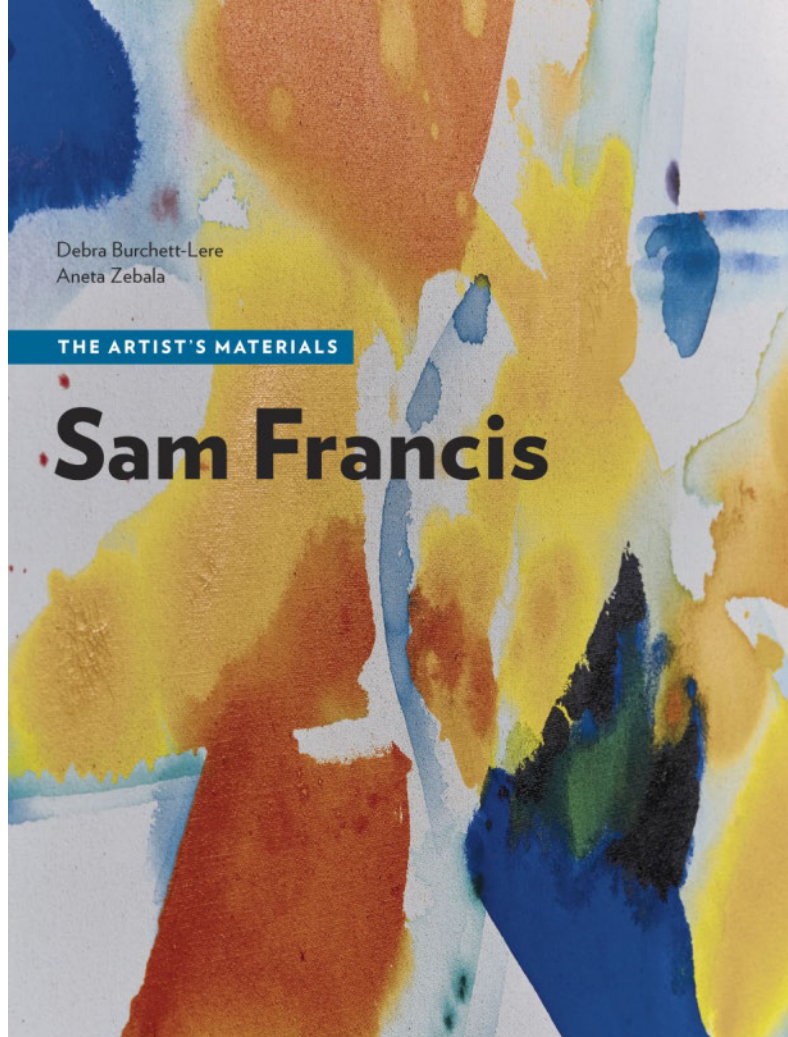
In this brilliantly researched and narrated book, co-authored by Debra Burchett-Lere (director of the Sam Francis Foundation) and Aneta Zebala (free-lance conservator based in Los Angeles), Sam Francis (1923–94) is portrayed as a lyrical colorist and painterly abstractionist, influenced both by modern European colorists, such as Matisse and Kandinsky, and by American contemporaries like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko.

Widely celebrated for his large-scale vibrant color-saturated canvas paintings (most executed on the floor), Francis is known for enthusiastically embracing and modifying new paint systems to achieve his iconic gestural drip and pour patterns onto the white primer. Defying all conventional rules of molecular compatibility, Francis mixed watercolors with oils and solvents, added pigments to PVA and Rhoplex, and poured Photo-flo into inks and Magna to achieve the desired 'quickness and fluidity' of the paint.

This study, part of the GCI's Modern and Contemporary Art Research Initiative, was conducted in close collaboration with the Sam Francis Foundation and Tom Learner, head of Modern and Contemporary Art Research at the GCI. The study investigated the artist's materials through ongoing conservation intervention and in preparation for the 2011 release of *Sam Francis: Catalogue Raisonné of Canvas and Panel Paintings, 1946-1994*.

Not only does this book provide deep philosophical and technical insight into the artist's studio practice, paint techniques, and materials, but it also acknowledges paint fabricators, suppliers, and assistants, rectifying previous inaccurate descriptions about the artist's use of materials. The book is full of information about Francis' non-traditional working methods at a time of explosive innovations in the paint industry during the second half of the 20th century; it gives invaluable advice to conservators, art historians, curators, collectors, art dealers, and artists.

The study examines thirty-seven paintings spanning the artist's five-decade-long career in which he produced more than nineteen hundred canvas paintings and eight thousand unique works on paper, not to mention thousands of limited-edition prints and monotypes. What adds to the complexity of this survey study is the notion that Francis, throughout his professional life, maintained studios in Paris, Bern, Mexico City, Los Angeles, New York, and Tokyo, where he often acquired paint supplies locally.



Book cover of *Sam Francis: The Artist's Materials*. Image courtesy of The Getty Conservation Institute

In the first of five chapters, *The Early Years*, which roughly chronicle the artist's development, the reader follows the aspiring medical student and WWII reconnaissance pilot who—at the age of twenty-one—was hospitalized for spinal tuberculosis, which would hold him immobilized in a body cast for three years. A photo included in the book shows Francis suspended from his hospital bed frame, lying face down on a pallet one foot above the mattress. In the image, Francis is painting on a drawing board with a set of watercolors and brushes given to him for physical therapy. Through contact with Bay Area Figurative Movement artist David Park, Francis was introduced to art history and what it means to be an artist and recalled the advice to be “very self-critical and very acute about what I was looking at.” He soon developed his own style and technique using egg tempera and pigment on primed Masonite board. The authors hint here at what would later be characterized as ‘unconventional mixing and paint application.’

After briefly considering a move to New York, Francis instead chose Paris, then still the capital of the art world (chapter two, *The Fifties*). This chapter sets the stage with his artistic and intellectual community in Paris at the time (Joan Mitchell, Ellsworth Kelly, Alexander Calder, Dorothea Tanning, André Breton, Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir) but also emphasizes the economic restraints after WWII. Incrementally working on large formats rolled out in his small hotel room, he investigated a wide variety of individual colors (The Monochromatic Paintings), already challenging traditional materials, such as egg tempera with colophony or oil and dammar, “to achieve the effects of watercolor.”

Focusing on what would become one of his signature colors, the authors delve deep into the color blue in a multitude of hues. Using Raman spectroscopy to characterize modern synthetic organic pigments available at that time, they identified ultramarine, cobalt, cerulean, copper phthalocyanine, manganese, and Prussian blue throughout his oeuvre.

In chapter three, *Early Sixties to Early Seventies*, and four, *Late Seventies to Early Nineties*, the authors present a fine balance between close visual observation on the painted surfaces—evaluating secondary documentation such as studio photos and film stills, quotes from his assistants, suppliers, and collectors—and scientific analysis to explain the artist's working process and confirm their observations. The emphasis on studio practice and choice of materials here complements the creative process and the uniqueness of this abstract impressionist. Or, as the chemist and conservator David Bomford is quoted in the introduction, “A study attempts nothing less than to re-create original acts of making art... We are taking shortcuts into the artists' studios, looking over their shoulders as they worked ...[and] engaging directly with their working methods.”

Especially enlightening for conservators is chapter five, *Notes on Condition and Conservation*, where caution is suggested in cleaning Francis' painted surfaces; what may look like a consistent layer of oil or acrylic paint can turn out to have watercolor or gouache mixed in, making these layers easily water-soluble. This chapter also gives an excellent overview on the stretchers, strainers, canvas, gesso, and binders the artist used over the years. Chapter five is full of information about the engineering of Francis' liquid paints and focuses on his close collaboration with former assistant and paint maker Dan Cytron, who traveled the world to find the most saturated and light-stable pigments to meet the artist's demand for performance and permanence.

The book closes with three Appendices. Appendix I, *Summary of Data from Thirty-Seven Paintings*, was compiled and analyzed by Catherine Defeyt, Joy Mazurek, Lynn Lee, and Alan Phenix, all from the GCI. Appendix II, *Pigments and Binders*, contains schematic graphs, and further detailed descriptions are found in Appendix III, *Analytical Methods and Sample Preparation*.

One wishes only that such thorough studies could be applied to the work of many other experimental artists.

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Christian Scheidemann is the founder and president of Contemporary Conservation Ltd, a New York-based studio specializing in the conservation of contemporary art. He has lectured and published extensively on material matters in contemporary art and how they inform, trouble, or intersect with aesthetics, ethics, and value.

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