

Introduction

It was the winter of 1958. Along the rue de Domrémy in Paris, candelabra streetlamps cast pools of light on the cobblestones. In his studio, Sam Francis worked alone through the night, eager to complete what he described as *his enormous dream*: the massive *Basel Mural* triptych—three separate canvases, each measuring approximately thirteen feet high by twenty feet long, and, with their stretcher bars, weighing nearly eighty pounds apiece. To keep warm while he labored, Sam wore a wool overcoat and burned coal in the stove. Over the last month, he had all but forgotten to sleep. To his patron Franz Meyer Sr., he wrote, *The brush is up and will not come down until they are finished. It is like filling great sails dipped in color . . . This is the work I have always wanted to do. Ripeness is all.*

Sam painted intuitively, standing so close to the canvases he could sense the rhythm and contour of the images as his brush pulled them forth, hear what he called the breath of the painting. For him, each canvas became a new skin, each form a new body. As dawn approached, he paused. Surrounded by his sensuous, billowing webs of radiant blues,

Throughout the text, I have italicized quotes from Sam Francis's aphorisms and letters, reserving quotation marks for remarks from interviews and his published writing.

blazing oranges, and ringing golds, he waited. The finishing touches were always made in the natural light of day.

Suddenly, one of the giant canvases toppled from the wall, trapping him underneath.

He struggled to hold the immense painting aloft. His heavy overcoat and the viscous canvas on its wooden frame must have been smothering. At five feet six inches, Sam stood less than half the height of the canvas, and, though he was strong, he was compromised by fatigue and disease. About the murals, he had written friends and family, *Perhaps I have created something now that will endure. To this I dedicate my life.* Now, if he let the wet image drop to the floor, it would be ruined, and part of him would be lost as well. The abstract forms came from within his soul. The shaping of them was the shaping of himself. About his painting, he said, “It comes from me and is therefore me.”

And so, while the coals burned out in the stove and daylight brightened the skylight, Sam held the wet eighty-pound canvas above his head for hours. By the time help finally arrived, his back and arms throbbed. His shoulders ached. The resulting injury to his abdominal wall would require surgery. But he had saved the painting.¹

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Sam Francis was in the pantheon of American artists who ascended to international prominence during the post-World War II economic boom and the country’s rise to preeminence on the global stage. A complex and dynamic man, he embodied many of the romantic ideals of America’s first avant-garde art movement: Abstract Expressionism. He was heroically ambitious and committed to the revelation of the self as a vehicle to express the universal. Employing lyrical colors and organic forms on a vast expanse of white canvas, he envisioned painting as a transformative process. His abstract shapes continually explored the relationships between matter and void, finite and infinite space, life and death.

Early in his career, he rose to world stature. He was a generation younger than fellow painters Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko. All three were middle-aged by 1950, the year Sam Francis, not yet thirty, set off to explore the world, taking the vocabulary of Abstract

Expressionism abroad. For the next forty years, his career spanned three continents. From Europe, he explored Japan and twice circled the globe. Along the way, he assimilated and seeded styles, not only taking Abstract Expressionism to Europe and Japan but also absorbing both Asian and French artistic traditions to disperse when he returned to America. Indeed, Pontus Hultén, the founding director of the Pompidou Center in Paris and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, labeled him “the first international artist.”² According to Hultén, between 1958 and the mid-1960s, Sam commanded the highest prices of any living painter.

In midlife, Sam settled in Los Angeles, but he continued to be fueled by a relentless artistic searching. He preferred a nomadic lifestyle, what he called *a suspension*. His growing wealth enabled him to maintain studios around the world. He refused to be tied to a single country or home (or even an individual woman) and refused to limit his representation to one gallery or dealer. His independent trajectory anticipated a larger cultural shift: the rise of the influential international artist embraced by a global art market that far outweighed the major urban art worlds of New York, Paris, or London. His earning power and control over his career challenged the stereotype of the struggling, impoverished artist and set the template for today’s blockbuster artists like James Turrell, Sir Anish Kapoor, and Jeff Koons—more than five decades later.³

Outsize in every way but physical stature, Sam Francis created more than ten thousand works of art during his fifty-year career. His paintings are found in major art museums and public collections around the globe. Indeed, his vaulting ambition and extraordinary impact reached far beyond painting. He was instrumental in the founding of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1979. MOCA went on to help launch the city of Los Angeles as the vital contemporary art center it is today. He also established a publishing company, a printing press, a holistic medical research center, a reforestation program, and an alternative energy company. Yet because he doesn’t fit neatly into the modernist chain of homogeneous art movements, his influence and vast achievements are still relatively unknown outside art-world circles.

While the story of any one person reveals certain aspects of the culture and the times, and the biographies of artists must examine their bodies of

creative work, this book is first and foremost the story of Sam Francis's tumultuous and multifarious life. In the early 1970s, when my father, the art historian Peter Selz, was researching his monograph on Sam Francis, I met Sam. Though I'd studied and grown up surrounded by his monumental paintings, and I'd read my father's book, it was Sam himself, the man as enigma, who intrigued me. At the time of our introduction, Sam was a stout little man with long gray hair who had just created the largest single canvas in the world (*Berlin Red*, 1969–70, measuring twenty-four by thirty-six feet). Ill most of his life and usually in pain, when he stepped, literally, onto his vast canvases, he felt his discomfort vanish as he painted. He leapt with the grace of a gazelle and flung paint as if his brush were a magic wand. Who was this incongruous man, propelled by such desire that he risked his body and soul for painting? I had to find out.

Like many, I was drawn to both the euphoric painting and the mythic nature of his self-narrative. From a nearly fatal illness in his early twenties, which left him immobilized for three years, to his metamorphosis into an artist, Sam's life evokes the archetypal story of rebirth: confrontation with death, a retreat from earthly matters, then, ultimately, the emergence of an altered self. His original aim had been to become a doctor, but his education was interrupted by World War II. While training in the Army Air Corps, he contracted spinal tuberculosis. Encased in a full-body plaster cast, he was often quarantined and alone. Given a set of watercolor paints as a therapy tool, he took up painting as a means of leaving sickness and pain and escaping from his plaster cage and hospital bed. From the moment he first picked up a brush, life, death, and painting became intrinsically linked. When he recovered, he was convinced he had cured himself through art.

Suffering and pain have informed the work of artists as diverse as Frida Kahlo and Jean-Antoine Watteau. Both lived with injury or disease throughout their lives and sought out-of-body release through art. "The most powerful art in life is to transform pain into a healing talisman," Kahlo wrote in her journal. "A butterfly is reborn, blossomed into a colorful party!" Watteau, who suffered from tuberculosis, painted *Pilgrimage to Cythera* in 1717, a fantastical depiction of an island paradise of love and light where no pain existed. Though Sam refused to be curtailed by tuberculosis, his work often evokes skin, veils, and blood cells. Time and again,

matter and void battle for preeminence on his canvases, while art surfaces as the healing enterprise of his biography.

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By 2014, when Debra Burchett-Lere invited me to lunch in Los Angeles to discuss writing his biography, Sam had been dead for a decade. On the recommendation of board member John Seed, Burchett-Lere, the executive director of the Sam Francis Foundation, had read my book *Unstill Life*, a memoir of my father and the art world. Each chapter of that book includes short biographical histories on an artist intimately connected to my father's life and his work as an art critic, historian, and museum director. One of those chapters focused on Sam Francis. Burchett-Lere wanted to know where I had heard the story I'd related of Sam threatening to crash a plane, kamikaze style, into the compound of his greatest patron, the Japanese oil baron Sazō Idemitsu. Idemitsu had refused to allow Sam to marry his youngest daughter. "From my father," I told Burchett-Lere. It was a tale I had loved as a child for its romantic, Romeo-and-Juliet quality.

"We don't think it's true," Burchett-Lere said.

On reflection, I realized the story had always seemed inconsistent to me. It's hard to reconcile the rotund and serenely smiling man who sat like Buddha in our home with this tale of a desperate, daredevil, take-no-prisoners pilot. And yet many art historians believed it, just as they believed and reported the false narrative that Sam had risen phoenixlike from the ashes of a fiery plane crash to become the painter of the heavens. I began to wonder what else about his story I, and others before me, had gotten wrong.

As it turned out, a lot.

Because of my position as both insider and outsider to Sam's story, Burchett-Lere thought I was ideally suited to combine an intimate account and a neutral perspective. I'd met Sam and observed him. Yet although I was familiar with the art world he'd navigated, I didn't work in that world or in the art academy that analyzed, lauded, canonized, and critiqued his paintings and his life. Given my father's role in Sam's career, I hesitated. But while my father had written Sam's monograph, much of the biographical lore relevant to his investigation—and other scholarship—appeared to be false. Furthermore, as an art historian, my father focused on discovering artists

and bringing their work to the forefront in exhibitions and books. As a writer of narrative nonfiction, I focus on illuminating the artists behind the images—in this case, piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of Sam’s experience and revealing how he transmuted events, ideas, dreams, and lies into works of art.

Burchett-Lere first proposed this biography, and I am greatly indebted to the Sam Francis Foundation for the access it granted me and the funding it provided during the year when I was crafting a proposal. But the book is editorially independent. The research, scholarship, and writing are entirely my own.

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In every artist’s life, there is a gap between wanting and becoming, between the person and the art. This biography strives to fill this gap, to elucidate and understand the boy Sam was and the artist he became. For, indeed, Sam’s desires, born out of tragedy, gave rise to an astonishing body of work. His appetite for life, for love, for spirit and matter drove an artistic exploration that sent him continuously back and forth around the world.

By nature, Sam was a great fabricator with a trickster personality. He identified with Carl Jung’s trickster archetype: the mischievous breaker of taboos, the magical conjurer who tries with illusions to continually transcend the earthbound fate of man. Even though he entered into five marriages, Sam felt trapped by anything locked, firm, stable, or binding. He embraced chaos, believing it to be the wellspring of creativity and the antidote to ossification. Friends, wives, and associates referred to his demonic nature and his “dark side.” Yet these same people spoke of his dazzling, exalting canvases, his humor, his open heart, his deep generosity, and his unlimited support.

Everyone I interviewed professed to know Sam best. Many had pet names for him, as if Sam were a character out of a Dickens novel, and each moniker emphasized a different reality. He was Chubby, Sammy, Beautiful Voyager, Global Sam, King Sam, and Sam-Chan (lovable Sam). I have chosen to refer to him simply as Sam. Given that Sam’s wives, children, brother, and parents shared his last name, I have also opted, for clarity and readability, to use first names when referring to Sam’s immediate family. Everyone else is referred to by surname.