

**Sam Gilliam** (b. November 30, 1933 in [Tupelo, Mississippi](#)) is an [African American Color field painter](#) associated with the [Washington Color School](#), [Abstract Expressionism](#) and [Lyrical Abstraction](#). He works on stretched, draped, and wrapped canvas, and adds sculptural 3D elements. He is recognized as the first artist to introduce the idea of a painted canvas hanging without stretcher bars c.1965, a major contribution to the Color Field School.

Lately, he has worked with [polypropylene](#), [computer generated imaging](#), metallic and iridescent acrylics, hand-made paper, [aluminum](#), steel, and plastic.

**Biography:** Sam Gilliam was born in 1933 in [Tupelo, Mississippi](#) and was the seventh of eight children to Sam and Estery Gilliam. The Gilliams moved to [Louisville, Kentucky](#) shortly after Sam was born. His father worked on the railroad, and his mother cared for the large family. Gilliam began painting in elementary school and received much encouragement from teachers. In 1951, Gilliam graduated from Central High School in Louisville. Gilliam served in the [United States Army](#) from 1956 to 1958. He received his Bachelor and Masters degree of Fine Arts at the [University of Louisville](#). In 1955, Gilliam had his first solo exhibition at the University of Louisville. He initially taught art for a year in the Louisville public schools. In 1962, he married Dorothy Butler, a Louisville native and a well-known journalist. That same year, Gilliam moved to Washington, D.C., where he has lived ever since.

**Career in the 1960s, early 1970s:** Gilliam is internationally recognized as the foremost contemporary [African-American Color Field Painter](#) and [Lyrical Abstractionist](#). In the 1960s, as the political and social front of America began to explode in all directions, the black artist began to take bold declarative initiatives, making definitive imagery, inspired by the specific conditions of the African American experience. Abstraction remained a critical issue for artists like Sam Gilliam. Gilliam's sense of color is modulated by his study of light, color, and its transformative and changing dynamics. He is most widely known for the large color-stained canvases he draped and suspended from the walls and ceilings during the late 1960s and early 1970s. "The background for Gilliam's art was the 1950s, which witnessed the emergence of [abstract expressionism](#) and the [New York School](#) followed by [Color Field painting](#)." Gilliam's early style developed from brooding figural abstractions into large paintings of flatly applied color pushed Gilliam to eventually remove the easel aspect of painting by eliminating the stretcher. Gilliam was influenced by [German Expressionists](#) such as [Emil Nolde](#), [Paul Klee](#) and the [American Bay Area Figurative School](#) artist [Nathan Oliveira](#). He states that he found lots of clues on how to go about his work from Tatlin, [Frank Stella](#), [Hans Hofmann](#), [Georges Braque](#), [Pablo Picasso](#), and [Paul Cezanne](#). In 1963, [Thomas Downing](#), an artist who identified himself with the Washington Color School, introduced Gilliam to this new school of thought. Around 1965 Gilliam became the first painter to introduce the idea of the unsupported canvas. He was inspired to do this by observing laundry hanging outside his Washington studio. This was the first of its kind and was of huge influence throughout the art world. His drape paintings were suspended from ceilings,

arranged on walls or floors, and they represent a sculptural, third dimension in painting. Gilliam states that his paintings are based on the fact that the framework of the painting is in real space. He is attracted to its power and the way it functions. Gilliam's draped canvases change in each environment they are arranged in and frequently he embellishes the works with metal, rocks, and wooden beams.

**Career in the 1970s and 1980s:** In 1975, Gilliam veered away from the draped canvases and became influenced by jazz musicians such as [Miles Davis](#) and [John Coltrane](#). He started producing dynamic geometric collages, which he called "*Black Paintings*" due to the hue. Again, in the 1980s Gilliam's style changed dramatically to quilted paintings reminiscent of African patchwork quilts from his childhood. His most recent works are textured paintings that incorporate metal forms. Gilliam's ability to move beyond the draped canvas, coupled with his ability to adopt new series keeps the viewers interested and engaged. This has assured his prominence in the art world as an exciting and innovative contemporary painter.

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Gilliam is also one of the few successful, self-supporting African American artists who views the teaching of art as a mission. His love of teaching developed during the one year he spent in Louisville public schools. He taught for nearly a decade in the Washington public schools, and then at the Maryland Institute, College of Art, and the [University of Maryland](#), and for several years at [Carnegie Mellon University](#) in [Pittsburgh, Pa](#). In addition, Gilliam still devotes time to conducting workshops, participating in panels, and delivering lectures in this country and abroad.

**Quotes:** These are direct quotes from the artist help describe him and/or his work; "I am a better artist today in that I am obviously a better teacher. Whether I am teaching or making art, the process is fundamentally the same: I am creating." "Only when making the work can I determine the many languages that form the planes on which it is to exist. Like abstract phrases the many intentions of the work (before an audience) passes through an intuitive sieve... The work was not planned, there are ploys, however, to the way it was laid out and then put together." 1996 –Sam Gilliam.

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Gilliam received his B.A. in fine art and his M.A. in painting from the [University of Louisville](#) in [Kentucky](#). He has taught at the [Corcoran School of Art](#), the [Maryland Institute College of Art](#) and [Carnegie Mellon University](#).

He has had many commissions, grants, awards, exhibitions and honorary doctorates. A major retrospective of Gilliam's work was held at the [Corcoran Gallery of Art](#) in 2005. He was named the 2006 University of Louisville Alumnus of the Year.

He lives in [Washington D.C.](#) and has a studio in the historical [Shaw](#) neighborhood.

**Lyrical Abstraction** is an [art movement](#) born in [Paris](#) after [World War II](#). At that time, [France](#) was trying to reconstruct its identity devastated by the [Occupation](#) and [Collaboration](#). Some [art critics](#) looked at the new abstraction as an attempt to try to restore the image of artistic

Paris, which had held the rank of capital of the arts until the war. It is possible that lyrical abstraction also represented a competition between Paris and the new American school of painting, [Abstract Expressionism](#), based in [New York](#) represented by [Jackson Pollock](#), [Willem de Kooning](#) and many others. The [New York School](#) versus the [School of Paris](#).

Lyrical abstraction was opposed not only to [Cubist](#) and [Surrealist movements](#) that preceded it, but also to [geometric abstraction](#) (or "cold abstraction"). Lyrical abstraction was in some ways the first to apply the lessons of [Kandinsky](#), considered one of the fathers of abstraction. For the artists in France, lyrical abstraction represented an opening to personal expression.