



NYC Museum Highlight - “Agnes Martin” at the Guggenheim

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by Pat Rogers

A major retrospective of the American painter Agnes Martin (1912-2004) opened last week at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, the first since her death. The exhibition is on view from October 7, 2016 through January 11, 2017 and presents paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures. The show promises to be one that shouldn't be missed for fans of Abstraction Expressionism and Minimalism.

One of the preeminent painters of the twentieth century, Martin created subtle and evocative paintings composed of grids and stripes and frequently inscribed with penciled lines, according to the Guggenheim. Her canvases significantly influenced artists of her time and subsequent generations. Often associated with [Minimalism](#) yet kindred with the Abstract Expressionists, Martin was one of the few prominent female artists to emerge from these prevaillingly masculine art movements of the late 1950s and '60s.

The survey is the most comprehensive ever mounted of Martin's art. Simply titled “Agnes Martin,” the retrospective features over 115 works and traces Martin's career from her lesser-known paintings of the 1950s to her final canvases of the early 2000s, filling the Guggenheim rotunda. Click [here](#) to see installation images at the Guggenheim.

“Agnes Martin” presents the art chronologically with works on paper interspersed with paintings. The exhibition also includes over 20 artworks unique to the New York presentation of the retrospective. Among these is *White Flower* (1960), which was acquired by the Guggenheim in 1963 and was the first work by the artist to enter any museum collection, according to the Guggenheim.

After its presentation at the Guggenheim, the retrospective travels to [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#). The show was already presented last year at the [Tate Modern](#) in London and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf. All four museums co-organized the survey with the Tate Modern as lead.

In New York, the exhibition was recently reviewed by Holland Cotter for *The New York Times*. Cotter describes the retrospective as “...the most out-of-this-world-beautiful retrospective I've seen in this space in years. Her art is as abstract as abstract gets, yet her presence in it is palpable. So is her story, once you know how to read it.” Click [here](#) to read the entire review.

Agnes Martin was born in 1912 in Saskatchewan, Canada. She moved to the United States in 1932 and became a U.S. citizen in 1950. In the 1940s and early '50s, Martin lived and studied periodically in the northwestern United States, New Mexico and New York City. She obtained degrees from

Teachers College, Columbia University. In 1957 she settled in Coenties Slip in lower Manhattan alongside fellow artists [Robert Indiana](#), [Ellsworth Kelly](#), [James Rosenquist](#), [Lenore Tawney](#) and [Jack Youngerman](#). She established her career as an artist, earning her first solo show in 1958 at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York.

By the mid-1950s, Martin replaced the landscape and figurative watercolors of her formative years, as well as the biomorphic oil paintings that followed, in favor of experiments in different mediums to create simplified abstraction with found materials, according to the Guggenheim.

Her paintings of the 1960s, which feature square formats, grids, penciled lines drawn on canvas, as well as compositions with subtle variations in shade and hue, marked a crossroads in the history of abstraction. With her gentle inscriptions of penciled lines on subdued fields of wash and color, Martin established a geometric and spatial language that she would refine and reinterpret over ensuing decades. Despite her restrained style—and unlike the rigidly formulaic work of the Minimalists—Martin maintained a deep conviction in the emotive and expressive power of art and decidedly handcrafted, delicate surfaces.

Martin left the New York art scene and abandoned painting in 1967 amid growing interest in her work. In search of solitude and silence, she traveled across the United States and Canada for almost two years before finally settling in New Mexico, where she lived the rest of her life. After a hiatus, Martin published *On a Clear Day* (1973), a portfolio of 30 screenprints of differently proportioned grids and parallel lines. She began painting again in 1974, turning to stripes as a primary compositional format while continuing to explore and refine her spare style. She continued working in this manner until the final years of her life, when she reintroduced bold geometric forms into her paintings.



“Untitled #5” by Agnes Martin, 1998. Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4 cm. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Acquired with assistance from the Gesellschaft der Freunde, numerous artists and art dealers, and with special support by the guests of the dinner on the evening of December 3, 2011 © 2016 Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Martin often chose titles that suggest a preoccupation with the natural world, such as *White Stone* (1964) and *White Flower*, and throughout her career she maintained a particular interest in using art to evoke the experience of nature, according to the museum.

She was steadfast in her denial of any representative elements in her work and had this to say about her subject: “It’s really about the feeling of beauty and freedom that you experience in landscape. My response to nature is really a response to beauty. The water looks beautiful, the trees look beautiful, even the dust looks beautiful. It is beauty that really calls.”

Martin was honored with the Skowhegan Medal of Painting and Sculpture (1987), Oskar Kokoschka Prize (1992), Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale (1997), National Medal of Arts (1998), and Lifetime Achievement Award from the Women’s Caucus for Art (2005), among other awards.

“Agnes Martin” is organized by Tate Modern, London, in collaboration with Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The Guggenheim presentation is co-curated by Tiffany Bell, Guest Curator, and Tracey Bashkoff, Senior Curator, Collections and Exhibitions.

BASIC FACTS: “Agnes Martin” remains on view through January 11, 2017. The Guggenheim is located at 1071 5th Ave, New York, NY 10128. www.guggenheim.org.

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