

# Shane Campbell Gallery

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## Sign Here!

BY [Mary Haus](#) POSTED 07/01/04

**Some artists' signatures are self-expression, some are design elements, and some are just fun.**



Robert Rauschenberg in an untitled 1958 painting, the artist signed up the right-hand side, using his signature “as a compositional element and as line.”

ELLEN PAGE WILSON/COURTESY PACEWILDENSTEIN GALLERY, NEW YORK/WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK/GIFT OF THE AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY ART FOUNDATION INC., LEONARD A. LAUDER, PRESIDENT

One day in Antibes, not long after the war, Picasso was treating a group of friends to lunch at a restaurant. As the lunch went on and on, and his guests were getting restless, Picasso—famously a bit of a cheapskate about small things—finally requested the bill. When it came, he did a little drawing on it and handed it to the restaurateur, saying, “How about I give you that?” The restaurateur replied, “How wonderful! But maître, do you mind signing it?” Picasso answered, “I’m buying the meal, not the restaurant.”

Jack Flam, author of the recent *Matisse and Picasso: The Story of Their Rivalry and Friendship* (Westview Press), relates this story—probably apocryphal, he notes—to illustrate what he calls the “power of the signature.”

Interest in the artist’s signature didn’t begin with Picasso. Artists have been signing their works since the Renaissance, sometimes placing a name or a monogram in a conspicuous place, sometimes hiding it so the viewer has to search for it. Just what does a signature mean to the artist—and to the beholder or the scholar? And what does it mean, as in the story about Picasso (who frequently signed his paintings), for posterity?

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John Wilmerding, Christopher Binyon Sarofim '86 Professor of American Art at Princeton University and visiting curator in the American art department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, recently set the parameters for the subject in his book *Signs of the Artist: Signatures and Self-Expression in American Paintings* (Yale University Press). The idea to do the book, Wilmerding says, “came, on the one hand, out of the clever, humorous side of all this, the tricky and the fun part, the secret garden, the labyrinth; and on the other, the really serious side, can a case be made that these signatures carry profound meaning?”

To build his case, Wilmerding speeds the reader through several hundred years of European art, and then on to American signature devices, to delve into what he sees as clues to self-expression and self-representation: Van Eyck's famous presence in the mirror of his *Arnolfini Marriage* (1434), right under his very conspicuous signature; Frederic Church's carving his initials in a tree trunk in his *Heart of the Andes* (1859); Winslow Homer's varied signatures and monograms, some two dozen in all, and the art-historical speculation they have inspired; the ways in which such 20th-century artists as Marsden Hartley, Andrew Wyeth, and Jasper Johns encoded themselves in their work.

Wilmerding's research is exhaustive, his case studies intriguing. Thomas Moran signed one painting, *Sinbad Wrecked* (1919), with his customary monogram but also pressed his fingerprint into the paint just below it—“to authenticate his canvas in the most modern of ways,” Wilmerding writes. Other artists made themselves witnesses to history, as when Frederic Church signed his name prominently among the stones of the ruined temples of ancient Greece in his paintings.

Still others, Wilmerding contends, revealed their political leanings. With William Sidney Mount's *Catching Rabbits* (1839), for example, Wilmerding builds on earlier scholarship to deduce that Mount placed his signature on a wooden hunting trap to show that he was a Democrat rather than a Whig. Mount's audience, Wilmerding says, would have understood the word associations: rabbit = hare = hair = wig = Whig. Mount was alluding to the Whig efforts to trap votes in the 1840 presidential campaign. “These are the details,” Wilmerding notes, “that illuminate the whole.”

“You have to start with, What is the function of the signature?” says Gary Tinterow, Engelhard Curator of 19th-Century European Painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “For Renaissance artists, Dürer, for example, it's a stamp to say, ‘I made it, and here's what I'm recording at this moment.’”

Then there is “signature as advertising,” Tinterow continues. Next time you come across one of Gustave Courbet's grand pictures, he says, like the Met's *Young Women from the Village* (1852), make note of the brilliant vermilion “G. Courbet” placed squarely in the lower left corner. It's in European, especially French, paintings destined for the great Salons that the signature “became a function of the intended display of the piece,” says Tinterow. “If you're Courbet, you use a great big red signature so people can identify it from far below”—and from among hundreds of paintings hung cheek by jowl.

In the case of Degas, Tinterow points out, the signature seems to have been just as important to the artist, but for composition as well as display reasons. When Degas showed works at the Impressionist exhibitions, in particular in the 1870s, Tinterow says, “he continued to revise his paintings or works that started out as pastels. He collaged bits of paper and added on, and as the work enlarged and became

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more important, he would put in a signature, scratch it out, and put it elsewhere. It was clearly important to him visually. As the composition evolved, so did the signature placement.”

Tinterow adds that one of his favorite examples of the signature as a “sign and a joke” is in Goya’s *Portrait of the Duchess of Alba* (1797). The artist’s noble patroness stands against a landscape in full mourning dress (she had recently been widowed). She points, somewhat oddly, to the ground. There, says Tinterow, “written upside down to us but rightside up to her, is ‘Solo Goya’ (only Goya), meaning that only Goya could have painted this; he’s the only artist in my life.” As if that weren’t enough, one of her rings is inscribed with Goya’s name.

Jack Flam notes a function of the signature particular to Cézanne. The artist rarely signed his paintings, except for those purchased by the collector Victor Chocquet (who owned 33 of them) and signed only at his insistence. A signature on a Cézanne, says Flam, most likely means it was once in Chocquet’s collection.

Flam also points out that in modern times, “one of the functions of the signature that evolved was, ‘It is mine, it is genuine, it is finished.’” Jackson Pollock often signed on the front of his paintings, Flam explains. If you look at a Pollock, such as *Number 13A Arabesque* (1948)—and you have to look closely, weaving your eye through the furious skeins of paint—there it is, “Jackson Pollock.” The signature seems pulled along by the force of the painting, and the paint. “It has the quality of a logo,” Flam remarks.

At least one other Abstract Expressionist recognized the branding potential of the signature, if only in jest. Art historian Irving Sandler recalls walking into a show—he declines to identify the artist—in 1958. “The canvases were still wet,” Sandler says. “I brushed against one of them and got paint on my sleeve. I called him the next morning and said, ‘I’ll send you the cleaning bill.’ He said, ‘Don’t bother, just bring it over and I’ll sign it.’”

Other Abstract Expressionists were more ambivalent about signing their work on the front. Robert Motherwell did. Clyfford Still didn’t. Barnett Newman sometimes did.

Newman’s name kept coming up in conversations about signatures, usually in remarks like, “I don’t think Barnett Newman ever signed any on the front,” or “Barnett Newman didn’t sign on the back,” or “I think Barnett Newman refused to sign his work.”

So which is it? Ann Temkin, curator in the department of painting and sculpture at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, who organized the acclaimed Newman retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art two years ago, says, “He didn’t sign every painting, but he was happy to sign them. He was, in fact, taken to task for it, especially with his ‘Stations of the Cross.’”

Newman created these 14 paintings between 1958 and 1966. For him they were the distillation of the cry of Jesus, *Lama Sabachthani* (Why? Why did you forsake me?) Quoted in the May 1966 *ARTnews*, Newman called it the “question that has no answer.”

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Each painting is signed and dated in a very deliberate hand. In her catalogue for the retrospective, Temkin points out that Newman likely signed them just as they left the studio for their first exhibition, at the Guggenheim Museum in June 1966, since a 1965 photograph of the panels in his studio shows no signatures on any of them.

Sandler recalls, “When I saw the signature on the ‘Stations,’ I didn’t think it was appropriate. Barney Newman wanted to make a case for ‘Stations of the Cross.’ He had made the case for his earlier work that it was evocative of the sublime. What was that idiosyncratic signature doing there, unless he thought of himself as the embodiment of the sublime?”

Temkin replies, “Even when our exhibition was up, many art-world people said the same thing to me. I actually took this as one example of the great paradox that his work embodied. On the one hand, he was after a universal truth in his painting, and on the other, he was extremely self-conscious as an artist and of the fact that these were statements *by him*.”

Another artist whose name came up several times in conversations about signatures and abstraction was Robert Ryman. Sandler and Temkin both note that Ryman has often worked his signature or elements of a signature into a composition.

When asked about an untitled 1958 painting that prominently features “R RYMAN” going up the right-hand side, Ryman explained, “At that time, and even later, I would do that sometimes, usually going up the side, not the bottom, because going up the side made it more abstract. Because I felt paintings usually were signed, traditionally. I thought by signing up the side rather than along the bottom, I could use it as a compositional element and as line. There were also some instances in the early ’60s where I would sign something two or three times on the front in various places, there again as line, and sometimes not so much as line but as visual compositional points to move the eye around.”

The other end of the signature spectrum is the deliberate lack of one, points out Nicholas Fox Weber, head of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, in Bethany, Connecticut, and longtime intimate of the Alberses.

“The lack of a signature was something that always fascinated me,” Weber says. “Anni Albers always led me to believe that the calling card for the Bauhaus was the Gothic cathedral. The whole idea was no signature whatsoever. They had a great belief in folk art, in traditions of ancient Greek pottery. They thought that a great artist was like a religious disciple, not someone to deal with the issue of his own ego or talk about himself.”

The Alberses began their creative lives at the Bauhaus in the early 1920s, before immigrating to the United States in 1939, when Josef accepted an offer to teach at Black Mountain College. Anni would weave a monogram into her extraordinary, boldly colored textiles, Weber says, and sign her full name on the back, on the wooden stretcher.

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Josef spent the last 25 years of his life on his iconic series “Homages to the Square,” which numbers between 1,000 and 2,000 paintings, done between 1950 and 1976. Weber says that no one knows for sure how many there are. Josef signed most of his paintings on the back, Weber adds. But with many of the “Homages,” if you look carefully, in the lower right corner, you see that Josef scratched into the paint, with the stick of his paintbrush, a tiny “A” and the last two numbers of the date in a kind of monogram. “They really disliked the idea of the signature,” Weber says.

More recently, such artists as John Baldessari and the late Jack Goldstein (once a student of Baldessari’s at CalArts) have rejected the signature. In his recent book *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia* (Minneapolis Press), Richard Hertz quotes Goldstein as saying that when he had studio assistants, he had them sign his name on the back of his paintings. One of Goldstein’s dealers, Brian Butler, says that many members of Goldstein’s generation share this lack of interest in the signature, valuing the realization of an idea over the notion of authorship. “Signing the back, for Jack, wasn’t the point,” Butler says. “He wanted it to be a Jack Goldstein work, and signing it didn’t do anything toward making it a Jack Goldstein painting.”

Young Los Angeles artist Mark Grotjahn has the opposite view: his mark is not only on the front of his abstract paintings but is a part of them. Grotjahn’s brilliant vermilion *Untitled (Orange Butterfly Green M 2003 G)*, for example, features striated strokes of pigment that emanate from a glowing center. Floating in the lower corners are a lyrical *m* and *g*; Grotjahn says that, in fact, he places the initials first and then paints the image around them. “In part, it’s a reaction,” he explains. “Signing the front of a work in L.A. is not the cool thing to do. And, in part, I’m romanticizing the artist, bringing the artist back into the picture.”

Robert Longo signs his drawings on the front because the frames he is now using would obscure a signature on the back. This, in a sense, gives the signature an exalted place, although not in the way many artists intend. “I once was told that signatures are not meant to be read but recognized,” Longo says. “Mine is quite illegible—but pretty.”

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