



In the 1940s the Baltimore artist Morris Louis was creating abstract paintings and collages strongly influenced by cubism. Toward the end of the decade he kept a close eye on the work of Jackson Pollock, and in April 1953 Louis visited New York, where he saw the latest Pollocks and also the work of Helen Frankenthaler. As a result of this trip, Louis began laying unstretched and unprimed canvases on the floor and pouring on thin washes of paint. Over the next eight years, he evolved a distinctly personal approach to abstract expressionism, painting numerous large canvases that were lyrical, even mystical, in mood.

*Turning* belongs stylistically to a group of paintings done between 1954 and 1959, and more specifically to a 1958 series titled *Veils*. In *Turning*, the expansive horizontal space is dominated by a single imposing form. The form is composed of plumes of rich earth colors, which were stained one over the other, wet on wet, and were absorbed by the warp and weft of the raw canvas. Dark reds, pale olives, and moss greens flow upwards, warmed by an underlying incandescent red-orange. The layered, or laminated, effect of the washes creates a puzzling three-dimensional quality that seems to shift before the viewer's eye. As were other pioneers of his generation, Morris Louis was interested in "all-over" painting (later called "field" painting), which emphasized the actual picture plane and the validity of paint itself.

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#### MORRIS LOUIS

American, 1912–62

*Turning*, 1958

Acrylic on canvas; 94 1/4 x 178 1/4 in. (239.4 x 452.8 cm.)

Purchase, Acquisition Fund and Academy Volunteers Fund, 1971 (3997.1)

## MORRIS LOUIS

American, b. Baltimore, MD, 1912;  
d. Washington, D.C., 1962

*Turning*, 1958

Acrylic on canvas

Purchase with Academy funds and funds from  
Academy Volunteers, 1971 (3997.1)

In the mid-1950s, Baltimore-artist Morris Louis abandoned his early interest in abstraction influenced by Cubism and began laying unstretched and unprimed canvases on the floor and pouring on thin washes of paint. Over the next several years, Louis developed a distinctly personal approach to abstraction, painting numerous large canvases that are lyrical, even mystical, in mood. One in a series of paintings called *Veils*, this work, *Turning*, is composed of plumes of rich earth colors, that were stained one over the other, wet on wet, and were absorbed by the weave of the raw canvas. Dark reds, pale olives, and moss greens flow upwards, warmed by an underlying incandescent red-orange. The layered, or laminated, effect seems to shift before the viewer's eye. As were other pioneers of his generation such as Helen Frankenthaler, Louis was interested in "all-over" painting (later called "field painting"), which emphasizes the surface of the work and the validity of paint itself.

"Turning"

Purchased from Funds of the Museum and Academic Volunteers  
1971, #3997.1

Acrylic on canvas, (H 94 1/4 " x W 178 1/4 "

GAL 8 Morris Louis, USA

1912-1962

1958

Gallery 3

ARTIST: Born in Baltimore, Maryland. Student at Maryland Institute of Fine & Applied Arts, participated in Federal Arts Project during the 1930's. In 1940's abstract paintings and collages of cubist nature. Best known for work 1954-62 in which subtle, abstractly organic images of changing colors were created by staining un-sized canvas with acrylic paints. A solitary, introverted man, who lived for painting. Influenced by Jackson Pollack and Helen Frankenthaler; worked with Kenneth Noland in Washington, DC, where he and his wife lived and taught. Major series of paintings: "Veils" 1954; the second series "Veil 1958", "Florals:" "Unfurleds."

SUBJECT: Large scale. Motif of Veils done during second series. Wavering, slightly twisting central bar of pale olive/sap greens in center, reflecting unstained sides. Winged shafts cover from 1/2 to 3/4 of vertical area and stress both vertical and lateral movement. Format is horizontal; tongues of paint and plumes are vertical, aligning color with uprightness of wall. Color indicates veil of black over red and green.

MEDIUM & TECHNIQUE: Louis allowed no one in his studio, so no one ever observed him painting, and his method of creating dramatically original images i.e. "veils" is a mystery. It appears he took lengths of cotton duck; folded, pinned, and draped the loose material over a huge wooden armature which was probably suspended over some kind of trough to catch the liquid paint as it ran down the raw, unprimed canvas. This staining process could be manipulated by Louis altering and controlling the direction which the paint flowed as he poured it on from the can. He would usually start with the brightest color,

layering others on to create these ambiguous shapes and forms...no brush stroking. This layered staining of diluted paint, when it was absorbed by the canvas, resulted in a rich, iridescent form.

STYLE: His second "veils" period.....importance of the scale of the painting format. Mystical, sensuous, like the forms of "lumia" in a static moment. Louis achieved a synthesis of design and color, inspired by Pollack's dripping paint onto the raw canvas and Frankenthaler's interest of color staining the canvas.

INSTRUCTIONAL AIDS: Give synonyms for "veil" (transparent curtaining, fabric you can see through i.e. bride's veil) This layering gives more of a three-dimensional feeling than Frankenthaler's flat, 2 dimensional forms. Let the students' imagination explore this 3 dimensional form as a kind of environment to encircle the viewer. This is a good example of the validity of the paint itself....creating an "all-overness."