The Practice of Morris Louis

[This text is reproduced in its entirety from the following publication: Upright, Diane. Morris Louis: The Complete Paintings. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985, pp. 35-48.]

When Morris Louis died in September 1962, his paintings had just begun to attract widespread interest and critical attention. Although he had exhibited on a fairly regular basis since 1953, more than four hundred paintings he produced between 1953 and his death remained stored on rolls in his Washington home. Since Louis did not sign, date, or title paintings unless they were released for exhibition or sale, most of the stored canvases bore no inscriptions. Furthermore, since he painted with his canvas tacked to a temporary work stretcher, rolled paintings when they were dry, and determined precise dimensions only when pictures were stretched for exhibition or sale, even the exact dimensions of the paintings that formed his estate were uncertain. And the intended hanging orientation for some paintings was unclear because he had demonstrated some flexibility in regard to that issue when he was alive.

Added to the magnitude of possible questions this situation raised for the advisors to the Louis Estate was the fact that Louis had kept no records, diary, or notes relating to his paintings, nor had he corresponded with anyone about these matters except Clement Greenberg. In fact, he kept very much to himself. He never permitted anyone (including his wife) access to his studio while he was working and rarely invited anyone into the studio at all.

Louis's widow, now Marcella Louis Brenner, provided unfailing support for his career from the time of their marriage in 1947. She pursued an active professional career in education and accepted the separation Louis maintained between his art and their family life. As she once explained,

> People often ask how I was able to contain my curiosity about what Morris was painting. Living in the same house, and knowing the painting was going on in the same house. It was indeed difficult, but I respected his need not to be bothered, annoyed, pestered. And I knew that he did not want to have to explain. I think he did to some degree to his students, or in a way it came through to them, but he didn't otherwise talk very much about it, except perhaps to people like Clem [Clement Greenberg].[i]

Helen Jacobson, one of Louis's students, confirmed that appraisal: "He never talked about his work. He seemed to guard jealously his private world of art, and apparently, only a few artist and critic friends were allowed to share it with him."[ii]

After Louis's death, much of the responsibility for making the decisions necessary when paintings were released for exhibition or sale fell on Clement Greenberg, who served as the advisor to the Louis Estate from 1962 through 1970.[iii] Greenberg was the obvious choice, for he had been Louis's friend and advisor since their meeting in 1953. He visited Louis in Washington at roughly six-month intervals.[iv] Louis usually saw Greenberg when he traveled to New York, although until 1960 those trips were infrequent and rarely lasted more than two days. Greenberg arranged exhibitions of Louis's work and attempted to interest both dealers and collectors in the paintings. The artist and critic corresponded at regular intervals between January 1954 and August 1962; these letters reveal clearly the active role Greenberg played in promoting Louis's career as well as the trust Louis placed in him.[v]

Under Greenberg's guidance, the Louis Estate assumed a major responsibility when it came to titling, dating, stretching, and hanging paintings from the estate. The unnecessary veil of mystery surrounding these issues has prompted misconceptions and occasional implications of wrongdoing, especially concerning the stretching of canvases. But, as Greenberg stated in 1973,

> It mattered very much where Louis' canvases were "cut" and it continues to matter very much. The responsibility of stretching the many canvases he left unstretched at his death in 1962 fell upon me. I have followed his indications wherever I could find them, and when I could not I have followed his practice. In either case there was plenty of guidance.[vi]

The intention here is to document Louis's "practice" regarding his paintings as precisely as possible and to explain any modifications or variations in that practice and in its later interpretations.

Greenberg's first task as advisor to the Louis Estate was to supervise the inventory made in October 1962 of all the paintings stored in Louis's home. During three weekend sessions in Washington, the paintings were rolled out one by one; each was photographed and assigned an estate number. These numbers reflect only the order in which paintings were unrolled. In some cases, however, particularly with the Stripes, paintings stored on a single roll that were given consecutive estate numbers seem to have been made at the same time. An index file was created

with a card for each painting bearing this number, a verbal description, estimated dimensions, and an approximate date assigned by Greenberg. Furthermore, Louis's widow authenticated the paintings by writing "M Louis" and the estate number on the back of each canvas (see fig. 1, which shows this authentication inscription on the back of *Rigel*, cat. no. 558). The estate numbers were written on cards that were placed on top of each canvas and included in the inventory photographs. This photographic record, in the form of slides now in the Louis Archives, documents 422 paintings. In a few instances these slides provide the only visual record of paintings whose present location is unknown. Later in the autumn of 1962, the estate compiled a list of those paintings by Louis then in the possession of his dealers and in storage in New York.

TITLING AND NUMBERING

Any attempt to gain access to Louis's personality or ideas about art by considering subjective or personal implications of his titles will prove frustrating. As William Rubin once explained, "As with certain other modern artists, titles were of little interest to Louis, who preferred them to numbers simply for reasons of convenience. Many of the titles of his works were suggested by friends."[vii]

Early Paintings, 1934–53

A few of Louis's titles, however, demonstrate personal associations. *Trellis* (cat. no. 48), one of the few paintings he hung at home, was titled with reference to the grape arbor he maintained in his garden; the imagery suggests both the form and color of the arbor. Similarly descriptive titles of semi-abstract paintings are: *Hummingbird* (cat. no. 14), *Two Heads* (cat. no. 15), *Sub-Marine* (cat. no. 16), *Water Hyacinths* (cat. no. 21), *Cyclops* (cat. no. 25), *Topographic View of City* (cat. no. 26), and *The Ladder* (cat. no. 27).

All of the paintings in Louis's first one-man show, held at the Washington Workshop Art Center Gallery in 1953, were given subjective titles. According to Leon and Ida Berkowitz, the workshop's directors, the sixteen titles given to the paintings and collages emerged from a conversation in which Ida encouraged Louis to talk about his feelings during the execution of the works in question.[viii] These included the titles for the *Charred Journal* series (cat. nos. 30–36), which referred to the Nazi book burnings, and *I'm in Love* (cat. no. 39). Mrs. Berkowitz claims responsibility for titling the *Tranquilities* collages (cat. nos. 40–42), which stemmed from her interest in Zen poetry.

Veil Paintings, 1954 and 1958–59

The generic term "Veil" to denote the major series from 1954 and 1958–59 was given by William Rubin. As he explained in reply to one critic's interpretation, "The term 'veils' used for a type of Louis painting which he began to make in 1954, certainly has no relationship to the 'Veil of Maya'—or any other veil for that matter. I can say this with absolute assurance since I coined the term myself, and it just sort of stuck, as a useful way of distinguishing a certain type of Louis painting." Mr. Rubin also commented that he had titled *Saraband* (cat. no. 188), and he dismissed the meaning imputed to that title.[ix]

Like *Saraband*, all of the Veils exhibited during Louis's lifetime were given titles. Most were suggested to Louis by Greenberg, who came up with some while viewing the paintings and also, at the artist's request, sent lists of possible titles. Among the Veil titles coined by Greenberg are *Air Desired*, *Aurora*, *Bower*, *Colonnade*, *Curtain*, *Golden Age*, *Iris*, *Plenitude*, *Russet*, *Surge*, *Terranean*, *Vernal*, and *Zenith*.[x]

Until 1964, the estate numbers served as the only identification of paintings not titled before Louis's death. Seventeen such pictures were included in the memorial exhibition held at the Guggenheim Museum in 1963; all were listed *Untitled* in the catalogue. When a painting bore an estate number, a catalogue number, and a storage warehouse number, understandable confusion arose. When Louis's paintings were to be included in the 1964 "Documenta III" exhibition in Germany, the Louis Estate initiated the practice of titling paintings as they were released. Louis's widow wanted to avoid assigning titles with subjective overtones. Since her husband had set a precedent by titling two Unfurled paintings with letters from the Greek alphabet (see below), she decided to use transliterations of Hebrew letters for the Veils.[xi] Titles were assigned alphabetically as paintings were released; for example, among the paintings sent to "Documenta III" were *Aleph* (cat. no. 268) and *Beth* (cat. no. 270), titles derived from the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. When each letter had been used once, two-letter titles, such as *Beth Aleph* (cat. no. 285), were assigned. All untitled Veils remaining in the Louis Estate were similarly titled during the preparation of this catalogue raisonné.

Unfurled Paintings, 1960–61

The designation "Unfurled" seems to have been devised by Louis, albeit indirectly. In a July 1962 letter to Greenberg, Louis discussed his hope that his diagonal stripe paintings would "make a transition from the vertical picture I'd done for so long to the big unfurling ones such as

used at Bennington."[xii] In addition, Louis included "Slow Unfurling" on a list of possible titles for those late Stripe paintings, although he never used the title.

Louis exhibited and titled only two of his nearly 150 Unfurled paintings during his lifetime. Those two, *Alpha* (cat. no. 335) and *Delta* (cat. no. 325), were those included in an exhibition organized by Greenberg at Bennington College in 1960. The titles were Louis's invention. Another painting in that show, a small columnar Veil, was titled *Gamma* (cat. no. 193). The Louis Estate decided to follow this precedent and title all Unfurleds as they were released with transliterations of the Greek alphabet, beginning with one-letter titles, like *Beta* (cat. no. 328), and then using two-letter titles, like *Beta Alpha* (cat. no. 386).

Stripe Paintings, 1961–62

The generic term "Stripe" designating Louis's final series of paintings evolved gradually after his death. During his lifetime, the paintings were called Pillars by Greenberg and Louis's dealers. Louis's practice in titling individual Stripe paintings is well documented in his correspondence with Greenberg. After the critic first saw the Stripes during a May 1961 visit to Washington, he wrote to Louis, "Automatically, I refer to them . . . as 'Pillars of Fire.'"[xiii] *Pillar of Fire* later became the title of one painting (cat. no. 431). In preparation for his October 1961 exhibition at the Andre Emmerich Gallery, Louis wrote Greenberg, "Do you have any titles? I'd appreciate whatever you have. There will be about 10 ptgs in the show—all from the 'Pillars of Fire' group."[xiv] In his next letter, Greenberg appended the following postscript:

> *TITLES*: Parting of Waters; Pillar of Dawn; Flood End; Water-Shot; Pillar of Cloud; Pillar of Noon; Sea Gamut; Sky Gamut; Earth Gamut; Pungent Distances; Plane Beyond Plane; Color Barrier; Notes of Recession; Pillar of Hope; Pillar of Desire; Pillar of Risk (you and Marcella can go on with the Pillars; note that all titles have two or more words in them: that identifies your 1960–61 production; your next series should have titles of a different generic character; but we'll talk about that).[xv]

Apparently, Louis decided to take Greenberg's advice and changed the generic character of his titles, since the Stripe paintings released in 1962 have predominantly single-word rather than double- or triple-word titles. For example, in April 1962 Louis released paintings titled *Apogee*, *Cherry*, *Pogo*, *Unit*, and *Willow*. When it was time to title the paintings for his 1962 fall exhibition at the Emmerich Gallery, Louis was already seriously ill. Although he asked

Greenberg for suggestions, Louis himself titled the eight paintings: *No End*, *Equator*, *Hot Half*, *Prime*, *Infield*, *Purple Fill*, *Moving In*, and *Apex*.

From the artist's death until 1974, the estate numbers served as the title for Stripe paintings newly released. No consistency was evident in the form of these titles, which were as varied as *Number 3*, *Thirty-six*, *37*, and *1-62*. Beginning in 1974, however, an alphabetical table of star names was used as the source for titling all previously untitled Stripe paintings; examples are *Achenar*, *Bellatrix*, *Merak*, *Polaris*, and *Vega*.

Other Titles

Not all of the untitled paintings were titled according to the guidelines just described. In some instances, a related group of paintings was given serial titles. This was the case for the seven horizontal Stripe paintings first exhibited in 1968, titled *Horizontal I*, *Horizontal II*, etc. Since not all of Louis's paintings can be designated as Veils, Unfurleds, or Stripes, other (sometimes related) titles were used by the estate. In 1970, for example, the Whitney Museum exhibited for the first time four paintings from a series that was entitled *Omega* (cat. nos. 253–57). A group of *Aleph Series* paintings (cat. nos. 261–69) was shown in 1967; included was *Last of a Series* (cat. no. 269), which had been titled in 1961 when it was on loan to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In a letter to Louis, Greenberg had suggested the title, saying, "Why not call it 'Last of a Series,' which is what it is?" Other groups of paintings given serial titles include the *Ambi* series (cat. nos. 249–52) and the *Para* series (cat. nos. 229–34). When this catalogue raisonné was being prepared, all previously untitled estate paintings were titled.

DATING

As was mentioned above, Louis rarely signed or dated paintings until they were released for exhibition or sale. This meant that few of the paintings found stored in his home after his death had been dated. In October 1962, during the three sessions in which the estate inventory was conducted, Clement Greenberg dealt with this problem. Based upon his familiarity with Louis's paintings, Greenberg assigned dates with varying degrees of specificity, such as "1958–59," "1959," or "1960 late spring." For the most part, dates assigned by the critic have remained the designated dates of paintings, even when evidence discovered later and/or Greenberg's own reevaluation called for adjusting them.

First of all, Louis's own dates on paintings sometimes seem to reflect the date of inscription or exhibition rather than of the picture's execution. The clearest example is the group

of "Italian" Veils (cat. nos. 189–205), some of which were first exhibited in Europe in 1960. Several of those shipped abroad were inscribed by Louis with the date 1960 when he shipped them, even though they were probably painted the preceding year (see fig. 2, showing the inscription on the back of *Verdicchio*, cat. no. 200, one of these Veil paintings). In fact, *Masque* (cat. no. 189), one of these pictures that was not shipped abroad, is inscribed on the back "Ptd in 1958." Similarly, the Stripe painting *Pillar of Noon* (cat. no. 475) was dated 1962 when exhibited in 1962, but an invoice in the files of James Lebron, who stretched and framed Louis's paintings, indicates that it was shipped to Europe in December 1961; this date was confirmed by Louis's own inscription (discovered later) of 1961 on the back of the painting.

Greenberg's dating also contains inaccuracies, and he has occasionally offered revisions. The intervals of six months or more between his visits to Louis's studio made it impossible for him to ascertain the exact order of the paintings, especially during the artist's more experimental periods. The difficult conditions under which the inventory was conducted—more than one hundred paintings were viewed in each session in a space too small to see more than one canvas at a time—also contributed to the problem. Greenberg's dating revisions concern the Veil and the Unfurled series. He originally assumed that most Veils had been painted in 1959, but later realized that the series was painted primarily in 1958.[xvi] He initially dated the Unfurled series 1961, but revised the date to reflect his belief that Louis "seems to have worked on [the Unfurleds] from the early summer of 1960 until (at the latest) early 1961. . . ."[xvii]

The magnitude of Louis's oeuvre, especially the work from 1958 until his death, and the paucity of paintings dated by him make it unlikely that a precise chronology will ever be worked out.[xviii] The order in which he painted the major series of Veils, Unfurleds, and Stripes has never been in doubt, but the developments within those series and the order of his 1959–60 "Themes and Variations" can only be estimated based upon stylistic comparisons.

STRETCHING DIMENSIONS

Since Louis worked on unstretched canvas and did not stretch paintings until they were exhibited or sold, the paintings in his estate required another set of decisions. Louis had marked his intended stretching limits on some canvases before rolling them for storage, but he did not always do this. Furthermore, he often reserved broad areas of unpainted canvas on two or three sides of the painted image. And Louis himself, when it came to actually stretching the canvases he had marked, might have done it differently; he is known to have changed his mind about the

general principles involved in the stretching of his paintings, and that openness may have extended to individual works.

Some knowledge of these circumstances prompted misconceptions in the art press. As early as October 1962, an unsigned obituary in *Art News* stated, "He was seeking a way to eliminate 'composition' and the restrictions of pre-fixed formats by enlarging his image and refusing to let it be bound by arbitrary judgments. A painting, he felt, could be cut down a few inches without harming the effect he was seeking."[xix] Kenneth Noland responded the following month, ". . . this business about Morris wanting to 'eliminate "composition"' and 'enlarging his image,' and so forth, including cutting down the painting a 'few inches without harming the effect he was seeking,' would have made Morris very impatient."[xx] That tempered reply, however, was not enough to discourage such thinking.

In 1963, Daniel Robbins wrote, "In order to give total power to his rivers of color, he chose to eliminate all other factors which would divide or share in the powerful effect. The most audacious of these is one of the most extreme conclusions of contemporary painting: the calculated concept of uncompositional painting. . . . He did not impose strict limitations to conquer composition, *he simply ignored it*."[xxi] Robbins was discussing *Burning Stain* (cat. no. 443), which Louis had sent unstretched to the Guggenheim Museum for exhibition in 1961, accompanied by a note stating, "I have not filled in the size of the picture—I will leave the actual measurements to you, once it is stretched."

Although Alan Solomon's catalogue essay for the 1964 Venice Biennale explained Louis's practice with regard to stretching the paintings,[xxii] no awareness of his essay is apparent in a review written by Lucy Lippard in 1965. She commented, "I was surprised to see light pencil marks on *Ro* [cat. no. 343] marking the point where the strokes stopped in the center. This seems contrary to Louis's much-discussed principles of non-composition, his supposed lack of interest in formal relationships to the extent that he refused to decide the final dimensions of his canvases. In 1960–61 Louis still depended heavily on accident. . . ."[xxiii]

Finally, in May 1965, Clement Greenberg offered, in a letter to *Art International*, his first published explanation of Louis's practice with regard to stretching his canvases:

> . . . I knew Louis well enough, and long enough, to be able to say the "calculated concept of uncompositional painting" would have struck him as inane, whether applied to his own or anybody else's art. It mattered very much to him whether his color ran down

> an inch or half an inch; and he would have as little dreamt of refusing "to decide the final dimensions of his canvases" as of letting someone else paint on them. . . .
>
> . . . The rolled canvas of *Burning Stain*, which he had painted unstretched, as he did all his pictures after 1953, arrived in New York cut precisely to the size and shape in which he intended it to be stretched, allowing for the lapover needed to secure it to the sides of the stretcher. Almost all Louis' stretchers after at least 1957 were made in New York, and his canvases would be sent there for stretching. Naturally, the exact measurements of a picture—i.e., the figures in inches—had to be left until that canvas was taut on a stretcher.
>
> . . . Actually, he agonized over the size and shape of his pictures, and he did so all the more so because he would find his way to nuances of size, scale, and shape largely in the process of finishing a painting. The width of the canvases he left behind is clearly marked in green crayon where ever it is not self-evident—and it is not so only in a few of the pictures that came before the vertically banded ones of 1961–62. In these latter Louis hesitated til the end in deciding just where to mark top or bottom, but one or the other was always indicated in the *paint* itself. He hesitated as long as he did because he felt the decision as to height to be the more crucial one on this kind of picture, and preferred to make it at the last moment, just before the picture was sent off for stretching. . . .[xxiv]

In preparation for his exhibition of Stripe paintings—closely related to *Burning Stain*—at the Andre Emmerich Gallery in October 1961, Louis corresponded with Greenberg, Emmerich, and James Lebron, the expert who stretched the canvases. As early as April, Louis's letters discuss how and where the paintings were to be stretched; these letters make clear the seriousness with which he regarded the stretching of his paintings. Later that fall, when paintings were shipped to Europe, Louis discovered that it was too costly to ship them stretched, so he marked the canvases with height and width, and sometimes with an arrow indicating the intended top of the picture.

But Louis's pointed concerns were never published, and Greenberg's letter to *Art International* had little impact. As late as 1972 Jack Burnham commented, "We can begin to understand the motivation (and criticism) that led to the cutting of Morris Louis's unstretched canvases *after* the artist's death. It really didn't matter where the canvases were cut as long as they were divided through the stained areas."[xxv]

This prompted a second published letter from Greenberg, which clarified both Louis's practice and Greenberg's interpretation of it:

> In the "Veils" the top of the canvas itself gave the top of the picture (allowing an inch or so for fastening it to the stretcher bar). The bottom was given by the scuffing left in the painted surface at the place where the artist had folded the canvas over a raised horizontal bar. Here I have followed what was Louis' increasing tendency in the last "Veils" that he himself had stretched, which was to bring the sides of the picture as close as possible to the painted area or areas without touching them.
>
> In the "Unfurleds" both sides as well as the bottom of the picture were given by the scuff marks, and the top by the upper edge of the canvas itself. The unstretched "Stripes" showed in almost every case green crayon marks to indicate the bottom or top. The difficulty here was with the top, or bottom—as the case might be—and here I've had to rely on what I knew to be Louis' last intentions as well as last practice. Suffice it that in all but a few exceptional instances I have not "cut" through the painted area of any "Stripe" except along the scuff mark.[xxvi]

Veil Paintings, 1958–59

Louis's 1954 Veil paintings presented no stretching problems since they had all been stretched for exhibition or marked for stretching before his death. Greenberg's explanation of the situation with regard to the 1958–59 Veils would benefit from some amplification. The top of the Veil paintings never raised any questions because Louis reserved just enough unpainted canvas at the top so it could be secured to the stretcher without cutting into the image. At the bottom, the paint tended to puddle and spread out horizontally where the canvas rested against the edge of the work stretcher. Louis made the widest point of the painted image the bottom of the painting, unless the puddling left a cracked paint surface; in such cases he moved the bottom edge up slightly to eliminate any cracked paint. The same practice has been followed by the Louis Estate.

The artist was more flexible in his determination of the sides of his Veil paintings. When he first exhibited fourteen 1958 Veils at French & Company in 1959, he followed Greenberg's advice and left broad unpainted margins on either side of the painted image (for example, *Russet*, cat. no. 105). But both Andre Emmerich and Louis's widow recall that Louis favored stretching the Veils inside the staple marks left from his work stretcher, which would have eliminated most of the unpainted margins. This was the practice Louis followed for the works exhibited in his

1960 French & Company show (including *Saraband*, cat. no. 188), as well as for the "Italian" Veils when they were marked for stretching in Europe in 1960 (including *Autumnal*, cat. no. 195). Greenberg came to agree with Louis's preference for the closer cropping of the Veils, and the estate has followed that practice.

Unfurled Paintings, 1960–61

Louis's practice with regard to the Unfurleds was not so clearly established prior to his death, since only two of them, *Alpha* (cat. no. 335) and *Delta* (cat. no. 325), had been exhibited. But the unstretched Unfurled canvases raised few questions. As Greenberg indicated in his 1973 statement, the top was "given" by the top of the canvas, as it was for the Veils. The "scuff marks" he refers to as indicators of sides and bottom were the traces left by the work stretcher; again, as in the Veils, the paint tended to spread out across the canvas where it rested against the stretcher braces. This is especially evident in *Untitled* (cat. no. 401), the first "narrow rivulet" Unfurled stretched for exhibition when it was included in Louis's memorial show at the Guggenheim Museum in 1963. This is the only Unfurled stretched so that the scuff marks are visible on the front of the painting; all other Unfurleds were stretched following the guidelines Greenberg outlined.

Stripe Paintings, 1961–62

Many Stripe paintings had been stretched before Louis's death, but a large number remained in his estate, most of them marked for stretching by the artist. Although the Stripe paintings in the estate had been cut into individual paintings by Louis, it is clear that many of these had been painted several at a time on a single length of the 108-inch canvas he used for the Stripes.[xxvii]

The intended sides of the Stripe paintings were marked in green crayon. These marks were located on at least one side of the painted image at the bottom of the canvas of every Stripe painting except *Vega* (cat. no. 463), whose final dimensions were determined based upon comparison with similar Stripe paintings stretched under Louis's direction, like *Vaporous Pillar* (cat. no. 440). When one side of a Stripe was not marked by Louis, it was assumed that he intended to stretch that side to its full width.

The bottom of the Stripe paintings was always given by the "scuff marks," but determining the top was more complicated. Louis did not mark the intended top of unstretched pictures and had changed his mind about how much—if any—space to leave there. As Michael Fried reported,

> According to Greenberg, Louis originally wanted the stripes to be cut off by the framing-edge both at the top and at the bottom, but allowed himself to be persuaded to leave a few inches of blank canvas between the apparent "end" of the stripes, which often seems to be where they were begun, and the edge of the support. (There are, however, a number of pictures which Louis went ahead and marked to be framed as originally intended.) Greenberg now feels that Louis's original intentions were invariably correct, and that he was always in advance of his admirers.[xxviii]

Burning Stain (cat. no. 443), which Louis exhibited in 1961, was cropped at both top and bottom. No photograph exists of this painting prior to its stretching, but the paint may well have run off the canvas at both ends, so that no other stretching was possible, as was the case with *Vega* (cat. no. 463). Other Stripe paintings exhibited during Louis's lifetime reveal his flexibility regarding the amount of space reserved between the top of the stripes and the framing edge. (Compare, for example, *Pillar of Risk*, cat. no. 427, exhibited in 1961, with *Apex*, cat. no. 509, exhibited in 1962.) Paintings stretched by the Louis Estate reflect this variation in the determination of the top of the canvas.

Other Paintings

Determination of the stretching dimensions of unstretched canvases in the Louis Estate that do not fit into the Veil, Unfurled, or Stripe series has been based upon one of two principles. When possible, comparison has been made to similar or related paintings stretched under Louis's direction. Otherwise, the marks left by Louis's work stretcher have served as stretching guidelines.

HANGING ORIENTATION

One final aspect of Louis's practice that merits discussion is the proper hanging orientation of certain paintings—that is, how the top or bottom of a stretched painting was and is determined. The Unfurleds present no difficulties; they are always hung with the paint flow directed from the sides toward the bottom, so that the unpainted center forms a V-shaped wedge. But during and after Louis's lifetime the appropriate hanging of both Veil and Stripe paintings was much discussed. Greenberg explained both Louis's vacillations and some later interpretations:

> The one aspect of his art on which Louis did not bear down in quite the same way as he did on the others was the "direction" in which his pictures hung or were to hang.
>
> The decision as to which side of a portable painting is top, bottom, left or right is not irrevocable and Louis felt that his particular kind of art allowed for a new latitude here. Though he would make a definite decision before showing a picture in public, he was usually reluctant to commit himself to it by signing the picture, and only with qualms did he initial and date the paintings he showed at French & Co. in 1959 and 1960. He was always ready to allow for the possibility that further acquaintance might lead him to change his mind about the direction in which a picture was to go. He was willing even to allow others to experiment with his pictures in this respect; in any case he felt that if a painting of his was good enough it would stand up no matter how it was hung.
>
> My own experience would indicate that most of Louis' big "veils" fare best when hung as he originally intended, with the painted area anchored to the bottom of the canvas. I feel the same about his pictures with rectilinear stripes and know that Louis himself felt the same, despite his choosing to hang a dozen or so of the broad-striped ones the other way at the Emmerich Gallery in 1961 and 1962. On the other hand, towards the end of his life he began to think of hanging some of the narrow-striped ones sideways, that is with the stripes running horizontally; and in certain of these he decided to leave the stripes unanchored on either side, that is with their tips stopping short of the edge of the canvas. But here too he was prepared to leave the matter undecided.[xxix]

Veil Paintings, 1954 and 1958–59

The Veil paintings from 1958–59 have always been hung as they were painted, with the paint anchored to the bottom edge. The strength of these images, sharply silhouetted against the field, and the powerful sense of gravitational flow mitigate against any other hanging. Louis's signatures on six of the 1958 Veils confirm this orientation, since those inscriptions are visible even from a great distance and obviously were meant to be seen right side up. (The most dramatic of these inscriptions is the "M Louis 58" written in dark charcoal on the lower left of *Untitled*, cat. no. 81. See fig. 3.)

The situation of the 1954 Veil paintings is not as clear-cut. At least two of them, *Iris* (cat. no. 62) and *Salient* (cat. no. 63), were exhibited during Louis's lifetime with the paint anchored to the top, the reverse of the position in which they were painted. Although most of the sixteen Veils from 1954 are signed, the inscriptions are written so lightly as to be barely visible; they are

more readily interpreted as authentication signatures rather than as clear indicators of a proper hanging position.

According to Greenberg, Andre Emmerich, and the artist's widow, Louis always intended to hang all the Veils with the paint anchored to the bottom edge, but was persuaded by William Rubin to consider the opposite hanging direction. Rubin once owned *Salient* and *Saraband* (cat. no. 188), two Veil paintings whose inscriptions are positioned right side up only if the paint is anchored to the top edge. Rubin offered his reflections on this subject:

> There had been some on and off discussions with Morris about the orientation of the Veils both in New York and Washington. . . . In the first French and Company show the Veils were all hung mushroom up from the bottom of the frame, with the white space at the top. Some time after that a number of Veils were hung at French and Company (in their second show and in "*accrochage*") and shown in my brother's gallery and elsewhere in Europe with the opposite orientation. I remember distinctly that at the time of the second show the big veils were shown in the reverse position, white space at the bottom. This is the way *Saraband*, once owned by me and now at the Guggenheim, was hung. . . . Morris was of uneven mind about all this and he was certainly influenced by how well each particular picture looked in one or the other position.[xxx]

Louis also may have been persuaded by Rubin to consider an inverse hanging for the "Italian" Veils, which Rubin admired and brought to the attention of his brother, who promoted them in Europe. Although these paintings are usually hung so that the paint is anchored to the bottom, at least one of them (*Capricorn*, cat. no. 192) has an inscription and an arrow indicating that Louis considered the inverse hanging.

Yet, despite some conflicting evidence, of all the Veil paintings only *Salient* and *Saraband* are regularly exhibited and reproduced upside down relative to Louis's known preference. For that reason, they have been reproduced in the reference section of this catalogue raisonné following the artist's preference, while their owners' preference has been respected in the section of colorplates.

Stripe Paintings, 1961–62

Widespread confusion on the part of museums, collectors, and art dealers surrounds the issue of the correct hanging orientation for Louis's Stripe paintings. Clement Greenberg, Andre

Emmerich, and the artist's widow independently expressed to this author their clear recollections that Louis's original intention, maintained to the end of his life, was to hang the Stripes with the paint anchored to the bottom, reflecting by this orientation the manner in which he conceived and painted this series.

Louis was persuaded to change his mind when the Stripe paintings were first exhibited in 1961 at the Andre Emmerich Gallery. Emmerich recalls that he and Greenberg responded far more positively to these 1961 Pillars when the drips and splatters were positioned at the bottom. They believed that the gestural movement resulted from the dominant direction of paint flow and required a hanging that echoed Louis's painting technique. In fact, contrary to the way they perceived them, the Pillars had been painted in the inverse position.[xxxi] A compromise was reached: two paintings, *Split Symmetry* (cat. no. 457) and *Notes of Recession* (cat. no. 470), were hung as Louis intended, while the eight other pictures in the show were hung "upside down."

Although both Emmerich and Greenberg are now convinced that Louis was correct in his original thinking, some museums and many collectors and dealers continue to impose an inverse hanging on the Stripe paintings. Yet this inversion distorts a major pictorial feature of the series, as was first expressed by Alan Solomon in the catalogue for the 1964 Venice Biennale. He wrote: "In this exhibition, all of the pictures are hung the way they were painted; the stripes particularly seem quite different when the sequence from left to right is reversed from the position in which Louis worked them out."[xxxii] Since Louis reduced his pictorial vocabulary to the absolute minimum until, as another critic phrased it, "almost everything depends upon chromatic relationships . . . the paintings are almost all colour,"[xxxiii] it is self-evident that an inversion of a Stripe painting, resulting in a reversal of the colors, is a major aesthetic decision. It is one matter for the artist to experiment with such a decision, but quite another for it to be imposed by others.

All of the vertical Stripe paintings have been reproduced in this catalogue raisonné following Louis's original preference regarding their spatial orientation.

When the Andre Emmerich Gallery exhibited seven horizontal Stripe paintings in 1968, Dore Ashton strongly objected to the hanging of the pictures. She stated, "It is very easy to see that the stripes were painted vertically, since they bear the marks of beginning and ending in a downward drift. Whether Louis intended for them to be horizontal—which is the recent vogue—or not is perhaps an academic question. The fact is he never had the chance to see them stretched up, and that he never had the chance to edit them, or signify their completion in any way."[xxxiv]

She was correct in recognizing that the paintings were painted vertically and that Louis never saw them stretched.

Louis had released four of the fifteen horizontal Stripe paintings, however, before he died. *Number 4-26* (cat. no. 651) and *Horizontal I* (cat. no. 652) were already in New York in September 1962, while *Partition* (cat. no. 647) and *Pogo* (cat. no. 648) had been released to Andre Emmerich when he visited Louis in April 1962. Emmerich later wrote to the Tate Gallery upon their acquisition of *Partition*, "The painting is one of a very few 'narrow stripe' paintings which are 'open ended' on both ends of the stripes. These pictures were intended by Morris Louis to be seen either vertically . . . *or* horizontally. However, Morris Louis always preferred the horizontal position for these pictures."[xxxv]

The eleven unstretched canvases in the Louis Estate later stretched as horizontal paintings were the only "open-ended" unstretched Stripe paintings. In other words, the image was positioned on the field with a margin of unpainted canvas surrounding it on all sides. It was evident that these eleven paintings were conceived by Louis in the same manner as the four horizontal paintings he had released. He had not, however, indicated the top for these paintings. When the image was positioned asymmetrically on the field, the paintings were hung with the image closer to the bottom edge. In those cases where Louis's marks indicated that the image was to be centered, the selection of one side as top was based upon a subjective assessment of color relationships.

Recently, some question was raised about the proper hanging of the three diagonal Stripe paintings first shown in the fall of 1962 (cat. nos. 653–55). E. A. Carmean, Jr., suggested that Louis may have considered hanging those paintings with the canvas positioned as a diamond and the painted image positioned horizontally. This author is convinced that the evidence contained in Louis's correspondence and in the paintings' inscriptions indicates that he always intended to hang these three stretched canvases as squares with the painted image positioned diagonally.[xxxvi]

In fact, this diagonal image was the feature he referred to in a letter of July 1962 to Greenberg: ". . . in June, I did a couple which, *if they can be stretched by Lebron as I intend them*, should I think make a transition move from the vertical picture I'd done for so long to the big unfurling ones such as used at Bennington."[xxxvii] The essential feature that sets off the Unfurleds as a series from the rest of Louis's major series is the diagonal emphasis of their composition. Although Louis had painted the Unfurleds before the Stripes, none had yet been exhibited in New York, in part because they were too large for the space of Andre Emmerich's gallery, then located on Sixty-fourth Street. In July 1962, although Louis was terminally ill, he

was buoyed by the hope that the Unfurleds might soon be exhibited in New York. He viewed the exhibition of his diagonal stripe paintings as a means to prepare his audience for that earlier series.

It has been demonstrated that those who assumed responsibility for Morris Louis's oeuvre upon his death encountered a wide range of questions relating to the cataloguing, stretching, and hanging of his paintings. The major responsibility was assumed initially by Clement Greenberg, whose relationship with the artist provided him with an extensive knowledge of the pictures and with Louis's practice and/or intended practice regarding the handling of those pictures. Louis's flexibility with regard to some aspects of his art occasionally has made it difficult to assess his practice or intended practice. It is hoped that the documentation offered here has clarified the situation and will provide guidance in the future by clarifying decisions made in the past and the sources for those decisions.

NOTES

i. National Educational Television, "U.S.A. Artists: Morris Louis/Kenneth Noland," film and transcript in the Morris Louis Archives (undated).
ii. Helen Jacobson, "As I Remember Morris Louis," *Ten Washington Artists 1950–1970*, Edmonton Art Gallery, 1970, p. 8.
iii. Greenberg's decisions usually were made in consultation with Louis's widow, her lawyer, I. S. Weissbrodt, and Andre Emmerich, Louis's dealer in the United States from 1960 and the dealer for the Louis Estate since 1962.
iv. Clement Greenberg, interview with the author, 19 September 1975.
v. Greenberg's letters to Louis are in the Morris Louis Archives. Louis's letters to Greenberg are in the Clement Greenberg Correspondence, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
vi. Clement Greenberg, "Letter to the Editor," *Arts Magazine* 47 (December–January 1973), p. 94.
vii. William Rubin, "Letter to the Editor," *Artforum* 9 (March 1971), p. 8.
viii. Leon and Ida Berkowitz, interview with the author, 16 August 1975.

ix. Joseph Masheck had referred to “a concept of Schopenhauer’s which was taken up by American artists around the turn of the century . . . the ‘veil of Maya,’ which separates the self from the selves of others.” He also wrote, “*Saraband* is meant to suggest the irrevocable dance gesture in time. . . .” See “New York,” *Artforum* 9 (September 1970), pp. 79–80. William Rubin’s reply is in his “Letter to the Editor,” *Artforum* 9 (December 1970), p. 78.

x. When shown a list of titles of 154 of Louis’s Veil and Stripe paintings, Greenberg marked 108 that, according to his best recollection, he had suggested (interview, 1975).

xi. The use of the Hebrew alphabet had prompted speculation about Louis’s interest in Jewish mysticism. It should now be clear that no such titles were used during his lifetime.

xii. Morris Louis, letter to Clement Greenberg, 18 July 1962, Clement Greenberg Correspondence, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The Unfurleds were painted before the Stripes, but remained virtually unknown.

xiii. Clement Greenberg, letter to Morris Louis, 5 May 1961, Morris Louis Archives.

xiv. Morris Louis, letter to Clement Greenberg, 25 August 1961, Greenberg Correspondence.

xv. Clement Greenberg, letter to Morris Louis, 1 September 1961.

xvi. Clement Greenberg, interview, 1975.

xvii. Michael Fried, *Morris Louis*, New York, 1970, p. 32 and footnote 14.

xviii. For example, only 9 of the 125 1958–59 Veil paintings were dated by Louis, and only 16 others were dated in exhibition catalogues published during his lifetime.

xix. “Obituary,” *Art News* 61 (October 1962), p. 8.

xx. Kenneth Noland, “Editor’s Letters,” *Art News* 61 (November 1962), p. 6.

xxi. Daniel Robbins, “Morris Louis: Triumph of Color,” *Art News* 62 (October 1963), pp. 29, 57.

xxii. Alan Solomon, *New American Art: Four Germinal Painters*, 32nd Biennale di Venezia, New York, 1964, n.p.

xxiii. Lucy Lippard, “New York Letter,” *Art International* 9 (February 1965), p. 35.

xxiv. Clement Greenberg, “Letter to the Editor,” *Art International* 9 (May 1965), p. 66.

xxv. Jack Burnham, “The Semiotics of ‘End Game’ Art,” *Arts Magazine* 47 (November 1972), pp. 38–43.

xxvi. Clement Greenberg, “Letter to the Editor,” *Arts Magazine* 47 (December 1972–January 1973), p. 94.

xxvii. For example, the four paintings bearing the estate numbers 44–47 (cat. nos. 640, 641, 642, 633) probably originally comprised one 108-inch length of canvas. Their combined width prior to stretching was nearly 108 inches, and number 44 and 47 each had selvage edges along one side.

xxviii. Michael Fried, *Morris Louis*, p. 36.

xxix. Clement Greenberg, "Postscriptum, November 1966," *Morris Louis 1912–1962*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1967, p. 84.

xxx. William Rubin, letter to the author, 2 March 1976.

xxxi. See "The Technique of Morris Louis," p. 57.

xxxii. Alan Solomon, *New American Art: Four Germinal Painters*, n.p.

xxxiii. John Elderfield, *Morris Louis*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1974, p. 65.

xxxiv. Dore Ashton, "New York Commentary," *Studio International* 176 (July–August 1968), p. 39.

xxxv. Andre Emmerich, letter to the Tate Gallery, 22 March 1966.

xxxvi. E. A. Carmean, Jr., "A Possible Reversion in Morris Louis' Work," *Arts Magazine* 50 (April 1976), pp. 69–75, and Diane [Upright] Headley, "Morris Louis: Disposing the Diagonal," *Arts Magazine* 50 (April 1976), pp. 69–75.

xxxvii. Morris Louis, letter to Clement Greenberg, 18 July 1962, Greenberg Correspondence.