

The Watercolors of George Sand (she/her/hers) 1804-1876

At Jill Newhouse Gallery, November 8 – 30, 2023

Preview at The Art Show, Park Avenue Armory, November 2-5
Stand B11

The gallery will present the first exhibition in the United States of the watercolors of French artist and writer **George Sand**.

Digital catalogue with essay by Cora Michael will be available
October 25th.



George Sand, *Mountainous Landscape with Lake*, Dendrite, watercolor and gouache on paper, 6 1/2 x 9 1/4 in.

One of the very few successful female writers of the 19th century, **George Sand is best known as a novelist and playwright**, a true equal of her male contemporaries Balzac, Flaubert, and Victor Hugo. Sand published more than 70 novels and 30 plays in her lifetime, as well as being a regularly published journalist.

Less well known about George Sand is that she was also a **brilliant and innovative visual artist who worked primarily on paper**; and although her oeuvre is well known in Europe, it has never been shown in the United States. The watercolors shown here will confirm Sand's reputation as a visual artist, and tell the story of the life of a female author and painter in 19th century France.



George Sand, *Imaginary Ruins*, Watercolor on paper, 4 15/16 x 5 1/8 inches



George Sand, *Natural Archway to the Sea*, Watercolor on paper, 4 9/16 x 6 1/16 inches

Biography

George Sand (1804-1876) was born Amandine Aurore Lucile Dupin in France in 1804, the offspring of a French nobleman and a proletarian young woman. As a child, Amandine spent a good deal of time in Paris, but was raised primarily by her paternal grandmother in a chateau named **Nohant** in the Berry region of central France. It would eventually become her home, and as of 1952, a French national museum named in her honor.

Although Sand's life reads like the stuff of Romantic novels, she was in fact a tirelessly productive artist. She began her career as a journalist, publishing articles in *Le Figaro* and *La Revue de Paris*, under a pseudonym adapted from her writing partner's name Jules Sandeau. **In 1832, the publication of her novel *Indiana* brought her immediate fame and**

launched a passionate protest against the restrictive social conventions then in place for women by telling the semi-autobiographic story of a young wife who abandoned an unhappy marriage to find love. With the additional publication of what would become her most famous literary works, *Lélia*, and *La Mare au Diable* in 1855, Sand had ample material to fill a five-volume autobiography, which she had planned for years, and which she titled simply *Histoire de ma vie*.

George Sand was befriended by almost every important artistic and cultural figure of her day, including Balzac, Liszt, Delacroix, Flaubert, and Saint-Beuve, as well as being a lover to **Chopin**, Musset, and the stage actress Marie Dorval. (Her still popular nonfiction book *A Winter in Mallorca*, 1842, tells the story of her love affair with the gravely ill Chopin, but is told as a story of two men.) Most biographies describe Sand simply through these love affairs or focus on her reputation for challenging gender norms by wearing pants, and smoking cigars, both of which were against the laws of the time for women.



Nadar, *Portrait of George Sand*, 1864, Photograph

Yet in an era when women had very little agency, George Sand possessed remarkable independence and freedom. She actively engaged with current events, lobbying Emperor Louis-Napoléon for leniency toward imprisoned rebels following the 1848 Revolution, though she was later fiercely critical of the violence of the 1871 Commune. Perhaps most remarkably, she obtained a divorce from her husband Casimir Dudevant, in 1835 and won a series of legal

battles to gain financial autonomy, as well as custody of her two children, Maurice and Solange. And though she struggled at times, Sand was ultimately able to support her family through her work as writer, and to produce a body of works on paper that is original, inventive, and unique.

Drawing Technique

Like many of the women of her class in France in the 19th century, George Sand received instruction in drawing and music as part of her core education. But **her originality and radicalism can be seen later in her career in the invention of her own watercolor technique which she called “dendrite”** (the term derived from her study of natural history and mineralogy, referring to the vein-like patterns made from fossilized tracks of water visible in rocks). Also called “**aquarelles à l’écrasage**” (crushed watercolors), Sand made them by applying dollops of pure pigment to a piece of thick Bristol paper, then pressing a second moistened sheet on top. When the sheet was lifted, a series of abstract, textured zones of color were revealed, which she would then enhance with watercolor and gouache additions, **turning abstract forms into imagined landscapes of mountains and lakes.**

Sometimes she made the more radical choice not to enhance the original abstract forms on the page, leaving the pressed and rubbed color as it was. These works were called “**taches**” or “**stains.**” Other works include **decoupage** and **collage** in combination with the watercolor, and even the application of real plant matter with glue adhesive.



George Sand, *Composition (Tache en vert)*, c. 1870-75, Watercolor on paper, 4 11/16 x 3 1/2 inches

George Sand Today

What is the significance of Sand's art for viewers today? Is her gender relevant to our understanding and appreciation of her drawings? Sand was often praised by her contemporaries for the androgynous nature of her talent and personality. Elizabeth Barrett Browning dedicated a sonnet to the "large-brained woman and great-hearted man who has given herself the name George Sand." Flaubert wrote "You had to know her as I knew her to realize how much of the feminine there was in this great man, the immensity of tenderness to be found in this genius." And Turgenev lauded her by declaring, "What a brave man she was, and what a good woman." At her funeral, Victor Hugo commented on her important contribution to the arts and to women's rights. These are all obviously outdated modes of acclaim, from a time when the world was stuck in binary ruts of all kinds.

Sand's beautiful, skillful, and idiosyncratic drawings demonstrate what a woman's creative powers can yield when unbounded by convention and limitless in imagination: *she* was a true artist, *her* drawings are worth our attention, *hers* was an art like no other.



George Sand, *Waterfall with Distant Mountains*, 1875, Dendrite, watercolor and gouache on paper, 5 7/8 x 9 3/8 inches