

# SAM GILLIAM



Sam Gilliam's draped paintings such as *Relative* pushed the notion of what painting was and could be. By moving his canvases off their stretcher bars, Gilliam allowed them to shift and flow as fabric is meant to do. The folds in the canvases, however, were not created at random but instead reflect Gilliam's specific idea about how he wanted his paintings to be installed. *Relative*, while still hung on a wall, becomes a part of its setting and interacts with and within that space. Lighting in the room affects the way shadows from the canvas fall on the wall. Physical movement around the painting can cause the fabric to stir, altering our perception of it. The ample folds demonstrate the painting's flexible properties, highlighting nuances of stained colors and hinting at what the creases conceal. Viewers can indulge in the continuous play between action and stillness, bright color and dark shadow.

Gilliam was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, and grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. Like [Alma Thomas](#), he settled in Washington, DC, and taught art in the public schools. Also like Thomas, he was a member of the Washington Color School and the larger color field movement. Gilliam's experimentations with color and abstraction resulted from an interest in moving away from figurative imagery to adopt color as the main subject of his paintings.