

YAYOI KUSAMA | *Sky, 1954*

Watercolor on paper • 14 × 9 in. (35.56 × 24.77 cm) • Signed, titled, and dated by the artist on the verso

Provenance: Acquired directly from the artist by the artist's dentist, Japan, c. 1954; Private Collection, New York; Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, New York

THE ARTIST

Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929, Matsumoto, Japan) is one of the most significant and consequential artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Spanning painting, sculpture, installation, performance, film, and literature, her career represents an unbroken arc of artistic innovation stretching more than seven decades. From childhood, Kusama experienced vivid hallucinations — fields of dots and proliferating patterns that enveloped her surroundings — and she turned to art as both expression and therapy. Using watercolors, pastels, and oil paints, she developed a singular visual language rooted in obsessive repetition, organic form, and the dissolution of the self into an infinite field. Her philosophy of "self-obliteration" — the merging of the individual into the endless fabric of the universe — is one of the defining intellectual contributions of postwar art.

Kusama presented her first solo exhibition in Japan in 1952. Inspired by a letter from Georgia O'Keeffe, she emigrated to the United States in 1957, arriving in New York with 2,000 of her works on paper packed in her luggage — intending to use them in lieu of currency. Within two years she had exhibited at the Brata Gallery to landmark critical acclaim, with Donald Judd writing that her Infinity Net paintings were "strong, advanced in concept, and realized." Through the 1960s she became a leading figure of the New York avant-garde, influencing Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, and the broader Pop and Minimalist movements, while pioneering radical body art and anti-war happenings. She is now recognized as the best-selling living female artist in history, with cumulative auction sales exceeding \$1.17 billion. Her work is held in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Tate Modern (London), the Guggenheim (New York and Bilbao), the Whitney Museum of American Art, the National Museum of Modern Art (Tokyo), and dozens of other institutions worldwide.

THE WORK

Sky (1954) is a watercolor on paper executed in Japan three years before Kusama's emigration to the United States — placing it at the very origin of one of the most celebrated careers in contemporary art. The work belongs to a small, historically irreplaceable group of pre-emigration works on paper that Kusama created in the mountains of Nagano, working on letter-size sheets with watercolors and ink. As Kusama herself has written: "Deep in the mountains of Nagano, working with letter-size sheets of white paper, I

had found my own unique method of expression." These early watercolors are universally recognized as the foundational documents of her entire artistic practice — the first place where her hallucinated imagery, her dissolution of form into atmosphere, and her engagement with the infinite first appeared in concentrated, fully realized form.

In *Sky*, dense gestural marks in deep black and charcoal surge across a warm, muted ground of rose, umber, and shadow. The composition is electrifying in its directness — bold, sweeping strokes animated by an urgency that prefigures both Abstract Expressionism and the psychic energy that would come to define Kusama's New York period. Yet it is distinctly her own: the marks do not perform bravado but instead trace the contours of an internal landscape, the visual record of a mind translating hallucination into paint. The title *Sky* suggests both spatial vastness and the dissolution of boundaries — themes that would recur throughout her career in the Infinity Nets, the Mirror Rooms, and the dot-covered expanses that have made her among the most recognizable visual voices in the world.

The verso of the work carries Kusama's own handwriting — "water color / Sky / 1954 / Kusama" — inscribed in ink directly on the paper. This hand inscription constitutes primary authentication from the artist herself, eliminating any ambiguity about attribution, medium, title, or date. Works of this period bearing the artist's verso inscription are exceptionally rare. Comparable works from this exact period are held in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the National Museum of Modern Art (Tokyo), Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (Rotterdam), and the Blanton Museum of Art (Austin) — underscoring the institutional significance of this category of work.

PROVENANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE

The provenance of *Sky* carries extraordinary historical resonance. The work was given by Kusama directly to her dentist in Japan as payment in kind — a gesture entirely consistent with the artist's documented practice of compensating service providers with her own artwork during the years before her international recognition. This provenance story is a direct parallel to the most celebrated group of early Kusama works ever to come to market: the Collection of the Late Dr. Teruo Hirose, a Japanese cardiovascular surgeon who received 11 early Kusama works as gifts in exchange for medical care, sold at Bonhams New York on May 12, 2021 for a collective \$15.2 million — nearly double the pre-sale expectation of \$8.8 million.

Sky has remained in private hands since its creation — never previously offered at public auction — making this a rare fresh-to-market opportunity. The combination of a verifiably early date (1954), direct-from-artist provenance, the artist's own verso inscription, museum-peer comparables,

and an unimpeachable chain of custody through documented private collection and gallery ownership places Sky in the highest tier of early Kusama works on paper available outside of permanent institutional collections.

AUCTION COMPARABLES AND VALUATION

The May 2021 Bonhams Hirose sale provides the closest direct comparables for Sky, as it constitutes the only group of pre-emigration Kusama works on paper from the same period — 1952 to 1954 — ever to come to public auction. Results from that 100% sold, white-glove sale:

Flower 52 (1954) • Gouache and pastel on paper, 10½ × 9¾ in. • **\$350,312.50** (Bonhams New York, May 12, 2021)

Flower Petal (1953) • Gouache and watercolor on paper • **\$412,812.50** (Bonhams New York, May 12, 2021)

Untitled (1952) • Watercolor on paper • **\$400,312.50** (Bonhams New York, May 12, 2021)

Oceans of Love (1953) • Watercolor on paper • **\$312,812.50** (Bonhams New York, May 12, 2021)

Ever Inward No. 2 (1953) • Watercolor on paper • **\$325,312.50** (Bonhams New York, May 12, 2021)

Trees (1953) • Gouache and ink on paper, 14 × 9¾ in. • **\$212,812.50** (Bonhams New York, May 12, 2021)

Notably, the opening lot of the 2021 Bonhams sale — a 1954 pastel and gouache on paper — hammered at \$280,000 against a high estimate of just \$30,000, achieving nearly ten times its pre-sale estimate. The entire sale of 11 lots achieved \$15.2 million against a pre-sale high estimate of \$14 million, with bidders from China, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States competing for every work. Since that sale, the Kusama market has continued to strengthen: her paintings have averaged \$629,802 at auction over the trailing twelve months, and major late works have achieved records of \$7.8 million (Christie's Hong Kong, 2023) and \$5.7 million (Phillips, 2023).

Applying market appreciation of approximately 40–70% since the May 2021 comparables, and accounting for Sky's unique provenance narrative, fresh-to-market status, artist verso inscription, and the sustained institutional demand for early pre-emigration works, a credible auction estimate for Sky (1954) in a 2026–2027 evening sale at a major New York auction house falls in the range of \$350,000 to \$650,000, with meaningful upside to \$1,000,000 or above under optimal sale conditions including strong pre-sale marketing, a competitive bidding environment, and targeted outreach to Asian and international collectors.

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