

Helen Frankenthaler

a biography



Helen Frankenthaler, *Portrait of the Artist*, University of California, San Diego

The daughter of a wealthy New York family, Helen Frankenthaler was born on December 12, 1928. On family trips she fell in love with sky, sea, and landscape so starting at a young age, her parents encouraged her artistic pursuits by sending her to experimental schools. Frankenthaler had the opportunity to study under Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo at Dalton School, and then Paul Feeley at Bennington College. After college, she returned to New York, and while her training and initial studio work was rooted in Cubism, she felt the need to break out of the geometric rigidity to create more organic compositions.

Frankenthaler's relationship with art critic Clement Greenberg, who she met in 1950, allowed her to be part of New York's avant-garde scene through his introductions to significant artists like Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock. Perhaps this exposure is why Morris Louis described Frankenthaler's seminal work, *Mountains and Sea*, as a "bridge between Pollock and what was possible." It was also with this painting that she "discovered" her stain technique when, unknowingly, she applied paint to an unprimed canvas.

In 1958 she married Robert Motherwell, a younger member of the New York School. In addition to influencing each other's work, the artistic power couple did not have the same monetary struggles



Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea*, 1952, oil on canvas, 7'2 5/8" x 9'9 1/4"

as their fellow artists. At this time, Frankenthaler worked in various studios and traveled as much as possible. She continued to develop her use of large abstract forms of deep color. When she switched from oil to acrylic, her canvases were flooded rather than stained.

Never content to produce in just one style, Frankenthaler continually evolved her artworks, primarily working in two dimensions on paper or canvas. In addition to trying ceramics and illustrating books, she even had a brief flirtation with steel sculptures. Frankenthaler is known for her significant contributions to contemporary printmaking. She traveled to Japan in 1983 to make woodblock prints with Tadashi Toda, a Japanese traditional Ukiyo-e [u-KEE-yo-yay] printmaker.

Frankenthaler is one of those rare artists who achieved national recognition very early in their careers. In 1960, at thirty-two, she was given a retrospective at The Jewish Museum in New York City. Throughout her professional career, she had many successful teaching opportunities and received over a dozen honorary doctorate degrees from institutions such as New York University, Smith College, and Yale University.

Working up until the final years of her life, Frankenthaler died in 2011. She is remembered for her contributions to the Color Field movement which is recognized, by some, as the ancestor to the Minimalism movement of the 1960s.

What concerns me when I work, is not whether the picture is a landscape, or whether it's pastoral, or whether somebody will see a sunset in it. What concerns me is - did I make a beautiful picture?

- Helen Frankenthaler

In the 1960s and 70s she concentrated on large areas of color, emphasizing the gestalt of an image; in her words, "A really good picture looks as if it happened all at once." Frankenthaler adopted Jackson Pollock's technique of painting on an unstretched, unprimed canvas on the floor, which enabled her to immerse herself physically in the painting and work from all sides. Her soak-stain technique emphasized the fluid quality of paint and the flatness of the canvas more than traditional methods of painting. She then cropped and stretched the canvas. Her large cropped paintings have an environmental quality that implies a continuation of the picture into the viewer's space.



By allowing the thinned paint to sink into the white canvas like a dye, she created the illusion of a pervasive, sparkling light that suggested the ephemeral nature of sky and water, a frequent subject of hers.

Looking at *Monoscape*, one has a sense of the freedom of paint moving across the canvas. The technique of painting on the floor and then hanging the work on a wall allows it to be read both horizontally and vertically. On one hand, there is a sense of an aerial view, as if one were looking down at waves on a beach, and on the other, the forms suggest mountains and atmosphere.

These different perspectives are compounded by tonal gradations. The color appears to spread downward from the top of the canvas toward an unpainted bottom, yet the paint near the bottom flows upward, not down. In either case the movement of the paint and the gradations of density of the pigment suggest a mobile and elusive form that defies gravity. *Monoscape* emphasizes the control and intellect of Frankenthaler's work, qualities that in other works are overshadowed by the emotional appeal of her clear vibrant colors and sensuous gradations of tone.



Helen Frankenthaler at work in 1969, New York. Photographed by Ernst Haas. © Ernst Haas Estate

Discussion Questions

What do you see? Using your five senses, describe *Monoscape*. How would it change if you look at it upside down?

Why do you think Frankenthaler tried many different artmaking methods?

How was her process similar to Jackson Pollock's?

Frankenthaler wanted to make "a beautiful picture."

Do you think she did? Why or why not?

How do you feel about abstract art?

Abstract Expressionists



IMAGES (Left to Right): Helen Frankenthaler, *Before the Caves*, 1958, oil on canvas, 8'6 3/8" x 8'8 3/8"; Lee Krasner, Clement Greenberg, Helen Frankenthaler, & Jackson Pollock at the nightclub Eddie Condon's, New York, January 1951; Jackson Pollock (American, 1912-1956), *Galaxy*, 1947, oil, aluminum, small gravel on canvas, 43 1/2" x 34"; Gift of Miss Peggy Guggenheim, Joslyn Art Museum, © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Inc. 1949.164

A group of artists – Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Barnett Newman, to name a few – were known as Abstract Expressionists (or the New York School) for producing work that emphasized the gesture or color fields in the 1940s. With the post-war mood of anxiety and trauma, these artists were committed to an expressive art of profound emotion and universal themes. This movement is credited for shifting the center of the art world to New York from Paris.

Pollock, known for his drip method, laid the canvas on the floor and created vigorous gestures – the expression of art being more vital rather than the subject. For color field painters such as Rothko, color served as the expressive force. Helen Frankenthaler became friends with all the major Abstract Expressionist painters through introductions by the art critic Clement Greenberg. Many times he accompanied her to studios and gallery exhibitions, and in 1950, the same year they met, a trip to Betty Parson's Gallery allowed her to experience her first Jackson Pollock show. Frankenthaler says when she viewed his artworks, "it felt as though I were in the center ring of Madison Square Garden."

In the 1950s the influence of the Abstract Expressionist painters on young artists was both stifling and inspirational. Some, like Tom Wesselmann and Roy Lichtenstein, reacted with an impersonal Pop style; while Joan Mitchell, Frankenthaler, and others incorporated many New York School ideas into their work. Frankenthaler would eventually be known as a second generation Abstract Expressionist artist.



IMAGES (Left to Right): Helen Frankenthaler, *The Sightseers* 1951, oil (enamel) & crayon on paper mounted on composition board, 5'1 1/4" x 5'7 3/8"; *Madridscape*, 1958, mixed mediums on paper, 25 1/4" x 34 1/2"

Printmaking a la Frankenthaler



Helen Frankenthaler, *Japanese Maple*, 2005, Edition 9/50, 16 color Ukiyo-e style woodcut, 25 x 38 inches, Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer



Helen Frankenthaler, *Bronze Smoke*, 1978, Edition 14/38, lithograph, 25 x 18 3/4 inches, Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

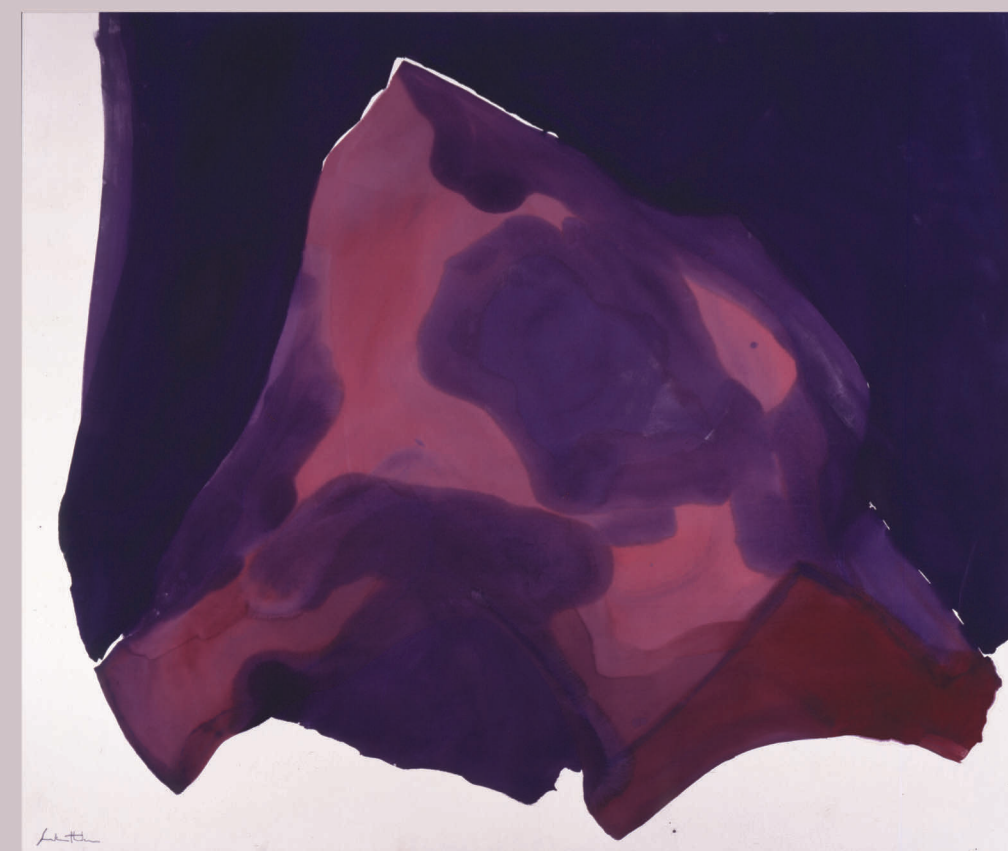
A pioneer in the field of contemporary printmaking, Helen Frankenthaler was confounded by the process at first. Reflecting on the necessity of working in phases when producing a new print, the artist was quoted as saying, "I was used to doing things all at once, and I had to learn that printmaking cannot be done impatiently if it's to be done well." Frankenthaler's approach to working with this medium was hands-on, recalling the gestural nature of her painting style, and her prints maintain the lyrical quality of her canvases, yet she asserted that printmaking and painting require two completely separate ways of thinking.

Frankenthaler embraced the opportunity for experimentation and collaboration inherent in printmaking. With the help of Ken Tyler, one of the founders of the renowned workshop Gemini G.E.L., she became an important innovator, particularly in woodcut. Many scholars credit her work in woodcut with sparking a renewed interest among American artists in this method of relief printing. *Japanese Maple* is an exquisite example of a Ukiyo-e [u-KEE-yo-yay] woodcut, a style practiced in Japan during the 18th and 19th centuries. This print features richly-saturated washes of color that evoke the staining effect Frankenthaler achieved in painting. Working in layers, the artist produced areas where the pigment is opaque – such as the blue oval in the bottom right corner of the composition. Other sections of the print received less ink, allowing the intricate, swirling grain pattern of the wood block to transfer onto the paper.

Timeline



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Helen Frankenthaler

American, 1928–2011

Monoscape 1969

acrylic on canvas, 104 3/4 x 124 1/8

Museum purchase with funds from National Endowment for the Arts Museum Purchase Plan Grant and matching funds from Joslyn's Women's Association, 1978.74

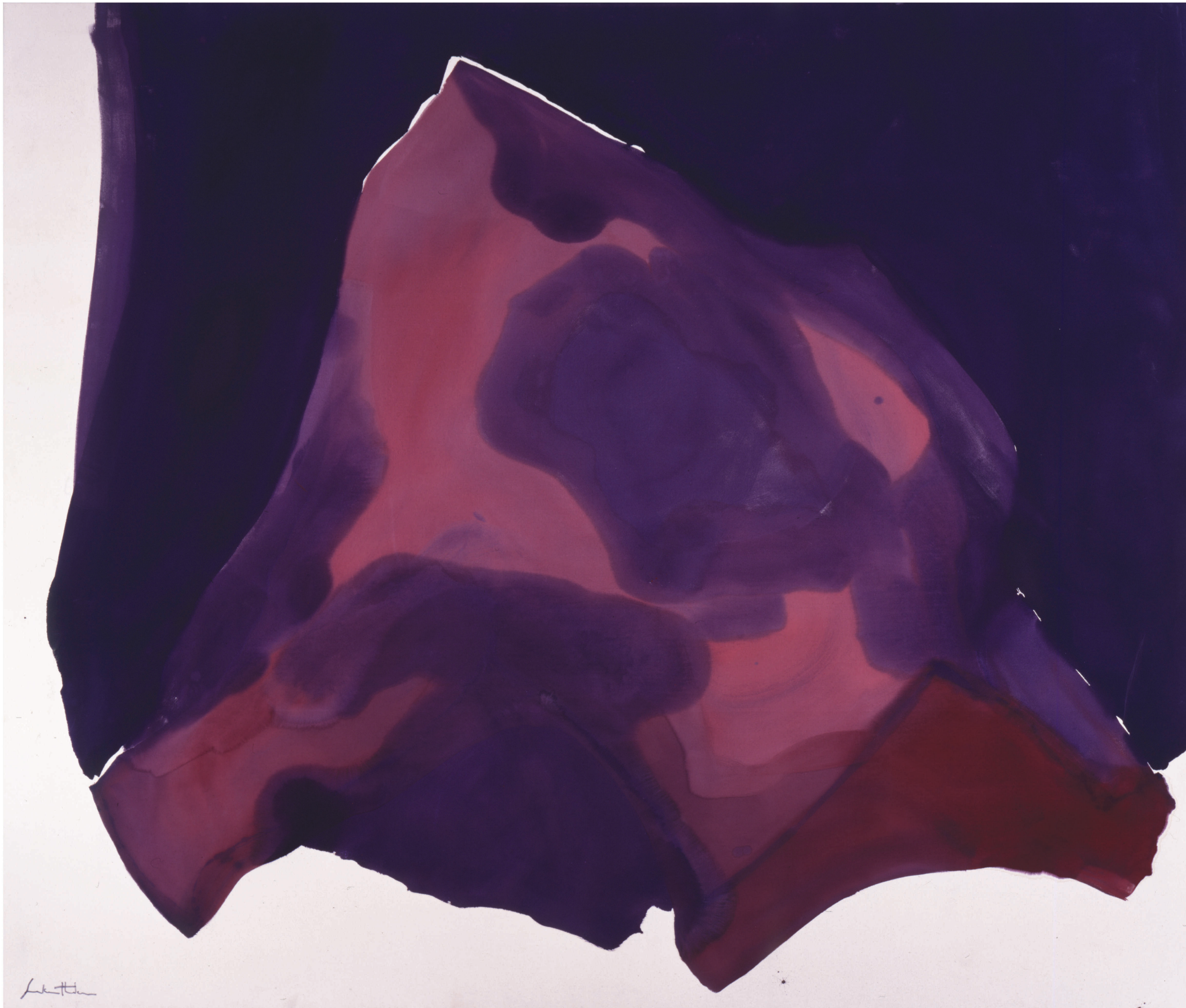
For me, as a picture develops, color always comes out of drawing. I never start out only with color. I start out as a spacemaker on a flat thing with four corners. But color is the first message on the picture plane. From there, it takes its place as scale and drawing. Color is also extremely important to my 'process.' It's born out of idea, mood, luck, imagination, risk, into what might be even ugly; then I let it tell me what might/should be used next, until I get the light and order that satisfies to perfection. The result is color and space and, I hope, a beautiful message.

- H. F.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Buddha's Court*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 96 3/4" x 93"

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HELEN FRANKENTHALER (AMERICAN, 1928–2011)

MONOSCAPE

1969, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

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Museum purchase with funds from National Endowment for the Arts Museum Purchase
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