



BOULEVARD

GRADES 6-12

A Few Key Points

- Frankenthaler evokes and suggests rather than offers a literal representation
- Many of her paintings resonate with the suggestion of landscape or natural forms
- The artist's method involves chance and spontaneous improvisation
- She poured, stained, and smeared directly onto an unprimed canvas on the floor
- While her titles might direct our reading, we are allowed a range of interpretations
- Coming after Jackson Pollock, she was a second generation Abstract Expressionist
- In 1952, Frankenthaler initiated a soak-stain, pouring technique that is associated with the more specific designation Color Field painting
- She was a woman among a group of painters dominated by men, but she preferred not to be categorized this way
- Frankenthaler began her career in the post-war period in the U.S. during a time of rapid change and Cold War anxiety

Sparking Discussion

- Discuss the role improvisation plays in Frankenthaler's work.
- What connections to other types of arts (music, poetry, dance, for example) can we find in Frankenthaler's work?
- What other poets and artists were known to have inspired one another?
- What are some of the differences between painting, music, and poetry?
- What was happening in the U.S. when Frankenthaler's career took off in the 1950s and 1960s?

Activities

1. A Persuasive Letter Regarding the Merits of Abstraction
Write a persuasive letter about abstract art. Have students take the position of an abstract painter in the early 1950s in the U.S. Have them write a letter defending the meaning and significance of their abstract painting practice.

2. Debate Regarding 20th-Century Abstraction

Hold a class debate about abstract art. Divide the class in half. One half will support abstraction, while the other half of the class takes a position against abstraction. Have each group write down both the pros and cons of abstraction in order to prepare their arguments and understand the other side's potential reasoning before the debate is held. Students can either hold an actual debate, or share their list for or against abstraction.

3. What Does the Artist Mean?

Frankenthaler, an Abstract Expressionist and Color Field painter, found landscape to be a lifelong source of ideas and inspiration. "My pictures are full of climates, not nature per se, but a feeling," she said in 1978. Have students gather and talk in small groups about what the artist might have meant by this statement and what it means to suggest rather than to represent. Then, have each student make a poem or an abstract picture that evokes the feeling of a place without concretely depicting or describing it. Ask them to repeat this exercise to convey atmosphere. Is this easier in words or in painting?

4. Painted Poetry (to be used with *Burnt Norton*, 1972)

Frankenthaler's painting *Burnt Norton* was named after a poem from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which served as her inspiration. Have students reflect upon and discuss the following lines from Eliot's *Burnt Norton*:

*'human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.'*

Have them draw or paint an image related to these words. Alternatively, have each student pick a few lines from a poem of their own choosing to interpret visually.

5. In Dialogue with the Masters (to be used with *For E.M.*, 1981)

Frankenthaler saw herself as part of a long tradition of painters, paying homage to several great artists, including Édouard Manet, to whom *For E.M.*, a large scale evocation of Manet's *Still Life with Carp* (1864), is dedicated. "This Manet painting challenged me to find out why this is such a good picture," the Abstract Expressionist painter recalled.

Have each student find a famous work of art to redo. First, have them write a paragraph about why they think the painting that they have selected is “such a good picture.” Afterwards, rather than copying, students should translate the original work into something entirely their own.

6. Space Age (to be used with *Saturn*, 1963)

Saturn abstractly represents the sixth planet from the sun. It was painted in 1963 during the height of the Cold War and the beginnings of space exploration; this time was inspiring and anxiety-provoking for many Americans. Use the painting to discuss the social and historical climate of this period. Other works that can be brought into the lesson include Lee Bontecou’s *Untitled* (1959) and Robert Rauschenberg’s *First Landing Jump* (1961).