



BOULEVARD

OVERVIEW

Introduction to Turner Contemporary-Helen Frankenthaler Experience

In 2014, Turner Contemporary in Margate, England hosted *Making Painting: Helen Frankenthaler and JMW Turner*, a compelling exhibition exploring the timeless act of painting through the work of two artists, 19th-century British landscape painter J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) and 20th-century American painter Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011).

Boulevard offers an immersive encounter with ten of Helen Frankenthaler's paintings (spanning from 1963 to 1992), which were exhibited in the North Gallery during this temporary show.

Inspire Your Students Across Curriculum

This Boulevard experience provides particularly rich inspiration for learning in history, literacy, astronomy, ecology, women's studies, technology, and art. Helen Frankenthaler's work is appropriate for viewers of all ages.

How to Use This Resource

This resource is designed for use by teachers, educators, or students to support and enrich the Boulevard viewing experience. Our Boulevard curriculum will help you explore these paintings through a range of different themes inspired by the work, offering ideas for educational projects and activities.

Looking at the Work

Abstract art can be inspiring, but also challenging for viewers of any age. When looking at Frankenthaler's works within the Boulevard experience, you may find these suggestions helpful in engaging students to look closely and in generating general discussion.

Ask students to respond to one or more artworks. Here are some examples of open-ended questions that can be helpful for starting a discussion.

- What is your first reaction to this painting?
- How does it make you feel?

- What interests or appeals to you? Discuss and share your thoughts as a group and find out how different artworks mean different things to different people.
- What can you see?
- How do you think it was made?
- What does this painting remind you of?
- What words would you use to describe the world depicted in the work of art?
- If you could step into this painting, what would it feel like?
- Would you like to have this object in your house? Why or why not?

Art/History in a Nutshell

Second generation Abstract Expressionist artist Helen Frankenthaler (1928 -2011) came to the fore of American modernism in the early 1950s with her soak-stain technique, pouring and rubbing paint into the unprimed surface of her canvases, and utilizing the spontaneous effects improvisationally and evocatively. She is closely associated with Color Field painting. Pushing beyond Jackson Pollock’s overall abstraction, her innovative methods—which did not include using a traditional paint brush—asserted the flatness of the picture plane and the opticality of the paint medium. For the next five decades, Frankenthaler experimented with varied processes, not only exploring the possibilities of painting, but also other media, including print and ceramic.

More About the Artist

Helen Frankenthaler has been recognized as one of the most significant American artists of the 20th century. She pushed the limits of abstract painting and experimented fearlessly with her materials and techniques, producing vital and ever-changing work, which she exhibited over the course of six decades. Frankenthaler studied painting with Rufino Tamayo, Paul Feeley, Vaclac Vytlacil, and Hans Hofmann. In the 1950s, she forged a close personal friendship with the famed formalist art critic and essayist Clement Greenberg, who is best remembered for being one of the first individuals to praise Jackson Pollock and to champion the cause of the Abstract Expressionist group. The critic argued that these New York-based painters were especially significant for moving closer to a “truth to materials” and emphasizing the flatness of the picture plane. Influential in the New York art community,



American Abstract Expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler (1928 – 2011) at work on a large canvas, 1969. Photo by Ernst Haas/Ernst Haas/Getty Images

Greenberg was able to introduce Frankenthaler to many important artists, exhibitions, and galleries.

In 1951, Frankenthaler saw Jackson Pollock's work at the Betty Parsons Gallery and later had the opportunity to visit his studio in East Hampton, New York. After experiencing Pollock's momentous strides, Frankenthaler created her own groundbreaking painting *Mountains and Sea* (1952). She departed from Jackson Pollock's aggressively gestural method by pouring paints onto enormous canvases placed on the floor, often controlling the flow of paint by lifting the edges of the canvases off the ground. While Pollock used enamel paints that pooled or collected on the surfaces of his unprimed canvases, Frankenthaler employed oil paints that she thinned with turpentine, allowing for the paints to soak in and be absorbed. This soak-stain technique allowed for compositions with large areas of saturated color that evoked natural, luminescent landscapes. She later switched to acrylic paints to further enhance these effects.

Frankenthaler traveled widely as a young woman, both within the eastern states of the U.S. and to Europe. Her paintings show landscape to be a potent and persistent source of material. As she put it, she would 'translate' landscapes into abstract compositions, gradually moving them away from their formal sources. Her inspirations range from memories of actual sites, such as prehistoric cave paintings at Lascaux in France or the New Jersey Shore to marks begun arbitrarily, which later took on symbolic or literary associations for the artist. In 1958, Frankenthaler married fellow artist Robert Motherwell. They traveled extensively and supported each other, but divorced twelve years later. Frankenthaler continued to produce artwork in various media, including steel sculpture, ceramic, and print. Additionally, she contributed as a visiting professor at Yale and Princeton, and served as a member on the National Endowment for the Arts.

Often described as a member of the Abstract Expressionism movement, she has also been associated with the more specific term Color Field painting. Her novel techniques immediately influenced a new generation of artists, including Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis.

Abstract Expressionism

Significant Abstract Expressionist artists include William Baziotas, Willem de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Franz Kline, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, David Smith, and Clyfford Still.

During the late 1940s and 1950s in the United States, an artistic movement called Abstract Expressionism flourished. Also known as the 'New York School' or 'Action Painting,' the artists were categorized together for their profound shift in style. The artwork produced was visually varied, including both abstract compositions and fields of color. There was, however,

a shared sense of ideals in the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II. Under the guidance of teachers like Hans Hofmann, and rooted in the school of Surrealism, these artists encompassed the first internationally recognized American art genre. Abstract Expressionists attempted to create works gigantic in scale, monumental in proportion, and weighted with the psychology of the human condition. With regard to technique, they preferred to focus on the process of painting, the gesture of the artist, and the spontaneous outcome of their actions.

Color Field Painting

Significant artists associated with Color Field painting include Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Mark Rothko, Frank Stella, and Clyfford Still.

Color Field painting was a movement in the United States that emerged as an extension of Abstract Expressionism. Whereas forceful gesture was paramount to the Abstract Expressionists, Color Field painters strove to express themselves, their emotions, and their spiritual and philosophical ruminations through other quieter processes, creating large fields of solid color spread or stained into the canvas. Color Field painting is characterized by the use of large formats, the flatness of painting's support, unbroken surfaces of color, and the emphasis on varied processes. Color Field painting was championed by formalist art critic Clement Greenberg, who argued that abstract, modern painting should be based on line, form, and space.