

Helen Frankenthaler

Biography and Legacyⁱ

Born: December 12, 1928 - New York, New York

Died: December 27, 2011 - Darien, Connecticut

Styles: Abstract Expressionism; Color Field Painting

Childhood

Helen Frankenthaler was born and raised in a wealthy Manhattan family with her two older sisters. Her parents recognized and fostered her artistic talent from a young age, sending her to progressive, experimental schools. The family took many trips in the summertime, and it was during these trips that Frankenthaler developed her love of the landscape, sea, and sky. Her father was a judge on the New York State Supreme Court and died of cancer when she was eleven years old. The loss affected her deeply, sending Helen into a four-year period of unhappiness during which time she suffered from intense migraines.

Early Training

At fifteen, Frankenthaler was sent to the Dalton School in New York and began to study under the Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo. By the time she was sixteen, she decided to become an artist, enrolling in Bennington College in Vermont, where she studied under Paul Feeley, who was fundamental in arranging exhibitions of Abstract Expressionists.



Mature Period

In 1948, Frankenthaler moved back to New York. Two years later, she met the prominent art critic Clement Greenberg (19 years her senior) at an exhibition she organized for Bennington alumnae. They began a romantic relationship that would last for several years, in that time Greenberg introduced her to several leading Abstract Expressionists artists, including Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock, and Franz Kline. Greenberg also prompted Frankenthaler to study under Hans Hofmann in 1950. 1952 was the breakthrough year for Frankenthaler; upon returning home from a trip to Nova Scotia, she created *Mountains and Sea*, a groundbreaking canvas where she pioneered her "soak-stain" technique. Working on a large canvas placed on the floor, Frankenthaler

thinned her oil paints with turpentine and used window wipers, sponges, and charcoal outlines to manipulate the resulting pools of pigment.

The following year, Greenberg brought the painters Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland to Frankenthaler's studio to see *Mountains and Sea*; their excitement over the work led to their experimentation with Frankenthaler's soak-stain technique and to the development, with Frankenthaler, of Color Field Painting. Louis would later declare that Frankenthaler's work was the "bridge from Pollock to what was possible". The achievement is also noteworthy given that Frankenthaler was just 24 years old at the time, while Pollock and de Kooning were in their 40s and 50s, and struggled many years before achieving recognition.

In the years that followed, Frankenthaler continued using the new method she had developed, drawing on her abiding love of landscape for inspiration. In 1957, she met fellow artist Robert Motherwell, another leading Abstract Expressionist painter, and the following year they began their thirteen-year marriage, marking a period of mutual influence in their artwork. Since Motherwell and Frankenthaler had both come from privilege, the two aroused jealousy among other, cash-poor Abstract Expressionist artists and were famously nicknamed "the golden couple."



In the 1960s, Frankenthaler began to use acrylic paint in place of oil. She achieved large washes of bright color in acrylic paintings like *Canyon* (1965), which reveal the possibilities of this new material. In 1964, her work was included in an exhibition curated by Clement Greenberg at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Identifying this new strain of painting that emerged out of Abstract Expressionism, Greenberg titled the show *Post-Painterly Abstraction* --- his preferred title for the style of painting developed by Frankenthaler, Louis, and Noland, which is more generally referred to as Color Field Painting. Frankenthaler also began to show her work internationally, exhibiting at the Venice Biennale in 1966 and at the United States Pavilion at the 1967 International and Universal Exposition in Montreal. She simultaneously began to develop her proficiency in other artistic media; in particular, she embraced printmaking, creating woodcuts, aquatints, and lithographs that rivaled her painting in their inventiveness and beauty.

After her divorce from Motherwell in 1971, Frankenthaler traveled to the American Southwest. Two trips she made in the mid-1970s resulted in *Desert Pass* (1976) and several other works capturing the colors and tones of the Southwestern landscape.

Late Period

Frankenthaler continued making art during the 1980s and 1990s, up through the last years of her life. In addition to her work in painting and printmaking, she experimented with a variety of other media, including clay and steel sculpture, even designing the sets and costumes for England's Royal Ballet. Several years after being honored at the prominent gallery Knoedler & Company in New York with the exhibition *Frankenthaler at Eighty: Six Decades*, Frankenthaler died in 2011 at her home in Darien, Connecticut.

The Legacy of Helen Frankenthaler

Frankenthaler's soak-stain technique gave rise to the Color Field movement, having a decisive impact on the work of the other artists associated with this style, such as Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski. In addition, its striking departure from first-generation Abstract Expressionism, Color Field art is often seen as an important precursor of 1960s Minimalism, with its spare, meditative quality. The canvases of Frankenthaler and her fellow Color Field painters also resonated with the theories of the movement's biggest promoter, Clement Greenberg. Their lack of illusionistic space embodied what Greenberg articulated as modernist painting's logical end result: an increasing embrace of medium's intrinsic quality, which for him was the concept of 'flatness,' or the two-dimensionality of the picture plane. Eventually, the movement and Greenberg's ideas lost their popularity and succumbed to the stronger forces of Pop art and Minimalism.



¹ *Biography of Helen Frankenthaler*, The Art Story, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/frankenthaler-helen/life-and-legacy/>
