**Ruth**

**Helen Frankenthaler Notes**

**Trajectory as an Artist / Biography**

Frankenthaler was born in 1928 in New York City (December 12th) and died in 2011 (December 27th) in Darrien, Connecticut. She was active as an artist for well over five decades. She was the eldest of three sisters raised in an affluent NYC family. Her father, whom she adored, died when she was 11. Very supported by her family in her desire to be a painter or a writer and given opportunities for study in school and out of it. Also, was interested in being a writer, lifelong interest in literature. Her family often travelled to beautiful places and nature remained a lifelong inspiration as did the process of making itself.

See ***Debates***.

[Link to Frankenthaler Bio](https://www.theartstory.org/artist-frankenthaler-helen-life-and-legacy.htm)

[Link to NYTimes Obituary](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/dec/28/helen-frankenthaler)

Obit includes a great photo of Frankenthaler in front of Mountains and Sea so you can see it at human scale in her studio.

She had a five-year relationship with critic Clement Greenberg beginning in 1948 and a thirteen-year marriage to fellow painter Robert Motherwell.

Ms. Frankenthaler, who married Stephen M. DuBrul Jr., an investment banker, in 1994 [NYTimes, 2003](https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/27/arts/art-architecture-helen-frankenthaler-back-to-the-future.html)

***Where this specific work fits into the broader trajectory and style.***

Frankenthaler had arguably been a serious painter since her late teens and had considered herself that way, and state this-- studying with Rufino Tamayo at the Dalton School, with Paul Feeley at Bennington. Later, strongly encouraged by Greenberg, she studies with Hans Hoffman (1950) –but said she was done with learning!

--Except the kind she would do in her own practice. She was a lifelong experimenter and innovator.   
Mountains and Sea of 1952 is considered her “breakthrough work” in which she invented her soak/stain technique. Created when she returned home from a trip to Novia Scotia.

From theartstory.org Frankenthaler bio

[Link](https://www.theartstory.org/gallery-janis-sidney.htm) to internet site: theartstory.org

*“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”*

When you look at pictures of her working, you immediately sense the intense physicality of her process. At the same time, she was very intent on making images and learning to guide the fluid mediums into a finished image.

In the 1960’s, she began to use acrylic paints instead of oil: this is the case in 1969, when she painted Sunset Corner. (See Canyon of 1965 for a comparative image earlier in her use of acrylics.)

She remained interested in the beauty and the resonance of the work throughout her career.

*Quote: 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 Signature***

***Working methods***

Frankenthaler was introduced to Jackson Pollack and Lee Krasner by Clement Greenberg sometime in the late 40’s

Pollack’s work immediately caused her to see the possibilities of painting very differently according to her.

Taking the canvas off the wall or easel –talks about not about shoulder and wrist anymore but about the entire body working in what she referred to as a “field” and that she stated for her went beyond the edge of even these very large canvases. (Wrist and shoulder quote from: Charlie Rose interview on YouTube)

**Abstraction - what is their position?**

***Debates***

***1#***

Frankenthaler always felt that her work retained associations to the figurative and the landscape. But said *“no viewer is going to look at this and say this is a shoe.”* Her focus on discovery during an intense process of making drew her into a characteristically inventive and experimental mode that characterized her work over fifty years of making art.

From many written sources, and her own interviews, one sees she had a sophisticated understanding of art movements and knew she was immersed in one—that of Abstract Impressionism. She is crediting with giving rise to a second one, Color Field painting—directly influencing Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. Greenberg curated a show called Post-Painterly Abstraction at LACMA in 1964 (Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland) his alternative preferred term to Color Field.

Frankenthaler enjoyed early success with Mountains and Sea. She became quite well known early in her career. By the 60’s she was part of major museum exhibitions in the U.S. and internationally. She and Grace Hartigan were the most successful of the group of female painters.

She didn’t see a conflict between being inspired by things she saw, representing these in her own manner while being fully taken up by painting itself, of later other media—especially print-making (with ULAE).

She described herself as a *“space-maker.”*

She also said in [2003 (New York Times) interview](https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/27/arts/art-architecture-helen-frankenthaler-back-to-the-future.html):

*''There is no 'always, '' she said. ''No formula. There are no rules. Let the picture lead you where it must go.''*

[***From the GalleryIntel website:***](http://www.galleryintell.com/artex/canyon-by-helen-frankenthaler/)

*“The landscapes were in my arms as I did it,” Ms. Frankenthaler told an interviewer. “I didn’t realize all that I was doing. I was trying to get at something — I didn’t know what until it was manifest.”*

**Titles:** She stated she always added them afterwards and didn’t like the practice of others using Untitled or #14.

**How is her art political? Environment around it? How did it charge this object? Did she view it as political?**

**Debates**

2#

An example of her attachment to beauty is evident in her statements in the 90’s that she thought the NEA should not fund works of dubious artistic quality (part of the culture wars).

She went further to state that artists were under tremendous pressure to comment politically or socially through their art itself and that she was against that….

[Charlie Rose interview](https://charlierose.com/videos/16627)

3#

An article by Daniel Belasco (in a google file we will share), argues that the 50’s were a proto-feminist period in art based on the number of active, ambitious women in the NYC art world. Hartigan and Frankenthaler were very successful and very close. Through reading their unpublished letters, they are deeply considering women painters and writers as role models evaluating their challenges and successes as female creators. Whether they defined themselves as feminists, they were passionate about freedom.

**See PDF in Exchange for:**

**See Us Now: The Feminist Positions of Helen Frankenthaler and Grace Hartigan, 1957–1962 by Daniel Belasco**

[All below from STJ 2017](https://www.wsj.com/articles/no-rules-helen-frankenthaler-woodcuts-and-as-in-nature-helen-frankenthaler-paintings-reviews-in-the-restless-innovators-studio-1500721205)

Wall Street Journal review of “No Rules” show of her work in 2017.

(talking about “*from her first woodcut, made in 1973, to her last, printed in 2009”* She died in 2011.

Frankenthaler is quoted (and this quote is used as the *No Rules* show title:)

*The title comes from an admonition in a 1994 interview to “Go against the rules or ignore the rules, that is what invention is about.”*

*Worth also noting is that the work of these women, especially Hartigan and Frankenthaler was received well and also sold, but gender was nearly always commented upon and sometimes the implicit subject of written responses and criticism.*

From Belasco’s article: See PDF in The Exchange

*Critic Irving Sandler recalled that Frankenthaler once challenged his characterization of her work as feminine, asking him if he would use the same word for Milton Avery. Frankenthaler questioned the Wölfflinian binaries that structure* *formalist art criticism, which were adopted by Clement Greenberg and most other critics of the day, who deemed the painterly qualities of Frankenthaler’s work, as well as (Marie) Laurencin’s, to be feminine.* ***Frankenthaler understood that »the essential feminine« is purely a subjective cliché that resides in the eyes of the beholder. The woman artist should have the power to deploy stereotypically feminine color and line at will, without fear of being tarnished or diminished. In that respect, we might think of Frankenthaler as an important precursor to postfeminist painters of the 1990s like Lisa Yuskavage who flaunted clichés of femininity for seductive and subversive purposes.***

**Approach to the work - how would you teach it?**

**The “Grids” activity is good for adults, and older students.**

**As an activity, people work by themselves for 5-10 minutes, then work with the others who have spent time with this work, then talk as a group of the whole. The gallery leader can infuse information, answer questions, delve into process and artistic intention, sharing quotes and practices.**

**I have also used this a preparatory activity for my own teaching. With these works in particular, I think it is fun and interesting to delve into materials, process and kinesthetic**