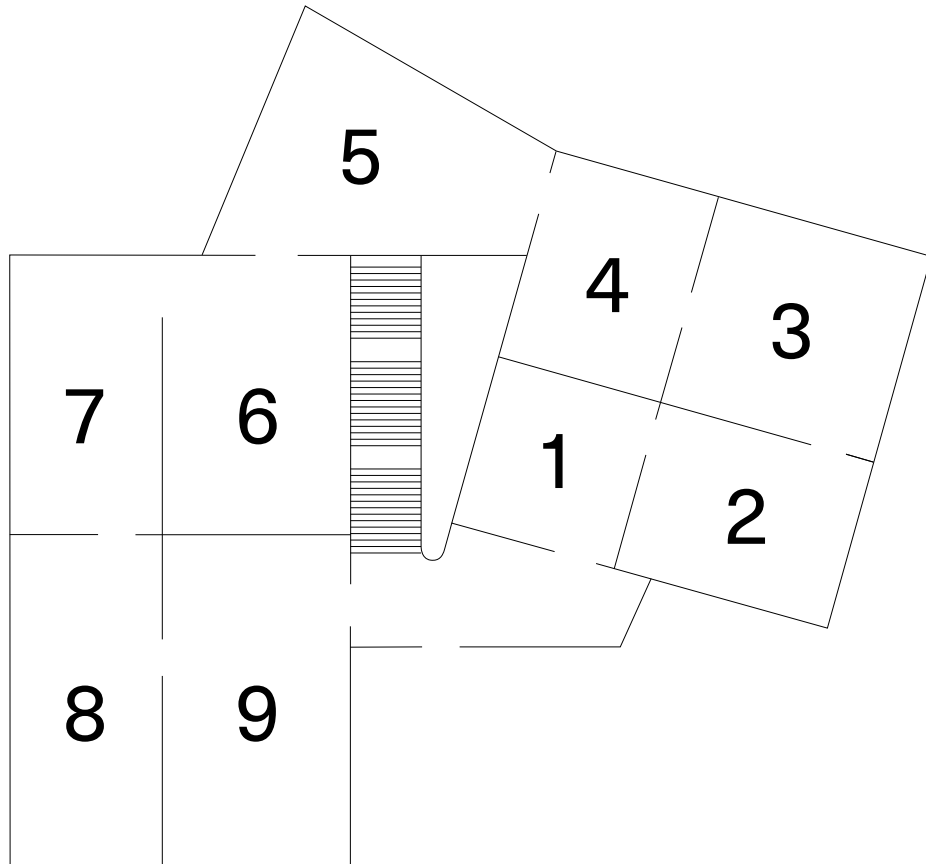




Helen Frankenthaler

english

2nd floor



Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) is a groundbreaking figure of postwar art in the U.S. Her experimental approach to the handling of paint and canvas makes her one of the most important artists of Abstract Expressionism. Painters of this movement used bold gestures, color, and movement to express emotion rather than depict recognizable subjects. When Frankenthaler begins exhibiting her work in the early 1950s, she is a young woman seeking a place in a world dominated by men. She confidently challenges them with innovative and large-size canvases.

Frankenthaler rolls her canvas out on the floor and pours diluted paint onto it, spreading the color with brushes, sponges and other paintings tools. This soak-stain technique becomes her trademark and provides the decisive impetus for what would be called Color Field painting, which is characterized by large areas of color and the emotional power of pure abstraction. At the same time, the technique lays the foundations for a long career throughout which her painting continually evolves without constraints.

Her work develops within the cultural climate of the Cold War, when abstract art is increasingly framed as a symbol of Western freedom. Her large, open compositions—with their flowing color and nonhierarchical space—resonate strongly with contemporary ideals of openness, expansiveness, and artistic liberty.

This exhibition brings together over fifty works by Frankenthaler spanning six decades, many showing her impressive use of scale, with a particular focus on her intense engagement with art historical models and traditions.

Biography

Frankenthaler grows up in an educated, affluent Jewish family. She receives early encouragement to confidently pursue her ambition to become an artist. She studies painting at the liberal Bennington College in Vermont. She learns to conduct precise visual analyses and engages intensely with Cubism (ca. 1906/07–1914), an art movement that reduces subjects to geometric forms and shows multiple viewpoints at once.

In her early twenties, Frankenthaler already maintains her own studio in Manhattan. She meets the influential art critic Clement Greenberg (1909–1994) and first-generation artists of the Abstract Expressionist movement such as Lee Krasner (1908–1984), Barnett Newman (1905–1970), Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and her future husband, Robert Motherwell (1915–1991). Her encounter with Pollock and his technique of painting on canvases lying flat on the floor make a particularly deep impression on her and becomes a crucial impetus for the development of her revolutionary soak-stain technique.

In 1951, Frankenthaler takes part in the groundbreaking *9th St. Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture* in New York and the Tibor de Nagy Gallery hosts her first solo show. From that point on, she is regularly featured in group and solo exhibitions—initially in the United States, and from 1959 onward also internationally. Among the major milestones are her retrospectives at the Jewish Museum in New York in

1960 and at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1969, the latter of which subsequently tours Europe.

The distinguished curator and scholar John Elderfield publishes a monograph on her work in 1989. That same year, the Museum of Modern Art, Fort Worth, in Texas mounts a retrospective of her paintings.

In the 1990s, Frankenthaler gradually shifts the center of her life and work from New York City to the Connecticut shoreline—first to Shippan Point in Stamford, and later to Contentment Island in Darien. During this period, she works primarily on paper and continues to be featured in exhibitions at major institutions. She dies on December 27, 2011, in Darien, Connecticut.

Throughout her long career, Frankenthaler continually expands her painterly practice, yet repeatedly returns to the soak-stain technique. Alongside her distinctive canvases and works on paper, she also creates an exceptional body of prints.

Artistic Influences

Frankenthaler becomes part of the New York art scene in the early 1950s, just as the city is emerging as a new center of the international art world and replacing Paris as the cultural epicentre. She belongs to the first generation of artists shaped by this newly ascendant modern art milieu. She begins a relationship with the art critic Clement Greenberg and quickly gains access to the art scene in New York. They entertain a lively dialogue about art.

Frankenthaler devotes herself to abstract painting and departs from traditional forms she had learned in college. Her early works are inspired primarily by Arshile Gorky (1904–1948), Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Joan Miró (1893–1983), Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), and Jackson Pollock (1912–1956).

1

The Soak-Stain Technique

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On October 26, 1952, Frankenthaler produces her key work, *Mountains and Sea*, using a completely new process: She pours paint onto an unprimed canvas that she had placed on the floor. The fabric absorbs the heavily diluted oil paint, creating translucent and luminous areas of color that leave the structure of the canvas visible. This marks a technical breakthrough that fundamentally changes how painting can function—color becomes part of the canvas itself rather than a layer sitting on top of it.

Frankenthaler moves across the entire canvas, working on it from all sides and manipulating the paint with brushes, sponges, and other tools. This method differs radically from the traditional way of painting with a brush at an easel. She deploys her whole body to engage with the entire space. With this technique, Frankenthaler breaks from artistic predecessors and establishes her own pictorial language.

The Early European Trips

Frankenthaler takes many trips to Europe during her lifetime. They are formative experiences for her artistic development. In 1948, she travels across the Atlantic for the first time and in subsequent trips encounters works of great art historical significance. She visits major museums and important exhibitions. The impressions left by the landscapes, cultural sites, and art works flow into her painting.

Frankenthaler is particularly taken with the prehistoric cave paintings in Altamira. In 1953 and 1958 she visits the cultural site in Spain several times. The artist sees a connection to her own painting and compared the rough cave wall to the untreated canvas in her works.

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Homage to Painting

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In 1956, Frankenthaler begins producing works that are inspired by encounters with other artworks. Her models range from Titian (ca. 1488–1576) to Marie Laurencin (1883–1956), demonstrating a remarkable stylistic and temporal breadth. She responds to specific paintings or draws inspiration from the way artists worked in the past.

In the early 1960s, new art movements such as Pop Art, which draws on imagery from advertising, consumer goods, and popular media, and Color Field painting emerge. In this period of artistic upheaval, Frankenthaler also starts to question the techniques she had been using. She begins to produce airy and partially figurative pictorial constructions.



Frankenthaler and Ruth Lyford (1928–2020) with teacher Paul Feeley (1910–1966) at Bennington College, Vermont, circa 1949
Bennington College Archives



Frankenthaler in her studio on West End Avenue, New York, photographed by Gordon Parks for "Women Artists in Ascendance," published in *Life*, May 13, 1957

Photo: Gordon Parks © The Gordon Parks Foundation Works © 2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ProLitteris, Zurich



Lee Krasner, Clement Greenberg, Frankenthaler, and Jackson Pollock at the nightclub *Eddie Condon's*, New York, January 1951

Photo: unknown; Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York



Frankenthaler in her studio at East 83rd Street and Third Avenue, New York, 1964, with paintings left to right: *Saturn* (1963), *Small's Paradise* (1964)

Photo: Alexander Liberman; Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2000.R.19) © J. Paul Getty Trust Works © 2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ProLitteris, Zurich



Frankenthaler in her Saddle Rock Road studio, Shippan Point, Stamford, Connecticut, September 1980, with paintings left to right: *Diana* (partial) and *Maverick* (both 1980, in progress)

Photo: André Emmerich; Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York © André Emmerich, used with permission Works © 2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ProLitteris, Zurich



Frankenthaler on a sailboat near Ischia, Italy, July 1973

Photo: unknown; Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York

Line and Surface

Around 1970, Frankenthaler enters a particularly productive phase. She continues to develop her painting technique and experiments with bolder applications of pigment, producing large-format works that are reminiscent of landscape but consist of abstract areas of color.

In works such as *Flood* (1967), the focus is still on the color field. Shortly thereafter, the line reappears in her works as a finely drawn stroke, but it does not form a contour or a boundary. Rather, the line becomes an autonomous pictorial element that provides a counterpoint to the fields of color and gives structure to the canvas. This interplay of linearity and area creates a spatial effect. In works such as *Moveable Blue* (1973), the line increasingly becomes a painted element.

5

Materiality and Experiment

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In the early 1960s, Frankenthaler starts to experiment with acrylic paints. In some works, the wood grain of the floorboards imprints onto the canvases, and Frankenthaler integrates this effect into her visual language. While producing other works with thick layers of paint, she discovers that the color penetrates through to the back of the canvas. She then turns the works over to continue painting on the flip side. The latter came to be referred to as “floorboard paintings” and are an example of her intense exploration of materiality and pictorial space.

Her approach to paint as substance, surface, and process is part of a broader postwar rethinking of what painting can be, explored by many Western artists of the time.

New Painterly Experiments

In the 1970s, Frankenthaler widens the scope of her painting style. Still working on the floor, she produces works with textured and multilayered surfaces, applying the paint in a variety of ways and layering it with different tools. Despite extended expanses of color, the paintings retain a spatial depth created by transparent layers of paint.

Frankenthaler's works on paper also take on greater significance during this period. She regards them as autonomous works, approaching their production in much the same way as her paintings and imbuing them with the same expressive power.

Towards the end of the decade, she returns again to the study of 15th- to 17th-century painting. Using thin veils of color over a dark ground, she creates effects of light and shadow similar to what she had seen in the work of artists such as Titian or Rembrandt (1606–1669).

7

Paraphrases in the 1980s

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In the 1980s, Frankenthaler once again engages intensively with works from the history of art, responding to a variety of specific works that range from Japanese woodcuts to paintings by European artists such as Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) and Édouard Manet (1832–1883). In these encounters, she does not copy the paintings but paraphrases them by transforming them into her own abstract visual language.

These historical works serve as a starting point for what she seeks in her own creative process: "Scale and the play of space and light are largely what it's all about." (1996). The motifs of her pictorial models are still partially recognizable, but they dissolve into stormy landscape or atmospheric spaces. In this period Frankenthaler uses a wide range of methods to apply color. Thin layers and spatters of paint can be seen next to energetic sweeps and impasto clumps of color.

The Last Productive Years

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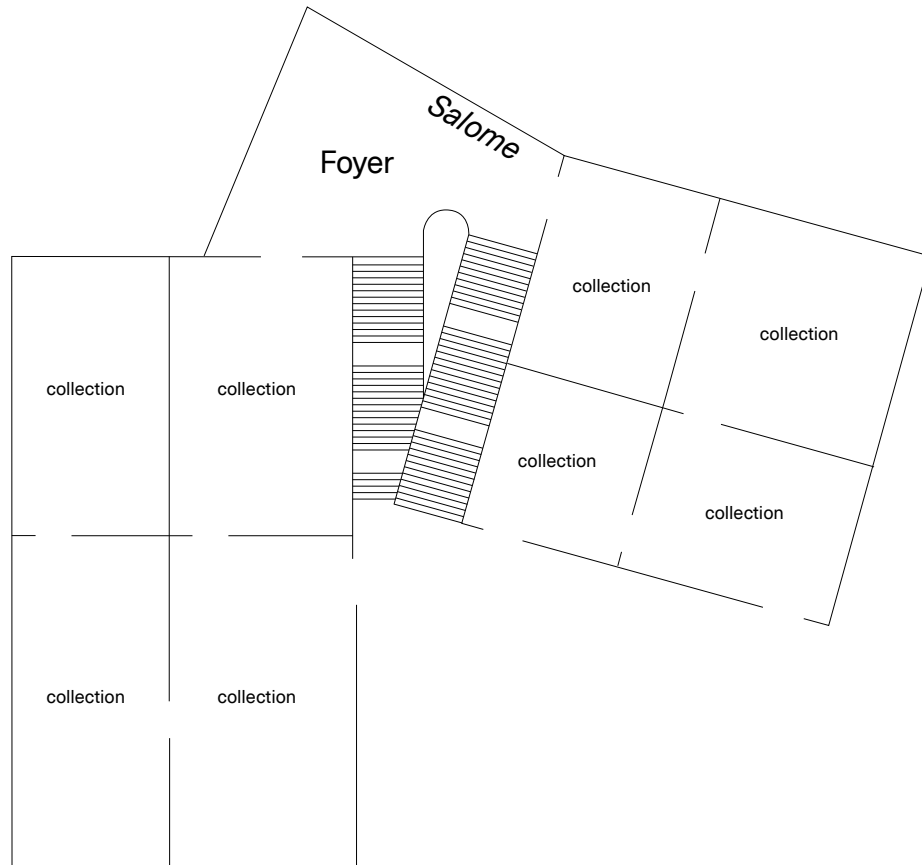
In the late 1980s, Frankenthaler begins a series of paintings with dynamic painted surfaces and contrasting color effects. The intense, glowing colors on a dark ground are reminiscent of stormy landscapes. In the early 1990s, too, her expressive painting continues to be inspired by an engagement with natural phenomena. The application of color, however, became more thickly layered.

In her final productive years, Frankenthaler focuses increasingly on large-scale works on paper, which she created at her studio table. Her interest in the artists of the past, such as Claude Monet (1840–1926), Rembrandt, or James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), remain ever-present. She paints her last canvases, including *Cloud Burst*, in 2002, which is unique and circles back to her beginnings in the early 1950s and the soak-stain technique.



Frankenthaler working on *Untitled* (1991) in her studio, Saddle Rock Road, Shippan Point, Stamford, Connecticut, July 1991

Photo: Vincent Dion; Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York



Salome

Helen Frankenthaler's *Salome* (1981) is installed at the entrance to the Kunstmuseum Basel's collection of U.S. American art, in the company of works by artists she knew and with whom she exchanged ideas. The collection has deep roots: As early as 1959, a donation made the Kunstmuseum the first European institution with a collection of contemporary painting from the U.S. Key works by Franz Kline (1910–1962), Barnett Newman (1905–1970), Mark Rothko (1903–1970), and Clyfford Still (1904–1980) form the basis of what remains a central focus of the collection to this day. With the donation of the painting *Riverhead* (1963) by the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation in 2024, one of the most important woman painters of U.S. postwar art is now also represented in the art museum.

kunstmuseum basel

Helen Frankenthaler
April 18–August 23, 2026
Kunstmuseum Basel

Opening Hours
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