

## Helen Frankenthaler (American, 1928-2011) – Artist Resources



Frankenthaler in New York, 1964  
Photograph: Alexander Liberman/Getty

### [New York Times Obituary](#)

The [Provincetown Art Association & Museum](#) showcased the work created by Frankenthaler during summers in the seaside town from 1950-69 with her then husband Robert Motherwell. Her stepdaughter, [Lisa Motherwell discusses the exhibition with co-curator Elizabeth Smith](#), Executive Director of the Frankenthaler Foundation.

Frankenthaler’s evergreen relevance continues to be celebrated in [solo and group exhibitions](#) throughout the world. In 2018, the [breakthrough biography \*Ninth Street Women\*](#), featured her as one of the powerhouse female voices of creativity and innovation at the heart of Abstract Expressionism.

[Helen Frankenthaler Foundation](#): artwork, exhibitions, publications, archives, grants.

[Getty Podcasts](#) brings together a discussion of Frankenthaler’s legacy with excerpts from interviews conducted in 1967 and 1971 about influence, inspiration, and innovation.

Frankenthaler reflects on her early years as a student and experiences New York in the 1950s, her approach to materials, and affection for working on the floor in [an oral history](#) with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in 1968.

Portland State invited Frankenthaler and nine of her paintings to the campus as part of their Visiting Artist Program in 1972. Watch the installation of her work and her casual [Q&A with students](#). Discussing how artists attempt to cope with the “border” of painting, through buildup of paint, shaped canvases, pierced canvases, Frankenthaler argues that “size, scope, is necessary. You cannot accomplish on an easel size what the message is that you might be able to accomplish in large scale.”

Frankenthaler [talks with Charlie Rose](#) in 1993 in conjunction with a retrospective of her prints and drawings – an often-overlooked aspect of her work – at [The National Gallery](#) of Art in D.C. “‘Beautiful’ has become an incendiary word because in many ways today, beauty is obsolete and not the main concern of art,” reflects Frankenthaler, “You can’t prove beauty, it’s there as a fact. You know it, and you feel it, and it’s real, but you can’t say to somebody: ‘this has it’...it gives no specific message other than itself, which in turn should be able to move you into some sort of truth and insight and something beyond art.” [Listen to her artist talk at the National Gallery.](#)



Frankenthaler in her studio, 1969  
Photograph: Ernst Hass



Helen Frankenthaler (American, 1928-2011)

**February's Turn**, 1979

Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2022:46.1

Born and raised in New York's Upper East Side, Helen Frankenthaler was encouraged to pursue art at a young age. With her distinctive "soak-stain" technique of infusing paint into the surface of unprimed canvas, Frankenthaler emerged as one of the most important figures in postwar abstraction. **February's Turn** evokes the transition of seasons, as the frozen months of winter melt away to a colorful spring. The painting is also part of a transition in Frankenthaler's practice, when the artist began modifying her "soak-stain" canvases with sections of thick impasto paint, bolder colors, and a focus on the edges of the composition rather than the center. As Frankenthaler once said: "A really good picture looks as if it's happened at once."

*On view November 9, 2022 – February 12, 2023*

Helen Frankenthaler (American, 1928-2011)

**Circe**, 1974

Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2022:57.1

“I have always responded to the wonders of the natural environment. When I was a child, I used to take my mother to the window of my room in our apartment on the thirteenth floor in Manhattan, and have her look at clouds because I was so mesmerized by what I could see out the window, all the spaces and changes of nature.” – Helen Frankenthaler, 2000

Helen Frankenthaler’s six-decade career made a monumental impact on the development of postwar abstraction. With her “soak-stain” technique of infusing paint into the surface of unprimed canvas, Frankenthaler bridged the gap between Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s and Color Field painting in the 1960s. **Circe** is recognized as a major painting by the artist. Named for the mythological daughter of the sun god Helios and the ocean nymph Perse, **Circe** alludes to divine femininity in the natural world. The painting was included in Frankenthaler’s traveling retrospective in 1975, a pivotal time in the artist’s prolific career.

*On view October 26, 2022 – January 29, 2023*





Helen Frankenthaler (American, 1928-2011)

**Carousel**, 1979

Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2021:11.1

Helen Frankenthaler once said: “A really good picture looks as if it’s happened at once.” The artist is known for her “soak-stain” technique, which she developed in the 1950s to infuse paint with the surface of an unprimed canvas. By the 1970s, however, the artist turned away from soak-stain in favor of thicker impasto brushstrokes. **Carousel** is a unique example of Frankenthaler’s work, because it combines the two techniques in a single canvas – the painting’s soak-stained reds are interrupted by strokes of cerulean blue, green, yellow, and white.

This work was formerly in the collection of the Palm Springs Art Museum. In response to COVID-19 museum closures, the Association of Art Museum Directors announced a two-year relaxation of deaccession guidelines and allowed museums to sell works from their permanent collections for operating funds. **Carousel** was auctioned in October 2020, with the proceeds supporting future acquisitions and collection maintenance at the PSAM.

*On view July 20 – October 18, 2021*



Helen Frankenthaler (American, 1928-2011)

**Breakwater**, 1963

Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2019:105.1

Over the course of more than six decades, Helen Frankenthaler built a body of work that remains relevant and influential. Consistently experimental and fiercely individual, she created paintings, woodblock prints, sculpture, and ceramics. Frankenthaler's pioneering approach to painting—termed the “soak-stain” technique—made her one of the most influential artists of post-war American Modernism, an era dominated by male painters. Bridging the gap between Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s and Color Field painting in the 1960s, Frankenthaler's seemingly spontaneous, abstract compositions concealed the methodical discipline and intentionality necessary for pouring acrylic pigments diluted with turpentine directly onto an unprimed canvas. **Breakwater** features monochromatic stains floating in a central arrangement of barely self-contained organic forms. The translucent veils of color evoke watercolors, seeming to hover on the surface of the canvas despite the nearly complete integration of medium and support.

*On view December 18 – March 22, 2020*

Helen Frankenthaler (American, 1928-2011)

**Weather Change**, 1963

Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2019:139.1

**Weather Change** showcases Helen Frankenthaler's interest in the traditional genre of landscape, particularly coastal environments. Throughout her career, Frankenthaler enjoyed visiting Atlantic beaches and summering in the idyllic seaside of Provincetown, Massachusetts on Cape Cod, gleaning inspiration from the patterns of sunlight playing off the ocean. Often working from watercolor sketches painted outside, she would return to her studio and complete the final composition using her signature method of pouring diluted acrylic paint onto an unprimed canvas placed on the floor. The technique might suggest unhindered spontaneity, but **Weather Change** demonstrates Frankenthaler's careful, controlled consideration and internalization of the natural world. She described the process as "[having] the landscape in my arms as I painted it...[having] the landscape in my mind and my shoulder and wrist." The horizontal stains of paint suggest abstracted elements of a familiar coastal landscape: a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean, a hint of sunrise or sunset, the nebulous formation of gathering clouds.

*On view January 22 – April 26, 2020*

