

Media release
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Helen Frankenthaler

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Curator: Anita Haldemann

With over fifty works from six decades, the special exhibition *Helen Frankenthaler* at the Kunstmuseum Basel offers extensive insight into the expansive oeuvre of a preeminent figure of American abstraction. Frankenthaler's intensely colorful paintings, typically in large formats, light up the galleries and engage viewers. This comprehensive in-depth survey is the largest exhibition of her work in Europe to date and her first institutional solo show in Switzerland.

A pioneering representative of Abstract Expressionism, Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) occupies a central position in postwar American art. Her soak-stain technique revolutionized abstract painting and catalyzed the development of Color Field painting in the U.S. from the mid-1950s onward. A particular focus of the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Basel is on her probing engagement with historic art she admired, which inspired many works throughout her career. For the first time, Frankenthaler's paintings will be shown in conversation with artworks ranging from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, a juxtaposition that enriches our understanding of her abstract art.

At the young age of twenty-three, Frankenthaler changed the course of modern painting when she came up with her innovative soak-stain technique: applying diluted paint to unprimed canvases she laid out on the floor, she created luminous compositions of — often monumental in size. She manipulated the paint from all sides, using sponges, scrapers, household brushes, and other tools. As a result, the canvas absorbed the pigments, yielding distinctive effects: fabric and color became one. Although Frankenthaler left plenty of room in her process for chance, she retained a finely honed sense of balance and structure. Her works have captivated viewers for decades through her lyrical handling of color and bold compositional choices.

In 2024, the Kunstmuseum welcomed Frankenthaler's formidable painting *Riverhead* (1963) to its collection. A generous gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, the work filled a significant gap in the museum's holdings of American art. The accession also prompted the museum to make plans for this major exhibition.

Biographical background and influences

The daughter of an educated and affluent Jewish family, Frankenthaler was raised in New York. She was encouraged early on to believe in herself and pursue her intention to become an artist. She trained as a painter at the progressive Bennington College in Vermont, USA. As a student, she tried her hand at Cubist composition and learned to subject pictures to painstaking analysis. As she strove to develop her own abstract practice, she found vital inspiration in Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, and Joan Miró, but also in younger artists including Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning.

By her early twenties, Frankenthaler had struck out on her own in a studio in Manhattan. She soon made the acquaintances of the influential art critic Clement Greenberg and members of the first generation of Abstract Expressionist artists including Lee Krasner, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and her later husband Robert Motherwell. The encounter with Pollock and his treatment of the horizontal canvas, in particular, made a profound impression on Frankenthaler and spurred her to develop her revolutionary soak-stain technique.

In 1951, work by Frankenthaler was on view in the seminal group exhibition *9th St. Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture* in New York, and the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York mounted the artist's first solo show. From this point on, she regularly presented work in group and solo exhibitions—first in the U.S., then, from 1959 on, also abroad. The retrospectives at the Jewish Museum, New York, in 1960 and at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1969 were particular highlights; the latter presentation subsequently toured in Europe. The first monographic study of her oeuvre, by art historian John Elderfield, came out in 1989, the year a retrospective of her paintings opened at the Museum of Modern Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

In the 1990s, Frankenthaler gradually relocated the center of her life and work from New York City to the Connecticut shore, first to Shippan Point, Stamford, and later to Contentment Island, Darien. During this time, she worked primarily on paper and continued to show her work at major institutions. At age eighty-three, she died in Darien, CT, in 2011.

Frankenthaler continually developed and refined her painterly practice throughout her career, but she also kept returning to the soak-stain technique. In addition to creating singular paintings on canvas and paper, she also worked in other media; her fine art prints, in particular, have won acclaim.

Helen Frankenthaler at the Kunstmuseum Basel is made possible by the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, which provided a generous loan of 37 works by the artist. Additional works come from the holdings of European and American museums and private collections including the ASOM Collection, Vaduz; the Brooklyn Museum, New York; the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; the MAMCO Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneva; the Merzbacher Kunststiftung, Zurich; the Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid; the mumok, Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna; the Museum Reinhard Ernst, Wiesbaden; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. An audio guide produced by soundgarden audioguidance GmbH leads visitors through the exhibition. The scenography was realized by Groenlandbasel.

Publication

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue with contributions by Anita Haldemann and Karen Wilkin and a richly illustrated biography by Amanda Kopp-Kempinski. It offers insight into Frankenthaler's oeuvre and life, her travels and creative inspirations, and contains plate reproductions of selected works, some paired with historic art to which they respond.

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About the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

Established and endowed by Helen Frankenthaler during her lifetime, the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation is dedicated to promoting greater public interest in and understanding of the visual arts. The Foundation advances the artist's legacy and inspires a new generation of practitioners through a range of philanthropic, educational, and research initiatives. Since becoming active in 2013, the Foundation has continued to strategically expand its program, which includes organizing and supporting significant exhibitions of the artist's work, fostering new research and publications, advancing educational programs in partnership with arts organizations around the world, and launching groundbreaking initiatives that foster systemic change in the field. As a primary resource on the artist, and a steward of her collection and archive, the Foundation holds an extensive selection of Frankenthaler's work in a variety of mediums, her collection of works by other artists, and original papers and materials pertaining to her life and work.

The exhibition

The exhibition *Helen Frankenthaler* at the Kunstmuseum Basel sheds light on Frankenthaler's creative process, showcasing major works from her beginnings in the early 1950s to her late oeuvre of around 2000. The nine galleries are arranged in chronological sequence to throw the evolution of her painting into relief. **The introduction** shows paintings from her early days in New York that clearly reflect her training and the inspiration she drew from artists like Kandinsky, Miró, Gorky, de Kooning, and Pollock. Devising the soak-stain technique in 1952, she freed herself from these formative models and found her own visual language, a progression that is evident in the works **in the second gallery**.

One important source of creative inspiration for Frankenthaler were visits to museums and exhibitions, to which she dedicated considerable time also during her frequent and extensive travels in Europe. She found inspiration in landscapes, cultural sites, and encounters with older art, as shown **in the third gallery**. From the mid-1950s on, she produced the first works stimulated by her studies of other artists' creations, including the paintings *Europa* (1957), which references Titian's *The Rape of Europa* (ca. 1560–1562) at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, and *Hommage à M. L.* (1962), in which she pays tribute to the artist Marie Laurencin's painting style and palette. The latter work exemplifies her painterly practice of the early 1960s, which is distinguished by airy islands of color and sometimes features discernible landscapes and living beings.

In the fourth gallery, visitors are invited to delve deeper into Frankenthaler's life and creative evolution: a richly illustrated biography retraces key stages of her life, complemented by the twenty-minute film portrait *Helen Frankenthaler: Let the Picture Lead You* by Maria Anna Tappeiner (Wolf Truchsess von Wetzhausen / WESTEND Film & TV Produktion, 2025), which captures the artist's extraordinary charisma.

Works like *Riverhead* (1963) illustrate the shift toward canvases covered edge to edge by flowing areas of color. In the early 1960s, Frankenthaler increasingly worked in acrylic rather than oil paints. Her pictures recall natural landscapes, encouraging associations of skies, clouds, mountains, forests, and water. Examples including her works *Flood* (1967) and *Moveable Blue* (1973), which captivate viewers by their sheer size and luminous colors, are on view **in the fifth gallery**.

The exhibition repeatedly pinpoints Frankenthaler's engagement with works of art from the past. Especially striking are her homages to André Derain and Claude Monet from the 1970s. In these instances, rather than choosing concrete pictures as points of

departure, she took inspiration from the earlier painters' palettes and compositional practices, as juxtapositions with selected works by them **in the sixth gallery** demonstrate.

During the 1970s, Frankenthaler produced paintings with layered coats of paint of varying intensity, employing a variety of tools to apply the paint. Her works on paper, which took on growing importance during this period, likewise bring home her emphasis on the surface; they are on view **in gallery seven**.

In 1979, Frankenthaler returned to in-depth studies of works of older art. Her paintings *Portrait of a Lady in White* (1979) and *Portrait of Margaretha Trip* (1980) are modeled on portraits by Titian and Rembrandt. During this period, she was especially interested in both painters' technique, and more particularly in glazing, the ultrafine layering of transparent paints, and the use of chiaroscuro and sfumato effects.

Postcards played an important role in how Frankenthaler worked with historic art. Although she saw the originals in exhibitions and at museums, the actual translation of what she had seen into her abstract compositions happened in her studio, where postcards served her as aides-mémoire. That is how the works on view **in room eight** came into being; they refer to specific paintings by Gustave Courbet, Edgar Degas, Utagawa Hiroshige, and Édouard Manet.

The last gallery presents several paintings from the 1990s that stand out for the impasto and dynamism of their surfaces. Frankenthaler was inspired to these works by natural phenomena such as thunderstorms or whirlpools. The resulting paintings recall pictures by Nicolas Poussin or William Turner. In her final years, Frankenthaler increasingly turned her attention to working on paper. Her output in this medium is in no way inferior to her paintings in terms of format or the quality of the surface design. The artist again took her cue from the art of earlier eras: *From the Master* (2002) gestures toward a self-portrait by Rembrandt at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; *Lighthouse Series XII* (1998), to James McNeill Whistler's *Chelsea Houses* (1880–87).

The artist's last paintings date from 2002; one of them, *Cloud Burst* (2002), marks the exhibition's conclusion.

As a prelude of sorts to the exhibition on level 2 of the museum's Neubau, *Salome* (1978) is on view in the landing on level 1, where the imposing painting, a loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation, also acts as a bridge to the Kunstmuseum Basel's collection of American art on view in the adjacent galleries.