



# HELEN FRANKENTHALER PAINTING WITHOUT RULES

FIRENZE PALAZZO STROZZI

27.09.2024 | 26.01.2025

## ***Helen Frankenthaler: Painting Without Rules***

Florence, Palazzo Strozzi

27 September 2024 – 26 January 2025

**Palazzo Strozzi celebrates Helen Frankenthaler's revolutionary art with the largest exhibition ever held in Italy, organized with the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, which places her works in dialogue with contemporary artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, David Smith, Robert Motherwell, Anne Truitt**

From September 27, 2024, to January 26, 2025, Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi presents *Helen Frankenthaler: Painting Without Rules*, a major exhibition celebrating one of the most significant artists of the century. Frankenthaler's revolutionary approach to painting is explored through works produced between 1953 and 2002, in dialogue with paintings and sculptures by contemporary artists, including Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis, Robert Motherwell, Kenneth Noland, Mark Rothko, David Smith, Anthony Caro, and Anne Truitt.

**Organized by Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi and the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation**, and curated by Douglas Dreishpoon, Director of the Helen Frankenthaler Catalogue Raisonné, the exhibition aims to highlight the artist's innovative practice through the lens of the artistic affinities, influences, and friendships that marked her personal and artistic life.

Through large canvases and sculptures by Frankenthaler and numerous works by other artists, the project stands as one of the most important exhibitions ever dedicated to the artist in Europe and the most comprehensive survey of her work to date in Italy. Loans come from the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation in New York and renowned international museums and collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Tate Modern in London, Buffalo AKG Art Museum, National Gallery of Art in Washington, ASOM Collection, and the Levett Collection, as well as Helen Frankenthaler's own personal collection.

With her innovative soak-stain technique, Frankenthaler indelibly marked the evolution of modern painting, establishing a new relationship between color, space, and form. The technique involved applying diluted paint on monumental unprimed canvases rolled out on the studio floor, creating effects similar to watercolor, initially with oil and then with acrylic paints. Frankenthaler applied paint with brushes and sponges, or directly from buckets, allowing it to spread and blend naturally, creating unique chromatic interactions marked by blurred transitions and translucent overlays.

*Helen Frankenthaler: Painting Without Rules* celebrates an artist who challenged conventions and expanded the boundaries of painting with a bold and intuitive vision that broke traditional norms. Frankenthaler is distinguished by her poetic abstractions, a combination of supple techniques and unbounded imagination, control and improvisation. Her practice expanded established canons in search of a new freedom in painting.

**Arturo Galansino**, Director General of Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, states, "We are thrilled to bring Helen Frankenthaler's work to Italy at an unprecedented scale, introducing new audiences to one of the greatest American artists of the twentieth century. With her innovative and no-rules approach, Frankenthaler stood out as a pioneering figure in the field of abstract painting, expanding the potential of the genre in ways that continue to inspire artists today."

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“Helen Frankenthaler’s dedication to painting was enriched by her friendships with artists, some of whom became part of her extended family,” remarks **Douglas Dreishpoon**. “Frankenthaler’s artistic circle was like an ecosystem of creative forces in constant play. Seeing their work in close company enables us to better understand Frankenthaler’s own innovations.”

Born in New York City, Helen Frankenthaler (1928 – 2011) studied studio art and art history with Paul Feeley at Bennington College, before returning to Manhattan, where she gravitated to abstract art. By the early 1950s she had gained direct access to the New York School and key figures in postwar American art, some of whom became part of her social circle. Frankenthaler surrounded herself early on with kindred artists who shared her unwavering commitment to experimentation. With trusted friends she shared studio visits, ongoing correspondence, and poignant perspectives on life. She also collected friends’ work, which was prominently displayed in her Manhattan home. Among them, *Helen’s Collage*, 1957, a paper collage by **Robert Motherwell**; *Aleph Series V*, 1960, a painting by **Morris Louis**; and *Ascending the Stairs*, 1979 – 83, a sculpture by **Anthony Caro**, will all be on view in *Painting Without Rules*.

Organized chronologically, the exhibition at Palazzo Strozzi tracks the development of Frankenthaler’s creative practice over six decades, with each room dedicated to a decade from the 1950s to the 2000s. Frankenthaler’s artistic innovations, seen in tandem with contemporaneous paintings, sculptures, and works on paper by friends, sheds light on the synergies and affinities between these artists.

The exhibition demonstrates the well-established influence of **Jackson Pollock** on Frankenthaler in the 1950s. Pollock’s *Number 14*, 1951, an abstract black and white enamel painting that hints at subliminal imagery, is shown alongside Frankenthaler’s *Mediterranean Thoughts*, 1960, a colorful oil painting with similar “elements of realism abstracted or Surrealism”—a phrase Frankenthaler used to describe Pollock’s work after seeing it in person in 1951. Viewers will be invited to make visual connections between subsequent works and their affinities. For instance, Frankenthaler’s *Tutti-Frutti*, 1966, a buoyant painting of colored clouds created using her innovative soak-stain technique, finds a Euclidean analog in **David Smith’s** *Untitled*, 1964, a painted steel sculpture constructed of stacked geometric shapes, all coasting on four small wheels. Frankenthaler’s own sculptures are also included in the exhibition. *Heart of London Map*, 1972, a steel assemblage, bears an affinity to **Anthony Caro’s** *Ascending the Stairs*, 1979 – 83, in its piece-by-piece construction. Frankenthaler’s works from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s are a testament to an artist who never stopped breaking the rules to explore new ways to make art.

The exhibition is augmented with educational projects that will provide visitors access to Frankenthaler’s life, her artistic practice, and community. Further, a rich and articulated public program will offer activities for schools, families, young people and adults, with a particular attention to accessibility and engagement.

*Helen Frankenthaler: Painting Without Rules* is co-organized by Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi and Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. Public Supporters: Comune di Firenze, Regione Toscana, Città Metropolitana di Firenze, Camera di Commercio di Firenze. Private Supporters: Fondazione CR Firenze, Intesa Sanpaolo, Fondazione Hillary Merkus Recordati, Palazzo Strozzi Partners Committee.

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## Helen Frankenthaler

Helen Frankenthaler (1928 – 2011) is widely credited for playing a pivotal role in the transition from Abstract Expressionism to Color Field painting and is best known for her invention of the soak-stain technique. Throughout a career spanning more than six decades, Frankenthaler experimented tirelessly, producing unique paintings on canvas and paper, as well as ceramics, sculpture, tapestry and prints. Frankenthaler's substantial body of work continues to make a profound impact on contemporary art and is represented in the collections of major museums worldwide.

## Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

Established and endowed by Helen Frankenthaler during her lifetime, the [Helen Frankenthaler 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.

## Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi

A dynamic cultural center set within a masterpiece of Renaissance architecture, Palazzo Strozzi is a focal point of Italy's art scene and a key cultural hub in the heart of Florence. Since its inception in 2006, the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi has organized more than seventy exhibitions, attracting in excess of three million visitors to date. Creating a lively dialogue between the old and the new, Palazzo Strozzi's exhibitions range from critically acclaimed historical surveys of old masters, such as Donatello and Verrocchio, to site-specific collaborations with leading contemporary artists, including [Ai Weiwei](#), Jeff Koons, [Marina Abramović](#), Olafur Eliasson, Anish Kapoor, and Anselm Kiefer. This unique mix of the historical setting and contemporary programme makes Palazzo Strozzi an active workshop for the new in Florence: where new artworks are produced, new studies and discoveries are made, and the public are engaged in discussions about important issues in contemporary society.

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## PHOTO SHEET

Helen Frankenthaler

*Open Wall*

(Muro aperto)

1953

Oil on canvas

cm 136,5 × 332,7

New York, Helen Frankenthaler

Foundation

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Helen Frankenthaler

*Alassio*

1960

Oil on canvas

cm 216,5 × 332,7

New York, Helen Frankenthaler

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Helen Frankenthaler  
*Mornings*  
(Mattine)  
1971  
acrylic and marker on canvas  
cm 294,6 × 185,4  
New York, Helen Frankenthaler  
Foundation

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Helen Frankenthaler  
*Star Gazing*  
(Guardando le stelle)  
1989  
Acrylic on canvas su tela  
cm 181,6 × 365,8  
New York, Helen Frankenthaler  
Foundation

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Helen Frankenthaler

*Janus*

(Giano)

1990

Acrylic on canvas

cm 144,8 × 240,7

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Helen Frankenthaler

*Solar Imp*

(Impianto solare)

1995

acrylic on paper

cm 198,1 × 151,8

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Helen Frankenthaler

*Matisse Table*

(Tavolo Matisse)

1972

Steel

cm 209,6 × 134,6

New York, Helen Frankenthaler  
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Helen Frankenthaler

*Heart of London Map*

(Cuore della mappa di Londra)

1972

Steel

cm 221 × 63,5 × 209,6

The Levett Collection, inv. CL 1026

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Anthony Caro  
*Ascending the Stairs*  
(Salendo le scale)  
1979 –1983  
sheet, steel, varnish  
cm 111,8 × 83,8 × 101,6  
New York, Helen Frankenthaler  
Foundation

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York.



Jackson Pollock  
*Number 14*  
1951  
Oil on canvas  
cm 146,5 × 269,5  
Londra, Tate. Purchased with  
assistance from the American Fellows  
of the Tate Gallery Foundation, 1988.

© Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists  
Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo:  
Tate.



Robert Motherwell  
*Summertime in Italy*  
(Estate in Italia)  
1960  
oil and graphite on paper  
cm 145,4 × 108,6  
Washington, D.C., National Gallery of  
Art. The Nancy Lee and Perry Bass  
Fund, 1999.55.4

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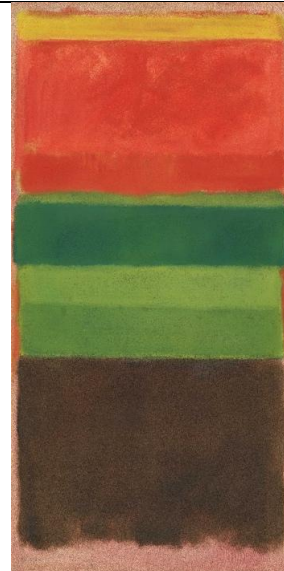
Morris Louis  
*Aleph Series V*  
(Serie Aleph V)  
1960  
Magna on canvas  
cm 266,7 × 206,1  
New York, Helen Frankenthaler  
Foundation

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(MICA) / Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
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Mark Rothko  
*Untitled*  
(Senza titolo)  
1949  
oil and mixed media on canvas  
cm 228,9 × 112  
Washington, D.C., National Gallery of  
Art

©1998 Kate Rothko Prizel and  
Christopher Rothko / Artist Rights  
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Helen Frankenthaler in her Third  
Avenue studio during a break in work  
on *Alassio* (1960), New York, 1960.  
Courtesy Helen Frankenthaler  
Foundation Archives, New York.

Photograph by Walter Silver © The New  
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Helen Frankenthaler in her East 83rd Street studio with *Small's Paradise* on the wall and *Fire* on the floor (both in progress), New York, 1964.

Photograph by Alexander Liberman; © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2000.R.19). Artwork © 2024 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown studio, summer 1968, with *Summer Banner* (hanging), *Spices* (in hand), and *Summer Core* (foreground).

Photograph by Alexander Liberman; © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2000.R.19). Artwork © 2024 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



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Helen Frankenthaler in her studio on East 83rd Street while working on *April Mood* and *Under April Mood* (both 1974), New York, 1974.

Photograph by Alexander Liberman; © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2000.R.19). Artwork © 2024 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Helen Frankenthaler in her studio on East 83rd Street while working on *April Mood* and *Under April Mood* (both 1974), New York, 1974.

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