

The Telegraph

Helen Frankenthaler and ‘the watercolour that ate the art world’

How the abstract American artist revolutionised painting with her ‘soak-stains’ – and why her peers hated her for it

Lucy Davies



Park Avenue princess: Helen Frankenthaler, c 1956 CREDIT: Gordon Parks/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

In 1952, with the first chill of autumn in the air, [Helen Frankenthaler](#) knelt on the floor of her New York studio and began pouring paint. Thinned with turpentine, it sloshed and pooled on the canvas beneath her. Overcome “with impatience, laziness,” as she later put it, she hadn’t bothered to seal the surface of the canvas, so her colours sank into its fibres, then bloomed into soft shapes that looked as if they had risen from a watery underworld.

I wonder if Frankenthaler truly knew, in that moment, that she had discovered [a new way of painting](#), but I like to think she did. Ever since abstract expressionism had blasted on to the scene in 1947, people had been speculating about the source of the next breakthrough; few expected it would be a woman, let alone a 23-year-old greenhorn.

Even so, *Mountains and Sea*, as Frankenthaler titled her picture (inspired by the landscapes of Nova Scotia), is today considered a milestone in [the evolution of American art](#). In the first few years after she invented the “soak-stain” technique, as her new approach came to be known, so many other artists imitated it that the critic Robert Hughes declared *Mountains and Sea* to be “the watercolour that ate the art world”.

Of course, pouring paint was nothing new: Jackson Pollock had been making his drip paintings for about five years and Frankenthaler always said her decision to try it “came from him, no doubt”. But in her hands, the procedure lost its vigorously intense, brawny quality to become something altogether more ethereal, radiant and serendipitous.

During a 60-year career, Frankenthaler, who died in 2011, never lost her appetite for risk. She sought out and delighted in the “productive clumsiness”, as she called it, that is inherent in learning anything new, admitting that she would “rather risk an ugly surprise than rely on things I know I can do”.



Watershed: in *Mountains and Sea* (1952) Frankenthaler gave the brawny style of the Abstract Expressionists an ethereal twist CREDIT: The Artchives / Alamy Stock Photo

In no case is this truer than with her prints, a relatively little-known (at least here in Britain) but significant chapter of her work that will shortly come under scrutiny in a new exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery in London.

Printmaking, a medium that is particularly fickle, furnished Frankenthaler with ample opportunity to flout the rules. “She would take something basic, or established, and she would say, ‘What if I did this? And then what if I did that?’” explains Frankenthaler’s close friend Ruth Fine, who recently retired as curator of modern art at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC.

Frankenthaler was reluctant to try her hand at prints. For her, each painting was a foray into a new world, and the repetitive nature of printmaking did not hold the same allure. Fortuitously, though, in the 1960s and 1970s a number of groundbreaking print workshops were established in America, spurring a new interest in the medium.

Two of Frankenthaler’s friends – the artists Larry Rivers and Grace Hartigan – persisted in coaxing her to give it a go. “They were so insistent and said, ‘Just come for fun one day and look around,’” Frankenthaler recalled. “And of course, I was hooked.”



Frankenthaler and Yasuyuki Shibata inspect proofs of 'Tales of Genji I' in the Tyler Graphics studio, 1997 CREDIT: National Gallery of Australia

With the help of master printers, who found ways to bend the medium to her requirements, she began to innovate. In the case of a woodcut, for instance, she used a cheese scraper to scratch the surface of the block and created texture by applying paper pulp with a comb and even a turkey baster.

Though each piece looks as if it has been created in an inspired instant (she spoke often of wanting them to look as if they had been “born at once”), Frankenthaler’s exacting standards meant that her prints often required several dozen proofs to achieve the desired effect. For the Tales of Genji series (1998), for example, Frankenthaler and master printer Kenneth Tyler took three years to find the

most suitable paper for the six prints. *Madame Butterfly* (2000), involved 46 separate woodblocks and an incredible 102 colours. “Part of me knows the agony that helped make it get born,” she later said. “But there’s another part of me that feels between me and Tyler and the paper and everything else, there was a magic.”

The key to Frankenthaler’s “magic” was that, instead of trying to recreate her paintings in print form, she was looking to be surprised by what she could create. This freed her up to adapt; to create a new visual language.



'Productive clumsiness': *Madame Butterfly* (2000) CREDIT: 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc.

“Helen was always daring,” says Fine. “Anything could spark her imagination. It was wonderful: you would send her a postcard and the next day, she would have made something based on it.”

Fine first met Frankenthaler in the early 1960s, when the artist gave a seminar at the University of Pennsylvania. As the only female in her class, Fine sat rapt as Frankenthaler “made it clear that if you were a woman, you had to be as serious about your work as a man would be”.

Frankenthaler loathed any mention of “women artists”. In a 1989 interview, she listed it as one of three subjects she most hated to discuss, along with “what I think of my contemporaries” and “my former marriage”. Between 1958 and 1971, Frankenthaler was the wife of abstract expressionist painter Robert Motherwell and stepmother to his two daughters. For a while they became a kind of golden couple – the Burton and Taylor of the art world.

Really, though, Frankenthaler only ever wanted to stand on her own two feet. “It’s only now we are realising just how difficult that must have been for her,” says Fine. Indeed, Frankenthaler’s rapid ascension (she won first prize at the Biennale de Paris in 1959, represented the US in the 33rd Venice Biennale in 1966 and had her first major museum exhibition in 1960) caused no little resentment among her abstract expressionist cohort. Barnett Newman, for one, wrote her a spiteful letter saying that her methods were “faded” and “limp”, adding: “It is time that you learned that cunning is not yet art.”



'Freefall' (1993) CREDIT: Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, In

The women were hardly kinder: Joan Mitchell compared Frankenthaler's paintings to sanitary towels, while her friend Hartigan once said they looked as if they had been made "between cocktails and dinner". She particularly took issue with the fact that, unlike the "steady, endless poverty" in which most of them lived, Frankenthaler was a Park Avenue princess, with a maid and weekly hair appointments at Maclevy's salon.

Frankenthaler grew up on Park Avenue itself, in a comfortable, highly cultured home. Her father, Alfred, was a judge in the New York Supreme Court, and while he doted on all three of his daughters, he often claimed Helen, his youngest, was "special".

"I think because her parents had high expectations of her, she grew up with the highest expectations of herself," says Fine. "And by that I mean she felt she had to demonstrate how she was special, in whatever she did. She dressed specially, ate specially. She was always challenging what she was doing in relation to what she had done before."



'Snow Pines' (2004) CREDIT: Tim Pyle

In person, Frankenthaler “could certainly be distant”, says Fine, “and she didn’t suffer fools gladly at all. You didn’t want to have Helen Frankenthaler annoyed with you, that’s for sure. But she was also warm and wry; she loved to laugh.”

In the final years of her life, Frankenthaler succumbed to an unspecified illness and was confined to a wheelchair, “which I knew had made life very difficult for her,” says Fine. Even so, Frankenthaler “didn’t complain.”

Fine continued to visit the artist when she moved from New York to Connecticut in 1994 until her death in 2011. “Was she despairing? I don’t know. But I do know that even if she felt like a glass-half-empty person at times, she always projected the glass-half-full version. Whatever she did, she did with vigour and with emphasis.”

Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty is at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London SE21 (dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk), Sept 15 to April 18