

ARTFORUM

Helen Frankenthaler's *Before the Caves*, 1958

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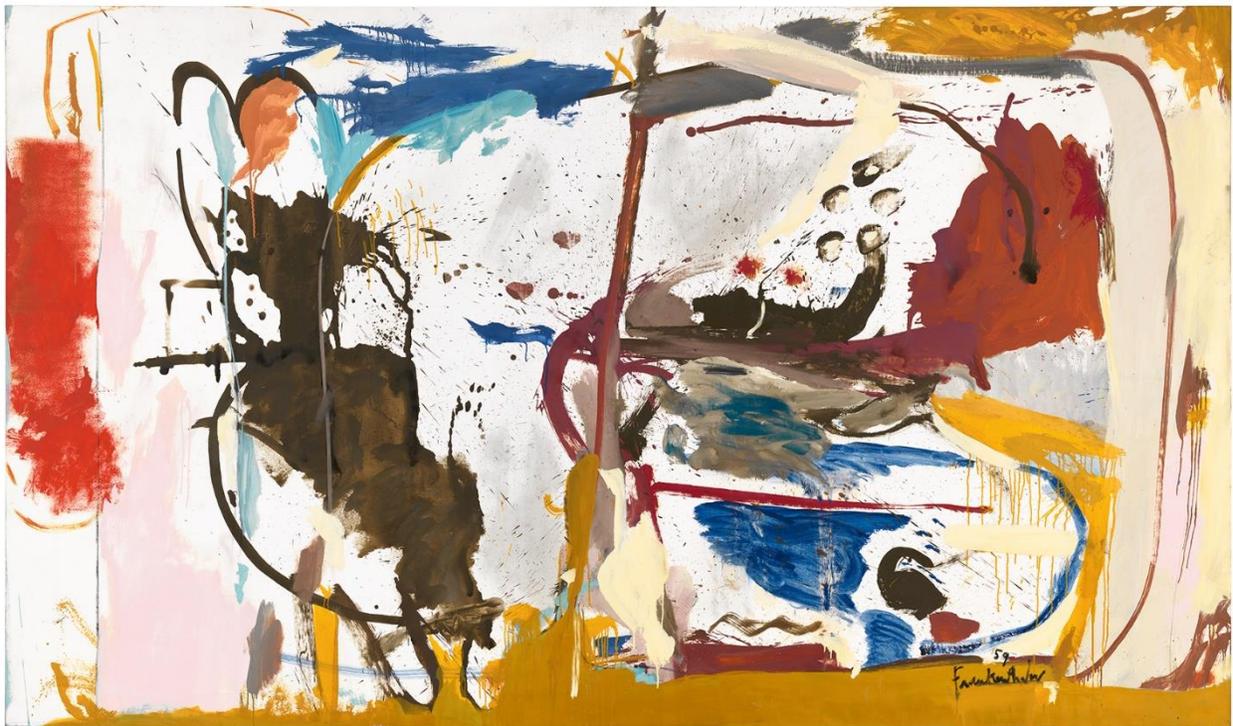


Helen Frankenthaler, *Before the Caves*, 1958, oil on unsized, unprimed canvas, 102 3/8 × 104 3/8". © Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

IN 1958, [Helen Frankenthaler](#) made a painting that she titled *Before the Caves*. It was painted before she left on her honeymoon trip with Robert Motherwell, during which the couple planned to visit the paleolithic caves of Altamira and Lascaux. (Frankenthaler had taken an earlier trip to Altamira in 1953.) Upon her return, she would paint *Hotel Cro-Magnon*, whose title commemorates the hotel in Les Eyzies where she and Motherwell stayed. And the following year, in 1959, she made two other paintings that seemed to be steeped in the aftermath of the cave visits: *Cave Memory*—two paintings in one, because she made another with the same name on its backside—and *First Creatures*. These four/five works seemed to jibe with remarks she made about the cave paintings she saw during her two trips: “It all looks like one huge painting on unsized canvas; in fact it all reminded me a lot of my pictures” and “I was enormously affected by the paintings—being

surrounded by direct, passionate, all-over murals.”¹ None embodied that encounter more than *Before the Caves*, painted in anticipation of her upcoming trip to Altamira and Lascaux. And none evoke so well my own experience of going to the caves in the Dordogne region of France, hoping to follow in Frankenthaler’s footsteps, this past summer.

Painted in oil on unsized, unprimed canvas, *Before the Caves* has three horizontal creases running beneath the colored marks that become part of the ground of the composition, much in the same way that the three-dimensional undulations of rock become part of the cave paintings in Spain and France.² With the painting’s title in mind, we are then encouraged to see the linear gray-blue marks swooping through the composition as crevices in a non-flat surface that might be understood as a ceiling curving above the head, rather than on the flat of the wall in front of us. From there, we might be inclined to take in the large ocher form in the center of the canvas as something like a diagonally disposed bison shape that follows some of the notional furrows in that surface, while vying with splatters that do not appear to depict anything but that might be read as naturally occurring stains and colored mineral deposits. Above, toward the upper right corner of the canvas, are the entirely un-paleolithic numbers “173.”³ But since it is also easy to lose the numberness of those red numbers among the other, non-signifying red marks elsewhere in the painting, that “173” oscillates between the abstract and the representational sign, just as the mark-making of the painting as a whole hovers between the nonfigurative and the depictive, or between the symbolic, the iconic, and the indexical (as semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce defined those terms): symbolic in the way of numbers and letters; iconic in the way of a painting’s resemblance to the creature it might or might not depict; and indexical, because all of the colored lines and shapes in the painting correspond to the swipes and arcs and pours made by the physical movements of Frankenthaler’s wrist, arm, and body in interaction with the ground of the painting, and with previous marks and spills already on it, some of which embrace the fortuitous physics of the stain, and others the intentionality of the human mark.



Helen Frankenthaler, *First Creatures*, 1959, oil, enamel, charcoal, and pencil on sized, primed linen, 64 3/4 × 111". © Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

What did the title *Before the Caves* mean? “Before” going to visit them—although she had already been to Altamira? Standing “before,” as in, right in front of them—although in fact, one stands inside

the caves, either under the paintings or right next to them? Or, in a chronology-bending mood, that her work somehow came “before” the paintings in those caves, so that it was anterior to the first paintings ever painted—even though they were painted some ten to thirty thousand years earlier than hers? Frankenthaler often chose her titles after the fact, so her works do not illustrate what their titles say; instead, the titles tended to be associated with something seen in them after their completion. Whether or not that was the case with *Before the Caves*, the ambiguity built into the title is entirely germane to the caves to which it refers.⁴

For the caves marinate in ambiguity. There are almost as many theories about them as there are caves: They are classical masterpieces made by skilled artists exhibiting the earliest form of genius; they tell great mythological stories; they are code-like communications; they are magic symbols associated with the sacred rituals of the hunt; the beasts they conjure in their profoundly non-anthropocentric worlds are totemic signs for different clans; they are shamanic interventions in the membrane dividing the netherworld from aboveground life; and so on.⁵ We will likely never know, but one thing seems certain about the cave paintings: They are poignant demonstrations of how deep the depictive impulse runs in the human species.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Hotel Cro-Magnon*, 1958, oil on sized, primed canvas, 68 × 81". © Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

So what about the cave paintings was so moving to an ostensibly nonfigurative painter like Frankenthaler? Evidently their relation to their stony ground was an important component of what she saw in them, as was their fresco-like quality, their alloverness, and their flickering movement when seen by candlelight, more or less as their original makers would have seen them.⁶ But one of her titles also suggests how much she was enthralled, too, by the “first creatures” that she saw in that candlelight. Thus, perhaps what she also saw in the cave paintings was the way they confounded the standard opposition between expressive abstraction and representational imagemaking, how they instead conflated those things, not only in their combining of entoptic and other abstract signage with persuasive renderings of bison, deer, horses, bulls, rhinoceroses, and other ancient beasts, but also in their dramatic conjoining of the depictive sweep of arm and hand with satisfying renditions of their animal referents, so that they point both ways: inward to the act of making and outward to the images of the exterior world that the artist had stored in his/her mind and body. In other words, the cave paintings make crystal clear how much depiction is dependent on bodily performance, how much it is always also “action painting”: I think Frankenthaler might have loved that realization, for it must have resonated with how she herself painted.

And then there is the ambiguity of some of the paleolithic images, drawn or painted over and under each other in the manner of a palimpsest, seen in the dark, merging with the cave walls’ contours and color changes, trailing off into rough nothingness or faded, fragmented, and calcified over the millennia in the humid, drippy caves that are their home. To encounter them is a bit like seeing Leonardo’s theory of stains on the wall come to vivid life: “In such a stain various inventions are to be seen . . . heads of men, various animals, battles, rocks, seas, clouds, woods. . . . It is like the sound of bells which can mean whatever you want it to. . . . I have in the past seen in clouds and wall stains which have inspired me to beautiful inventions.”⁷ Moreover, their ambiguity extends to their temporality and their far-from-“primitive” quality: They do not appear to progress over the multi-millennial time span during which they were made, thereby muddling any teleology that might run from their origin point all the way to modernist abstraction. So that, cycling back to beginnings, Frankenthaler’s “before” could rub up against her “memory,” her latter-day numbering against those “first” creatures, in a mode of painting that tries to get at the root sameness of the depictive and the abstract tendencies in the history of human artmaking, closing the loop between painting’s ancient origins and its present-day manifestations.

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NOTES

1. See John Elderfield, “Before the Caves,” in *Frankenthaler* (revised and expanded edition; Gagosian and Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, 2024), 158–89, esp. 162.

2. On this point, see the epilogue of my *Cézanne’s Gravity* (Yale University Press, 2018), 211–35; republished as “This Cézanne Which Is Not One,” in *Painting Photography Painting: Selected Essays* (Mack Books, 2023), 331–53. On the caves and the function of “ground” in painting, see also Meyer Schapiro, “On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image Signs,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 6, no. 1 (1972–73): 9–19.

3. “173” corresponds to the number of the town house that Frankenthaler and Motherwell shared on East Ninety-Fourth Street in New York; see Alex Nemerov, *Fierce Poise: Helen Frankenthaler and 1950s New York* (Penguin Books, 2021), 168.

4. It was Maureen St. Onge, once Frankenthaler’s trusted studio assistant and now director of collections at the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, who first told me about Frankenthaler’s habit of compiling lists of possible titles from which she would select once she was finished with a painting; now that I have seen some of those hand- and typewritten lists, it is evident that, however ambivalent she felt about them, she was fascinated by the poetry of ambiguity that they suggested. Her taste for

ambiguity is also clear from the title of her 1957 painting *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, after William Empson's influential 1930 book of the same name (New Directions, 1966). On Frankenthaler's attraction to ambiguity, see Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 148–57.

5. For an excellent summation of the views of Abbé Breuil, Max Raphael, André Leroi-Gourhan, David Lewis-Williams, et al., see Gregory Curtis, *The Cave Painters: Probing the Mysteries of the World's First Artists* (Anchor Books/Random House, 2006). My own preference is for the shamanic interpretation articulated in Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave* (Thames & Hudson, 2002).

6. See Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 162: “The animals moved as the candlelight flickered” was Motherwell's comment.

7. See *Leonardo on Painting*, trans. and ed. Martin Kemp and Margaret Walker (Yale University Press, 1989), 201, 222.