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### Landscaping Helen Frankenthaler

Morgan Ridler

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# Landscaping Helen Frankenthaler

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in Art History with Honors

May 2006

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## Abstract

There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality. There's no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark. It is what started the artist off, excited his ideas, and stirred up his emotions. Ideas and emotions will in the end be prisoners in his work. Whatever they do, they can't escape from the picture. They form an integral part of it, even when their presence is no longer discernible.

— Picasso<sup>1</sup>

Helen Frankenthaler is an Abstract Expressionist painter who seems to prove Picasso's point of view. She is an Abstract Expressionist painter who employs the techniques of abstraction but with links to the recognizable—particularly to nature. She uses her emotions, aesthetic sense, experiences and artistic training to paint large abstract canvases. Frankenthaler's abstractions are not meaningless shapes or random paint strokes. Her paintings have a strong link to other sources and inspirations. Helen Frankenthaler uses abstraction and landscape in combination to achieve deeper meanings. However, her paintings are not replications of the natural world. They can be considered "*interior landscapes*."

Frankenthaler does not consciously begin to paint a landscape, but she allows her thoughts and feelings to guide her work, pouring paint onto a canvas spread on the floor. With this technique Frankenthaler creates environments of paint. Many, if not most, of Frankenthaler's paintings prove her tie between abstraction and landscape.

*Mountains and Sea* of 1952 is Frankenthaler's most famous work, and the watershed work from which the rest of her career began. It is not only the work in which she first used her renowned innovation, stain painting, it is also a prime example of her abstract landscapes. Frankenthaler would continue to resolve the apparent dichotomy between landscape and abstraction in the majority of her canvases from 1952 to the present day. This study will consider a selection of works from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, to demonstrate this theme in the work of Helen Frankenthaler.

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Zervos, "Conversation avec Picasso," *Cahiers d'Art* (Paris), 1935. Reprinted in Dore Ashton, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views in The Documents of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art* (Harmondsworth, UK and New York: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1972; rpt. 1977), p. 64.

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## Landscaping Helen Frankenthaler

Landscape is a loaded question for an abstract painter. When one looks at an abstract horizontal canvas, one more or less consciously perceives nature or a horizon or view. One is not apt to think of a figurative reference, which is more apt to be vertical. Looking specifically for figures or landscape in abstraction can sometimes inhibit the ability to recognize a picture's true quality. I am affected by nature, and I have made many paintings both 'about nature' as well as those that imply the figure, but it's really not a primary concern of mine.

— Helen Frankenthaler<sup>1</sup>  
Spring-Fall 1997

### Introduction

Helen Frankenthaler (b.1928) combines the abstraction of the Abstract Expressionists and the legacy of American landscape painting to create her own "interior" landscape. Frankenthaler paints abstractions but the spaces, moods and formats she constructs are indicative of landscape painting. She is part of a tradition of landscape painting that includes Claude Monet and Jackson Pollock.<sup>2</sup> To Picasso abstraction was connected with the experience and emotions of the artist; this connection is equally significant in Frankenthaler's abstractions. My goal in this paper is to investigate selected paintings from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in an attempt to elucidate the relationship between abstraction and landscape in her art.

In 1969, the critic Hilton Kramer specifically asked whether Frankenthaler was a landscape painter in his article, "Helen Frankenthaler: 'The Landscape Paradigm.'"<sup>3</sup> Kramer wonders if her works' connections to those of Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe bring Frankenthaler into the American landscape tradition. Kramer argues that Frankenthaler's works have the "orbit of feeling" of

traditional landscape. They have a “kind of synthesis of landscape and abstraction.”<sup>4</sup> Most people think of the beautiful landscapes of the seventeenth-century Dutch or of the grand vistas of the Romantic and idealized Hudson River School. However, modern landscape painting is not traditional idyllic scenes of the countryside. Frankenthaler’s work is a prime example of the modern landscape: it is no longer solely a representation of the exterior world but also the interior world of the mind.

Helen Frankenthaler is best known as a second-generation Abstract Expressionist. She was married for thirteen years to Robert Motherwell, a fellow Abstract Expressionist, and was a friend of Clement Greenberg, the critic and supporter of the New York avant-garde. Frankenthaler was a young woman living in the midst of the 1950s’ and 1960s’ New York art scene. Her most famous achievement was her invention of the stain painting technique. This innovation, which was employed in her pivotal work, *Mountains and Sea* (Illustration 1), inspired Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland to establish Color-Field painting. Frankenthaler received an honorary degree from Syracuse University in 1985 for her accomplishments.

Although Frankenthaler’s staining technique, her influence on other artists and her femininity in contrast to the macho male Abstract Expressionist are interesting topics. I do not want to look at Frankenthaler as a woman artist, but as an artist. I do not want to follow the conventional route and emphasize the importance of her stain technique and her influence on other artists. Her prolific career is too often seen as an aftermath of her watershed work, *Mountains and*

*Sea*; more accurately, Helen Frankenthaler has explored many ideas, styles and techniques from the 1950s to the present. I will explore her work and one theme in particular, the landscape and its relationship to abstraction and its relationship to her innovative staining technique.

There are numerous articles, books and reviews about Helen Frankenthaler. There are two major monographs about the artist. The first is *Frankenthaler* by Barbara Rose, published in 1971, and the second, also titled *Frankenthaler* by John Elderfield was published in 1989. These books are extensive compilations of the artist's work with text explaining the artist's life. Frankenthaler had large retrospectives in 1959, 1969, and 1989, all of which had substantial exhibition catalogues. There have also been numerous smaller exhibitions in galleries and museums. The last major literary source is art historical journals, both scholarly and "popular." For example, *ArtNews* is a journal that has published articles about Frankenthaler from the beginning of her career to the present day. Journals or magazines may have articles on the artist and her work, reviews of exhibitions or interviews with the artist. Monographs, exhibitions catalogues, articles and reviews are the bulk of the factual and critical resources. Many of the sources about Frankenthaler discuss her development of the stain painting technique, her influence on the artists, Louis and Noland, and a few discuss her landscape associations.

The most important sources for the writer on Frankenthaler are her paintings. They are often large and imposing. It is important to examine the works in person and I have had the good fortune to see a few works but would



benefit from seeing more of them. Catalogues and monographs illustrate works but the experience of seeing the actual work is far more enriching.

Helen Frankenthaler's work can be linked to representation even though she is regarded as an abstractionist in the second generation of the Abstract Expressionists. *Mountains and Sea*, her most influential work and masterpiece was painted after a trip Frankenthaler had taken to Nova Scotia, Canada. She painted landscapes while there but on her return she went into her windowless studio and used the landscape as an inspiration along with other sources and influences. Frankenthaler's paintings are not realistic or illusionistic but they are also not abstract Mondrian grids or Josef Albers squares. A standard definition of abstraction is, "any art in which the depiction of real objects in nature has been subordinated or entirely discarded, and whose aesthetic content is expressed in a formal pattern or structure of shapes, lines, and colors."<sup>5</sup> Frankenthaler's abstractions correspond to this definition but she leaves some of the real objects discernible. Her abstractions have meaning as do an Albers or Mondrian painting. Her works express her moods and feelings as well as her innate and learned aesthetic sense. They represent the artist at that moment in time. One of her paintings can be an unconscious mix of experiences – for example, memories of landscapes or old master works.<sup>6</sup> Frankenthaler explains her relationship to landscapes and other sources of inspiration:

I carry [memories] with me and [they] can conjure up a lot in my mind. I rely more on what comes from within. As I always have, I depend most on my inner self and the actual process of painting. I think everything one experiences, feels, dreams, hears, and sees in a day comes out in your art somehow.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Julia Brown, *After Mountains and Sea* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Rose, Frankenthaler (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1971), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Hilton Kramer, "Helen Frankenthaler: 'The Landscape Paradigm.'" *New York Times*, March 2, 1969, sec 2, p.31. (Reprinted in H.K. *The Age of the Avant-Garde. An Art Chronicle of 1956-1972*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973) 392-94.

<sup>4</sup> Kramer, 392-294.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Mayer, *A Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques* (NY: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Julie Brown, "Interview with Helen Frankenthaler." *After Mountains and Sea* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998) 49.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Brown, 34.

## Landscape and Abstraction

Landscape is a traditional genre of painting. Landscapes can be incorporated into portraits, figure paintings or can be used on their own. The seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painters excelled at depicting the natural terrain. The nineteenth-century Romantic painters, J.M.W. Turner and John Constable, took very different approaches to landscape but both glorified nature. Impressionist painter Claude Monet used color to evoke the landscape and create a sensual and beautiful depiction of nature. In modern art, landscape can be more than a vivid representation of nature. It has increasingly become a vehicle for expressing inner concerns – thoughts, feelings, philosophies, memories. Helen Frankenthaler can be seen as a branch in the tree of landscape painting and especially the American branch.

One of the oldest traditions in American painting has been the landscape. The terrain of North America provides an endless supply of artistic inspiration. The American land represents individualism, freedom and spirituality. From the green forests and rolling hills of the northeast to the deserts of the southwest and everywhere in between, the American countryside is a subject that will continue to be utilized by American artists including Frankenthaler. Generations of artists from the Hudson River School of painters to modern landscape artists have painted the American environment. The Hudson River School used romantic ideals of beauty and the sublime to paint soaring views of the Rocky Mountains and majestic panoramas of the Hudson River valley. The early modernist painters, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin and Georgia O'Keeffe also used the

landscape as a means of expression. The American landscape tradition will always be a vital component of American painting.

John Marin (1870-1953) painted landscapes influenced by the structure and fragmentation of Cubism, the colors of Fauvism and the watercolor effects of Cézanne. Marin was moved by the natural environment and the landscape, which inspired his paintings.

Seems to me that a true artist must perforce go from time to time to the elemental big forms—Sky, Seas, Mountain, Plain—and those things pertaining thereto, to sort of re-true himself up, to recharge the battery. For these big forms have everything. But to express these, you have to love these. To be a part of these in sympathy.<sup>8</sup>

Marin painted many watercolor sea and landscape paintings where the masses of water and land were simplified. He took the landscape in his arms and helped to establish the beginnings of American modernism.

Two other artists who used abstract landscape imagery to express their own moods and feelings were Arthur Dove (1880-1946) and Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986). Dove believed nature has spirituality and is a living, breathing organism. His work is a semi-abstract blend of natural forms and abstract shapes. He used a bright palette and smooth shapes. Like Kandinsky, Dove related color to the other senses, the phenomenon known as synesthesia. O’Keeffe also used the natural world as an inspiration for her abstract organic forms. She found intimate and abstract forms within nature. These artists were part of the tradition of American modern landscape painting which was becoming increasingly abstract.<sup>9</sup> Frankenthaler continues in the tradition of using nature as a component of abstraction.

The “abstract sublime” is a phrase that has been used to define the goals of some of the Abstract Expressionists – Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Clifford Still, and others, perhaps including Frankenthaler. The “sublime” during the nineteenth-century referred to landscape painting that evoked awe or admiration. Terror was often seen to be a factor. In the twentieth century many artists were interested in capturing the allusive quality of the “sublime.” Newman, Still and Rothko all used the size of their canvases to create the feeling of an environment of imposing size and monumentality.<sup>10</sup> Frankenthaler creates this environmental effect in her works. Simplicity, abstraction, vast scale could evoke the “sublime.” In abstraction this can imply infinite space which can evoke awe. The viewer can feel encompassed by a Newman abstraction because of the clarity and harmony of the abstraction as well as its scale.<sup>11</sup> Still’s paintings can cause the feeling of the “terrible” as well as suggest the vast loneliness of the American West.<sup>12</sup> In a Frankenthaler painting, such as *Mountains and Sea*, the expansiveness of the canvas, the harmony of colors and interactions of the forms can immerse the viewer, giving them the sensation of being surrounded by in the canvas. The “sublime” can be encountered in abstraction that is tied to the natural world and landscape.

Important European modernist painters in the early twentieth century also evolved through landscape towards abstraction. Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) in his later landscape paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire was concerned with all-over composition and large forms in the landscape. He employed flattened, transparent overlapping colors to integrate solid and space. Cézanne was one of the important

fathers of modern painting and of the development towards abstraction through landscape. Frankenthaler is an heir of that evolution.

Art philosopher, Arthur Danto questions the association of Frankenthaler's work with representation. He is interested in the fact that people like to find familiar visual imagery in anything. Danto writes: "Pictorial representation is possible only because of the human eye's propensity to see forms in what is in effect only a marked surface. This is continuous with our disposition to see faces in clouds or snakes in glowing embers."<sup>13</sup> Frankenthaler's works are like clouds which viewers strive to explain in terms of representation.

Abstraction as we know it, or as it is often called, non-representational art, was essentially a development of the modern period, although it has been a component of art longer than representation has. Abstraction is considered to be in direct opposition to "realistic" or representational art, but they need not be mutually exclusive, and Frankenthaler's work proves it.

In the mid-twentieth century the art world became elitist and inaccessible to the average viewer. Representational art appears easy to understand and visually satisfying. By linking Frankenthaler to landscape painting she can be more easily understood and appreciated by the average viewer. Her works are often considered representations of feelings – feelings often inspired by landscapes and other visual imagery. Frankenthaler's abstractions have more meaning than the amateur critic might imagine and could even create the sense of the "abstract sublime."

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<sup>8</sup> Barbara Haskell, "Transcendental Realism in the Stieglitz Circle." *The Expressionist Landscape: North American Modernist Painting, 1920-1947*. Birmingham Museum of Art 1988 (Birmingham Alabama: 1988), 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Stevens Appelhof, *The Expressionist Landscape: North American Modernist Painting, 1920-1947*. Birmingham Museum of Art 1988 (Birmingham Alabama: 1988), 130, 154, 168.

<sup>10</sup> John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still*. (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, (2000).

<sup>11</sup> Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still*. 202.

<sup>12</sup> Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still*. 214.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Danto, "Art: Helen Frankenthaler" *The Nation* 249 no. 6 (1989):6.

## Frankenthaler, Her Life: Family, Childhood and School

To fully understand the complexities of the artist and her work, there has to be an understanding of the artist's life and times. Helen Frankenthaler was born into a privileged family on December 12, 1928. They lived on the Upper East Side of New York City. Alfred Frankenthaler, her father, was a New York State Supreme Court judge. Frankenthaler's mother, Martha Lowenstein, was a German immigrant. Frankenthaler had two older sisters. It was in an uncommon household of a privileged Jewish New York family that Frankenthaler was raised. In this positive environment Frankenthaler had the best schooling and soon discovered her love of art.

Frankenthaler's early success was in part due to her education. She had some outstanding teachers in high school and college and as a young artist. Frankenthaler's first teacher was Rufino Tamayo, a Mexican artist, who taught her the fundamentals of painting at the Dalton School in New York. This was Frankenthaler's first encounter with an artist. He encouraged her ability and urged her to explore the museums and galleries in New York.

After graduating from high school in 1946, Frankenthaler attended Bennington College in Vermont. She left home knowing that she wanted to work in the arts, either literary or visual. Frankenthaler studied both literature and painting. At Bennington she studied painting with Paul Feeley, an American Cubist who emphasized the analysis of paintings. The class would study old master works, dissecting the components, identifying the parts and essential



aspects in order to determine why a painting worked. Frankenthaler described the class and the types of works they discussed:

...with reproductions on the wall of Matisse's "Blue Window," a Picasso "Banjo Player," a classic and simple Mondrian, Cezanne's "Card Players." We would discuss, dissect, ape them as you only can when you're that excited. The exchanges were often thrilling and moving.<sup>14</sup>

During this type of activity Frankenthaler learned analytical methods of composition and creation that would influence her later art.

Frankenthaler learned to question what made a painting work. What did each mark on the canvas do for the whole? How did colors work together, etc.? Frankenthaler soon experimented with Cubism, the style of her teacher, Feeley. Cubism was first developed in Paris around 1907 by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. The primary aim of Cubism is to integrate objects with the space that they inhabit. The Cubist does this by opening up an object and fracturing the surface into planes. The flat surface of the canvas is acknowledged at the same time that a grid is created to analyze the relationships between space and forms. The methods of the Cubists were extremely innovative and shocking. Thirty years later in the 1940s and 1950s, the ghost of Picasso was still lingering in modern painting. Frankenthaler's early study of Cubism left a lasting impression on her work.

Frankenthaler's privileged upbringing and education greatly aided her pursuit of art and painting. She was also very precocious. *Mountains and Sea* is Frankenthaler's most famous and influential work. It is often described as her masterpiece and surprisingly was painted at the tender age of twenty-four. How

could an artist so young, mature so quickly? Many of her fellow Abstract Expressionists were much older and had been developing their art for decades.

Three factors suggested by B.H. Friedman could explain her early accomplishments:

1) a comfortable New York background exposed her early to the cultural life of a great city, gave her the chance to go to progressive schools (Dalton and Bennington), study with encouraging artists (Tamayo, Feeley and briefly Hans Hofmann), and freed her from economic obligations and external struggles; 2) her sex which spared her military service; 3) her will, even willfulness, which became a profound factor in both her art and career.<sup>15</sup>

The art historian John Elderfield suggests an additional factor in her passionate interest in art; that was the death of her father when she was eleven. Elderfield believes his death caused her to escape into art and, later in life, to have strong relationships with men. She still uses art today as a type of therapy to express her feelings.<sup>16</sup>

Frankenthaler did have an advantage over many other struggling artists because she was financially independent. By her twenty-first birthday, she had come into her inheritance, giving her the ability to fully devote her time to painting without economic strain.<sup>17</sup> Frankenthaler was able to summer in the country and travel abroad, widening her vision of the world and of art. Many of her contemporaries were struggling to survive in the harsh world of New York City.

By 1950, New York was home to most of the Abstract Expressionist artists and was increasingly becoming the center of the art world. American art before World War II was considered a backwater to the European avant-garde

center in Paris. Paris had been the home to the greats of modern art from Manet to Picasso. After the war, the United States emerged as the greatest and most powerful country in the world. Out of the shambles of Europe, and with the shift in power, grew the New York art scene. Many equate this with the emigration in the early years of the war of European artists and intellectuals to the United States. It could also have resulted from the maturing of American art. During the 1940s and 1950s with the help of European emigration, America developed her own, unique art movement, Abstract Expressionism or the “New York School,” based in New York City.

Themes that were developed and debated in Europe fused together in New York. The Surrealist emphasis on the subconscious and automatism, primitivism, and abstraction all were directly linked with the development of the new American painting. The new painting rejected the natural world and external problems and focused its concerns inwards. By the 1950s new artists such as Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and many others were the center of the New York avant-garde. The two main artists who represented the two foci of the movement were Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. De Kooning and his gestural paintings retained some vestiges of the external world. He was accessible to the second-generation; therefore many artists became disciples of de Kooning. Pollock was less accessible to the second generation because his style could not be imitated. Somebody could not legitimately make a Pollock-like drip painting and claim it to be their own style.<sup>18</sup> Critics were quick to discover the new movement and

support the new generation of artists. One of the most important critics of the period was Clement Greenberg. Greenberg was a Syracuse University graduate who established friendships with many of the avant-garde painters and sculptors of the 1950s, including Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler. Greenberg advocated formal and gestural abstract painting. He was hugely supportive and influential through his friendships and writings.

A second generation of painters soon flocked to New York to learn from the Abstract Expressionists. The second generation, including Helen Frankenthaler, formed a tightly knit community. The group consisted of artists Friedel Dzubas, Robert Goodnough, Grace Hartigan, Harry Jackson, Alfred Leslie as well as writer Frank O'Hara and musician John Cage. They would all meet at the Club, a meeting place for many artists and would go to the Cedar Street Tavern. This group of artists fostered a community of intellectual stimulation and inspiration.

During 1948, Frankenthaler decided to pursue painting rather than a literary career. In her non-residential college term of 1949, Frankenthaler was sent by Feeley to study with Wallace Harrison. Harrison was an Australian Cubist who ran a school in New York.<sup>19</sup> Frankenthaler's work with Harrison more fully immersed her in the world of Cubism. She became better versed in both Analytic and Synthetic Cubism. Analytic Cubism was primarily concerned with the deconstruction of solid and space while Synthetic Cubism *reconstructed* form using flat overlapping planes, further acknowledging the flat picture plane.

In the art world of New York which Frankenthaler was exploring, there was a dual crisis in abstraction and the treatment of space in painting. According to Barbara Rose, the first crisis was "...the rejection of the tactile, sculptural space of painting from the Renaissance until Cubism in favor of the creation of a purely optical space that did not so much as hint at the illusion of a 3<sup>rd</sup> dimension."<sup>20</sup> This means that the goal of painting was no longer to create the illusion of depth. Artists sought to find a flat way to paint. They no longer wanted to deny the flatness of the surface or create a window onto the world. It was solely about how the painting created optical sensation.

The second crisis for Rose was the absence of figuration and identifiable foreground and backgrounds. "The avoidance if not ideally the banishment of figure ground or positive shape against negative background" concerned the abstract artist.<sup>21</sup> Many artists were concerned with creating backgrounds and foregrounds that were indistinguishable. These were the new concerns of the modern painter. No longer was Renaissance perspective employed; rather, flatness was the ideal. Frankenthaler's painting technique – staining – would address these issues.

When Frankenthaler graduated from Bennington College in 1949 and returned home to New York she enrolled in Columbia University for graduate study to appease her family. She briefly studied with the art historian Meyer Schapiro but soon withdrew because she wanted to focus on her painting. Frankenthaler was working in the style of Synthetic Cubism but was exploring and searching for her own style.

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- <sup>14</sup> Henry Geldzahler, "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler" *Artforum* 4 no. 2 (1965), 36-38.
- <sup>15</sup> B.H. Friedman, "Towards the Total Color Image" *ArtNews* no. 4 (1966), 32.
- <sup>16</sup> John Elderfield, *Frankenthaler* (New York: H.D. Abrams, 1989), 15.
- <sup>17</sup> Elderfield, 19.
- <sup>18</sup> Susan Cross, "The Emergence of a Painter" *After Mountains and Sea* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998),
- <sup>19</sup> Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 20.
- <sup>20</sup> Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 68.
- <sup>21</sup> Rose, 68.

## 1950s

By 1950-51, Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko, and the entire New York School had become my mentors. By the time I made *Mountains and Sea*, in 1952, I'd already departed from the strict language of Cubism and I'd digested the influence of Pollock, Gorky, and de Kooning. In the 1950s, I looked at the whole range of art. I went to museum and gallery shows, visited other artists' studios, and traveled as much as possible. And I painted and painted and painted.<sup>22</sup>

Frankenthaler  
1997

Frankenthaler's critical years of development from 1950 to 1952 investigated a wide range of styles and theories of art. It was in these years that her development towards the staining technique and towards a mature style took place. She took a fresh look at Abstract Expressionism and used what she learned as inspiration for her work. One of the first works Frankenthaler created after graduating from Bennington was her *Woman on a Horse* from 1950 (Illustration 2). *Woman on a Horse* is a quasi-Cubist painting of interlocking planes of colors combined with the biomorphism of surrealism. The background is a soft blue and a figure is defined by a black outline with planes of red, yellow, white and blue suggesting multiple views of a woman on a horse. A woman's profile and the head of horse can be deciphered, as well as the indication of a whip and hand.

In 1950, Frankenthaler organized an exhibition of Bennington students in New York, in which she exhibited *Woman on a Horse*. She invited Clement Greenberg, who attended the show, discussed the works exhibited, and befriended Frankenthaler.<sup>23</sup> Greenberg suggested that Frankenthaler go to Provincetown, Massachusetts, to study with Hans Hofmann (1880-1966). Hofmann was born in

Germany and taught art there until he moved to the United States in 1930. He ran schools in New York and in Provincetown from 1933 to 1958. Hofmann was hugely influential in the creation of a new American style of art. Many of the second-generation Abstract Expressionists had attended his classes in which he emphasized his theory of “push and pull.” Hofmann advocated a style of painting with no clearly definable background. The elements of color and shape would work with and against each other to “push” and “pull” from the background to the foreground on the flat surface of the canvas.<sup>24</sup>

Frankenthaler’s lessons with Hofmann in Provincetown lasted only a few weeks because she did not like Hofmann’s teaching style. Nevertheless, Frankenthaler did absorb some of Hofmann’s ideas about the importance of color, resulting in a more varied palette. She also agreed with Hofmann’s “push and pull” ideas. The most important thing she gained from her experience in Provincetown was “new” subject matter: landscape. *Provincetown Bay* (Illustration 3), from 1950, was one of Frankenthaler’s most mature and free works from this early period when she was trying to develop her own visual language.

*Provincetown Bay* is more abstracted and flat than her previous work and is one of the first links to landscape painting. It depicts the sea and landscape outside Frankenthaler’s window. A horizon line of the land on the other side of the bay can be discerned. Above the horizon, the sky becomes a mix of blues, whites and grays, which suggest cloudy weather. The lower area of the painting includes flattened amorphous shapes of interlocking color. The work is



recognizable as a landscape because of the horizon and the sky, but the ground is a mix of colors and flattened shapes. Frankenthaler recalled painting this work and the response of another painter: “He couldn’t understand that I didn’t want the bay that much in perspective. I wanted it to be a little flat, parallel...to the canvas itself.”<sup>25</sup> *Provincetown Bay* was not in the style of Cubism but an experiment in Frankenthaler’s own development and a step towards an independent style. Landscape aided her in breaking from Cubist subject matter and style and moving towards something new.

She painted many other studies of landscapes while on the coast of Cape Cod, which would influence her work for years. After several years of studying to be a painter and imitating teachers’ styles and theories, there came the point in Frankenthaler’s career when she needed to synthesize the lessons she had learned and create something new.

In 1951 Frankenthaler painted *Great Meadow* (Illustration 4). It is full of fluid spontaneity and an all-over surface continuity. It is a transparent mix of soft browns, reds, green and yellow, which are intermingled but with drawn line creating distinct shapes. Frankenthaler explains the significance of *Great Meadow*: “There was the work on paper *Great Meadow*, from 1951, which was a really big step, unplanned, towards the making of *Mountains and Sea*.”<sup>26</sup>

*Ed Winston’s Tropical Garden* (Illustration 8) from 1951 is also an interesting and notable work from these early years. It is a narrative, frieze-like, large painting and was inspired by a bar on Eighth Street in Manhattan. It is abstracted yet reminiscent of landscapes.<sup>27</sup> Frankenthaler explained the title as a

reference to “a juke box bar on Eighth Street, filled with celluloid palm trees and five-and-ten-cent-store Hawaiian décor....I had the memory of the place and did a sunny green and yellow landscape.”<sup>28</sup> Frankenthaler’s *Ed Winston’s Tropical Garden* gives the impression of a long horizontal narrative frieze of a landscape. One can see tree shapes and natural forms. The background is yellow and greens. Oranges, reds and blues evoke trees, mountains, flowers, the sea and the sky. On the left side of the long painting, a horizontal blue shape can be read as the sea. From the sea blue shape and to the right is the inland of a tropical island. In the center of the painting a palm tree-like shape creates the sense of a dense forest of tropical plants. This near-abstract painting was inspired by the interior “landscape” of a New York bar and is a mass of colorful shapes and forms.

*Circus Landscape* (Illustration 9) and *Abstract Landscape* (Illustration 10), both of 1951, use landscape and abstraction in tandem. *Circus Landscape* evokes the feeling of the bright colors and movement of a circus. It is an “interior landscape” of the remembered visual experiences of the circus.<sup>29</sup> Frankenthaler used bright color and lines to create movement and visual interest. Some shapes are reminiscent of actual circus imagery and some seem to be completely abstracted shapes. *Circus Landscape* seems witty, playful and spontaneous in comparison to *Abstract Landscape*. *Abstract Landscape* is clearly planned and organized. There seems to be a sense of mountain terrain in the background of the painting. Rolling hills overlap with red tree-like forms. In the foreground, large shapes can be read as leaves or flowers. The colors are bright and their repetition

and distribution create a unity in the composition. The abstract forms and colors create a mood that is compatible with the hints of a landscape.

*New Jersey Landscape* (Illustration 11) from 1952 is another important link between landscape, abstraction, mood and color. It is a dark, grey painting which is a study of composition and the essence of landscape. It includes horizontal bands of color. The top includes the grey sky and below it the darker grey of a grove of trees. Below the trees is an ochre and brown field and then a darker band of brown along the bottom. This work is a description of a place but also a study in form. Each band of color creates the realization of flatness and not the illusion of depth. A mood is created with the dark and limited palette. It is clear that Frankenthaler was inspired by nature and seems to have recorded her memory of it in her growing language of abstraction.

The growth of Frankenthaler's development towards abstraction in the 1950s coincided with an increased use of landscape and the natural world as subject matter. *Mountains and Sea*, (Illustration 1) of 1952 not only introduced her new staining technique, but was the pivotal work in linking landscape with abstraction. Other works also reveal a relation to natural form in the development of Frankenthaler's painting. The works of the 1950s demonstrate a strong relationship to the visual world. Many of these paintings were inspired by landscapes or nature but also by paintings by other artists and by the human body. Abstraction using the natural world as inspiration is united with a flat surface of color and shape.

On July 25, 1952, Frankenthaler had gone on a road trip to Nova Scotia with Clement Greenberg. During the trip Frankenthaler painted many watercolor landscape paintings and was struck by the beauty of the mountains and their contrast with the sea. Frankenthaler returned to New York in August and on October 26, 1952, painted *Mountains and Sea*.<sup>30</sup> The work was inspired by the memory of the Nova Scotia landscape combined with lessons learned from other artists. Frankenthaler explained the process in an interview with Julia Brown in 1997:

I painted *Mountains and Sea* after seeing the cliffs of Nova Scotia. It's a hilly landscape with wild surf rolling against the rocks. Though it was painted in a windowless loft, the memory of the landscape is in the painting, but it also has equal amounts of Cubism, Pollock, Kandinsky, Gorky.<sup>31</sup>

*Mountains and Sea* was born out of the experience of nature and the examples of other artists.

*Mountains and Sea* is a large painting at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.<sup>32</sup> The composition is a mix of drawn line and stained color. Line creates amorphous and organic shapes, which are filled in with pinks, blues and greens. A central cluster of shapes thrusts to the top of the canvas and then widens down on both sides towards the lower section of the painting. On the right side, a rich blue band of color continuing off the edge of the canvas resembles the sea. A golden-brown oval shape dominates the center, and along with other forms clustered together, indicate the earth and the mountain.

Although the painting is environmental in size (7ft by 10ft), the softness of the stained colors and forms is striking. The pastel hues are created by the thinned

oil paint staining the raw canvas. Frankenthaler's palette and delicacy of touch particularly resembles Cézanne's watercolors. Like a natural environment, *Mountains and Sea* encompasses the viewer in its mood and movement. The large cluster of shapes in the middle seems to come out of the picture plane like a three-dimensional image. Movement is created by the "push and pull" of the colors and the swirling calligraphic charcoal line. Despite its abstraction, the forms and colors suggest the mountains and sea of the title; the central shapes rise above the rich blue below. The nature of Frankenthaler's experience in Nova Scotia becomes clear. The calm of the sea air and the harmony of nature emanate from the painting. Because of its delicacy and nuance, it is a work that must be seen in person.

When viewed in the gallery the staining technique used for the first time in this work is evident. An unsized and unprimed raw linen canvas acts in a manner very similar to regular cloth used for clothing and home furnishings. For centuries canvas had been primed many times before the application of paint. The technology changed and advanced, but painters still primed their canvas before use because unprimed canvas is very porous and rough. An artist ideally wants complete control over the paint. When the canvas is unprimed, the paint may soak into the weave before the painter can manipulate it. The priming of the canvas creates an even and consistent surface and the paint stays on the top of the canvas surface. When paint is applied directly to the unprimed canvas and is thinned down by a solvent, the paint soaks into the weave. The paint may spread and become part of the actual surface, no longer a "skin" on top of the canvas.

Staining affects the painting in revolutionary way. E.C. Goossen explains the innovative and important technique of staining:

This staining had a dual result: the colors, having lost their glossy coating, floated into and away from the surface creating a nebulous but controllable space; at the same time, the spectator's awareness of the natural texture of the canvas deprived him of an extended sense of illusion.<sup>33</sup>

The colors soak into the canvas and become part of it. The texture of the canvas is very apparent. The colors become airy and thin while the canvas can be used as a color as well. The canvas's hue affects the paint applied. The use of the staining technique for a whole composition was a Frankenthaler's innovation.

Helen Frankenthaler was initially impacted by both de Kooning and Pollock, but she was drawn to Pollock in the later part of her development; as she said, "You could become a de Kooning disciple or satellite or mirror but you could depart from Pollock."<sup>34</sup> Frankenthaler's strong knowledge of art history helped her move away from Pollock's influence. There were many past artists whose work sparked an interest in Frankenthaler and guided her to a new vision for her own art. These artists included Monet, Cézanne, Kandinsky, Miro, Gorky and many others. Each one helped Frankenthaler form her new techniques and vision of painting. Frankenthaler states: "Kandinsky and Gorky had led me into what is now called 'Abstract Expressionism' painting; but these [influences] came after all the Cubist training and exercise. It all combined to push me on."<sup>35</sup>

Wassily Kandinsky was a Russian artist born in 1866 who first studied to be a lawyer. He then decided to become a painter and moved to Munich in 1896. He studied art and was soon a founder of the Blue Rider group of artists in

Germany. His work became increasingly abstract, and by the early 1910s his work was close to “absolute abstraction.” Kandinsky was fascinated by color and the effects of color on the mind. He believed that, because the senses are connected, a color can evoke the sensation of sound and vice versa – a phenomenon known as synesthesia. His work was very important for Frankenthaler for several reasons. Before Kandinsky’s completely abstract paintings he had painted brightly colored landscapes that included areas of stained canvas. He had three different ways of painting at this time: first, *Improvisations*, which were drawn from the unconscious and were spontaneous; second, *Impressions*, which were direct representations of nature; and third, *Compositions*, which were slowly formed expressions of inner feelings.<sup>36</sup> These different types of expression through painting are synthesized by Frankenthaler. She uses her unconscious, nature and inner feelings in her work. The importance of color in Kandinsky’s paintings had a bearing on Frankenthaler’s own color-dominant canvases. Kandinsky’s watercolor-like application of paint also influenced Frankenthaler’s work. The use of bright colors to express his mood and to create the sensation of sound in his mind advanced into abstraction. He developed through the language of landscape towards abstraction as Frankenthaler later would.<sup>37</sup>

The second artist mentioned by Frankenthaler was Arshile Gorky (1904 - 1948), an Armenian-born American painter. He first adopted Surrealism during the 1930s employing both figurative and abstract styles and washes of bright colors and flowing lines. Frankenthaler saw Gorky’s 1951 exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She says, “[It was] a show that impressed me

enormously. Since I was so drawn to Kandinsky, the leap represented by Gorky made perfect sense.”<sup>38</sup> A work Frankenthaler saw at the exhibition, *The Liver is the Cock's Comb* (Illustration 5) of 1944, is a complex and dense combination of bright colors. There is recognizable imagery, such as suggestions of figures, alongside abstracted shapes. Reds, blues, yellows and white dominate the canvas. Gorky used Surrealism to create one of the first Abstract Expressionist styles. Frankenthaler admired Gorky's fluid “automatic” use of line and areas of thinned fluid paint.<sup>39</sup>

First-generation Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko's (1903-1970) works are perhaps closest to Frankenthaler's in their use of atmospheric fields of color to evoke landscape. He saw painting as a religious experience; his large soft-edged rectangular blocks of color express existentialist and Jungian philosophies. Rothko layers of luminous, translucent color and the suggestions of vast or infinite space have been linked with the concept of the “abstract sublime.”<sup>40</sup> *Blue, Green and Brown* (Illustration 6) of 1951 is a vast field of blue with the canvas in a vertical orientation. Horizontal bands of green and brown in the lower section create a sense of the earth. Frankenthaler's stain soaked canvases of the later 1950s and 1960s are akin to Rothko's layered fields of thinned paint, both evoking landscape.<sup>41</sup>

Jackson Pollock's 1951 exhibition at the Betty Parson Gallery was Frankenthaler's first exposure to his all-over drip paintings.<sup>42</sup> An all-over painting is a painting without a traditional composition, without any clearly correct orientation or central focus.<sup>43</sup> Frankenthaler explains her first experience



with Pollock's paintings, "It was as if I suddenly went to a foreign country but didn't know the language, but I had read enough and had a passionate interest, and was eager to live there. I wanted to live in this land; I *had to* live there, and master the language."<sup>44</sup> The lessons learned in these paintings, as well as the influence of Pollock's black-and-white drip paintings exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in the spring of 1952, began to fuse in Frankenthaler's work.<sup>45</sup>

The viewer can become absorbed by a Jackson Pollock drip painting. The image is completely composed of abstract dribbled paint. The scale is environmental and the effect is one of the most powerful encounters one can have with painting. *Lavender Mist* (Illustration 7) is a web of black, gray, pink and purple, which is so large it encompasses the viewer's whole field of vision. It has often been likened to landscapes and atmosphere. Frankenthaler was moved by the tactile and physical quality of the complex mix of paints.

Critic Clement Greenberg played a vital role in exposing Frankenthaler to the works and ideas of other artists in New York in the 1950s. Greenberg facilitated Frankenthaler's interaction with and exposure to Jackson Pollock. He brought Frankenthaler to Pollock's home in Springs on Long Island in 1951. There Frankenthaler talked to Pollock and his wife, the painter Lee Krasner, and learned about Pollock's revolutionary technique. Pollock worked with the canvas rolled out directly on the floor of his studio. He worked over the canvas pouring and dripping paint using his whole body to create an all-over image. Frankenthaler was attracted to the physicality of Pollock's technique. Pollock expressed his subconscious on the canvas. Frankenthaler adopted his technique of

painting on the floor, his application of paint, and the mental processes that occur when painting the inner mind.

After Frankenthaler completed *Mountains and Sea*, she invited Clement Greenberg to her studio to see the work. He was supportive and encouraged Frankenthaler to continue working in this vein. At Greenberg's suggestion, the Washington D.C.-based artists Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland came to New York to see *Mountains and Sea*. Louis and Noland were impressed. Louis explained the significance of *Mountains and Sea* as "the bridge between Pollock and what was possible."<sup>46</sup> Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* laid the foundation for Color Field painting. Louis went on to create his famous veils of color and Noland to paint his targets and chevrons. Frankenthaler's innovation launched a new movement as well as her own mature career.

Frankenthaler's staining technique was not born out of thin air but, was the result of many complex influences, which enabled her to let creativity take its course and do something completely different. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Cezanne, Henri Matisse, Paul Klee, John Marin, and Gorky were some of the precursors to staining.<sup>47</sup> Kandinsky and Pollock also used a kind of staining effect in many of their canvases. Kandinsky treated many of his oil paintings like watercolors. The color was thin and was partially absorbed by the fibers of the canvas. Pollock also created staining inadvertently. Pollock's thinner dribbles of paint soaked into the canvas while the more viscous paint remained on the surface. Both Pollock and Kandinsky unintentionally used staining in their paintings but only Frankenthaler was the first to deliberately use staining for entire paintings. Frankenthaler's

innovative staining technique became her lifelong preoccupation and would be explored more fully in the late 1950s and 1960s.

*Mountains and Sea* of 1952 is often recognized as Frankenthaler's most important work and is also sometimes the only work people know from Frankenthaler's oeuvre. Throughout the 1950s Frankenthaler further explored her stain painting. *Eden, Europa, Jacob's Ladder, Nude* and *Mother Goose Melody* are just a few of Frankenthaler's works from the 1950s that employ this technique. In 1958 Frankenthaler married fellow Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell. The paintings from this period can be characterized as dense, colorful and heavily worked explorations of her innovations in *Mountains and Sea*.

After *Mountains and Sea*, Frankenthaler's work can be divided into three categories as John Elderfield does in his monograph on Frankenthaler: "...Scenic remembrance, pictographic drawing, and interior landscape pictures...."<sup>48</sup> The relationships to landscape consist of remembrances of landscape and not specific locations. Frankenthaler would abstract shapes from the inner world of memory and imagination. The interior world of the artist is the subject, while landscape and other natural imagery are part of the jumble of the artist's mind.<sup>49</sup>

Nature's role and landscape's connotations in Frankenthaler's paintings are interestingly dissected in her *Lorelei* of 1956 (Illustration 12). The Lorelei Rock is a large geological formation on the Rhine River in Germany. The rock marks a curve in the river and the narrowest section of the river between the North Sea and Switzerland. Around this section of the river dangerous currents

have legendary power. The Lorelei is a mythological creature from German folklore who lured sailors to their death on the rocks. Frankenthaler traveled down the Rhine on a boat trip early in 1956 and was struck by the landscape. Frankenthaler later stated: “I’d been struck by the abrupt changes of pattern and space in the landscape: confusion of vineyards, the different sensations of distance and closeness.”<sup>50</sup>

The painting itself is not a clear representation of the Lorelei Rock but there is a definite mood created by the colors. Two large blocks of pink and blue dominate the upper central portion. The large dark blue “squared circle” is clearly the rock. Smaller bursts of red, purple, yellow and brown enliven the lower portion while to the right there is a line of negative space. Blue strokes create a horizontal in the lower third of the canvas and a vertical band at the left, evoking the meandering river. The work is not first recognized as a landscape; it appears to be merely a dense mix of colors and shapes without specific references. The title, however, suggests a specific landscape with narrative significance.

While painting *Lorelei*, Frankenthaler rolled out the canvas as she painted. During the process she became aware of the “nature symbols” and “the general color, the feeling of foliage at the bottom.”<sup>51</sup> Frankenthaler did not intend the painting to be a specific reference to the Lorelei; however, when the work was finished it had captured its essence. In Frankenthaler’s words, “Eventually everything combined into a real feeling of landscape for me – water, sky, land, shoreline, soft changes and modulations and abrupt ones.” The landscape had grown before her eyes. The specific reference to her trip and to Germany were

created after the fact. She continues: “Thinking of a title, there was an association between the experience of the picture and the memory of the experience of that voyage. I did not start out to do a painting of the Lorelei.”<sup>52</sup> The *Lorelei* was an unintentional representation of a memory of a landscape but through hindsight.

*Eden* (Illustration 13) was painted in 1956 in the midst of Frankenthaler’s exploration of staining and the interaction of color on canvas. *Eden* is a large canvas stained with bright pinks, blues, greens and yellows, arranged to create a balanced and harmonious composition as it is infused with emotion. In the center a teardrop shape of pink surrounds and reveals the unpainted canvas. On each side of the round shape one vertical line is coupled with two oval shapes to the right. They can clearly be read as two 100s. They may further be interpreted as the number of a bull’s-eye on a dartboard. On either side of the center there are dark greenish-brown verticals and below them a horizontal, under which there is little color on the unprimed canvas. All over the canvas bright splotches and amorphous shapes of color balance and complete the picture. This work is often described as one of Frankenthaler’s closest links to landscape painting. The two tall vertical green shapes can be read as trees. The bottom horizontal seems to be the horizon or land. A yellow sun-like shape (like a child’s drawing) inhabits the upper left-hand section of the canvas. The splotches of blue suggest sky or water. A red shape in the upper right resembles a hand and may be the hand of God leaving its mark on the canvas.

The title of the work, *Eden*, immediately brings the Garden of Eden to mind. The painting seems to evoke the feeling of olive trees and lush greenery in paradise. Carl Belz endorses interpretation:

Colors that suggest the foliage encourage the connection [to the Garden of Eden], as do hints of horizon lines, vista like compositional openings and a pervasive aura of light emanating from her pictorial expanses....Landscape associations are encouraged by many of the motifs in *Eden*.<sup>53</sup>

It is clear that *Eden* is visually and referentially connected to landscape imagery. The title suggests a location and the colors are of the earth: greens, browns, yellows, pinks and blues. The forms depicted suggest trees, the sun and even the horizon, yet the work is abstract and almost surrealist. The large bull's-eye does not seem natural in the world of *Eden*. This indicates meaning other than pure landscape or pure visual sensation – for example, a dream or the result of automatism (spontaneous expression through writing or drawing without censorship).

In this same period Frankenthaler painted *Interior* (1957 Illustration 14) in which a table and two chairs can be discerned. There is a window or a painting hung on the back wall of a space created using vestiges of perspective. The space is covered with large splotches of color and lines which confuse the scene. In *Interior* Frankenthaler recorded the world around her: “I looked around the room and then transposed what I saw onto the canvas.... I started with things within a space.”<sup>54</sup> She was trained by Cubist teachers to investigate space. At the same time Frankenthaler herself believed in the abstraction of *Interior*. She states, “You don’t really see those chairs and table when you look at the painting unless I point

them out because that painting is playing with depths and spaces, Cubism and Pollock, and everything that's coming from my imagination."<sup>55</sup> In fact the space created is more noticeable than Frankenthaler seems to believe. The intersection of the back wall, side wall and the floor is immediately apparent and draws the viewer's attention. This convergence of lines implies actual space within a constructed interior. Mood is still a significant factor in Frankenthaler's *Interior*. Karen Wilkins describes the mood of the painting as Southern or tropical. She suggests that if one relaxes their vision, the pure colors and shapes hark to a mood and sensation rather than a representation of a room.<sup>56</sup> However, while creating a mood, *Interior* is explicitly a reference to the physical world and to an investigation of space. The work could be interior and exterior at the same time, as the lush greens and blues at the right again suggest a garden setting.

*Basque Beach* (Illustration 15) of 1958 was painted while Frankenthaler was on her honeymoon with painter Robert Motherwell. The couple stayed for two months in a rented villa in the Basque beach town of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, France. *Basque Beach* captures the mood, colors, light, and sensuality of the beach. A blue mass extending from the center to the right of the canvas evokes water. The beige and brown colors suggest the shore. Space goes back to the horizon where light flickers in the blue sky. The flat stain-soaked canvas is forgotten when engulfed in the depths of the abstract beach scene. On the left of the canvas there is a suggestion of a body with legs and rounded head and arm forms. It has the sensual quality of a nude figure on the beach.<sup>57</sup> The beach setting

and Frankenthaler's amorous feelings fused to create a sensual and powerful image.

*Basque Beach* is an apt conclusion to the discussion of Frankenthaler's 1950s works. It is clear in the few examples from this period that the natural world was in her consciousness as well as her subconscious. During this period Frankenthaler herself was unclear about the relationship between nature and her abstractions.

...In one sense, I could say that nature has very little to do with my pictures. And yet I'm puzzled; obviously it creeps in! In the past couple of years I have made paintings in which an animal shape or a nose and mouth, numbers, apples, etc., appears as part of an otherwise totally abstract picture. These images are not put down to be recognized for what they are, nor are they surrealist. They seem to be spontaneous and necessary points of departure, often disappearing completely, on and off before the picture is finished. As I say, I'm puzzled because I don't have a fixed *idea* about this, and I seem to find myself in something new in terms of nature. I think that instead of nature or image, it has to do with spirit or sensation that can be related by a kind of abstract projection.<sup>58</sup>

This period was a time of discovery. It was a struggle between the need and desire for abstraction with an innate passion for nature and landscape imagery. The complex relationship between depth and flatness is apparent at this time.

Although her style would change somewhat in the 1960s, Frankenthaler would still not paint pure abstraction as many, including friend and critic Clement Greenberg, would have hoped.

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Brown, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Irving Sandler, "Hans Hofmann: The Pedagogical Master" *Art in America* 61 no. 3 (1973): 49-54.

<sup>25</sup> Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Brown, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Elderfield, 52-56.

<sup>28</sup> Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 53.



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- <sup>29</sup> Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 56.
- <sup>30</sup> Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 65.
- <sup>31</sup> Brown, *Frankenthaler*,
- <sup>32</sup> In March, 2006 I had the good fortune of seeing *Mountains and Sea* in person. It was larger than I thought and had an environmental effect on me. It was an emotional experience to see the work in person.
- <sup>33</sup> E.C. Goossen, *Helen Frankenthaler* Whitney Museum of American Art (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), 9.
- <sup>34</sup> Geldzahler, "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler", 37.
- <sup>35</sup> Geldzahler, 37.
- <sup>36</sup> Vivian Endicott Bennett, "Kandinsky, Vasily" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press, (April 10, 2006), <http://www.groveart.com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/shared/views/article.html?section=art.045642.1#art.045642.1>
- <sup>37</sup> Will Grohmann, *Wassily Kandinsky Life and Work* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.. 1958).
- <sup>38</sup> Brown, 30.
- <sup>39</sup> Cross, 9.
- <sup>40</sup> Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still*. 202.
- <sup>41</sup> Brown, 30.
- <sup>42</sup> Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 50.
- <sup>43</sup> "All-over Painting," Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press (April 24, 2006) [http://www.groveart.com/shared/views/article.html?from=search&session\\_search\\_id=118601616&hitnum=4&section=art.001940](http://www.groveart.com/shared/views/article.html?from=search&session_search_id=118601616&hitnum=4&section=art.001940)
- <sup>44</sup> Rose, 29.
- <sup>45</sup> Elderfield, 50.
- <sup>46</sup> Karen Wilkins, "Frankenthaler at the Guggenheim." *The New Criterion* 16, no. 7(1998): 12.
- <sup>47</sup> Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 68.
- <sup>48</sup> Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 103.
- <sup>49</sup> Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 103.
- <sup>50</sup> John I. H. Baum, *Nature in Abstraction: The Relation of Abstract Painting and Sculpture to Nature in the Twentieth-Century American Art*. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1958), 66.
- <sup>51</sup> Baum, 66.
- <sup>52</sup> Baum, 66.
- <sup>53</sup> Carl Belz, "Helen Frankenthaler's *Eden*" *ArtNews* 80 no. 5(May 1981) 157.
- <sup>54</sup> Brown, "Frankenthaler", 45.
- <sup>55</sup> Brown, 45
- <sup>56</sup> Wilkins, "Frankenthaler", 48.
- <sup>57</sup> Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 122.
- <sup>58</sup> Quoted in Baum, 66.

## The 1960s and 1970s

The aesthetic taste in the New York art world changed in the 1960s as new styles – primarily Pop and Minimalist art – were introduced and gaining recognition and popularity. Frankenthaler was still very young and was influenced by the changing mood of the art world. There was a shift in taste from painterly styles and approaches to painting to a more linear and direct representation.<sup>59</sup> In Frankenthaler's vocabulary this meant the reduction of shapes to their essential components, the use of more open space and the use of blank canvas. The 1960s also brought the new medium of acrylic paints. Staining continued to be Frankenthaler's method but changes accrued in the visual effect due to the new medium.

The idea of landscape within Frankenthaler's oeuvre also changed in the 1960s. As her confidence in her work and style grew, landscape was not as clearly evident in her work. She was trying to become a pure abstractionist using the minimalist approach of reduction to essential shapes such as rectangles. Important transitional paintings illustrate an evolving aesthetic between the 1950s' focus on landscape and the 1960s' focus on abstraction. Frankenthaler's titles during this transition still refer to landscape settings.

*Italian Beach* (Illustration 16) from 1960 reduces the almost chaotic shapes, drips, splotches and jumbled color of the 1950s to four rich colors. *Italian Beach* simplifies forms into one large blue shape and three irregular horizontal strokes of red, green, and golden yellow. Most of the canvas is raw and unpainted; Frankenthaler used the "negative space" of the blank areas as a positive element

in the composition. If this work is compared to Frankenthaler's earlier works – for example, *Basque Beach* (Illustration 15), – the difference is very noticeable.

*Basque Beach* extends to the far edges of the canvas and the whole surface is a mix of colors and shapes, overlapping, colliding and fusing. The shapes or strokes of color in *Italian Beach* are isolated in their own space and simplified. The composition was a harbinger of the simplification to come in Frankenthaler's paintings.

Nevertheless, Frankenthaler could not keep landscape references out of her work. *Swan Lake I*, (Illustration 17), and *Swan Lake II* from 1961 are centralized images, which suggest through the titles and the imagery swans and their surroundings. *Swan Lake I* has a square shape in the center with a web of blue, yellow and green. Swans appear out of the chaos of the color. Frankenthaler commented on the development of *Swan Lake*: “I started with blue, and a rather arbitrary beginning, at some point I recognized the birdlike shape – I was ready for it – and I developed it from there”<sup>60</sup> *Swan Lake*'s title and visual references are not the sole components of the work. The abstraction created is also a vital component. The centered canvas was a different feature of Frankenthaler's work. The painted area is surrounded by raw, unpainted space. Its pendant, *Swan Lake II* (1961) is very similar but the palette shifts to dark blues and blacks and employs the negative space of the canvas. The connection of imagery and representation used in the 1950s is found in both *Swan Lake I* and *Swan Lake II* but there is also reference to geometric shapes, negative space and minimal forms that bring the works into the '60s. For example, in *Swan Lake I* a network of calligraphic color

patches are contained within a square “frame” defined by four brown linear elements.

The paintings of the early 1960s have mystical color and organic forms. Floating imagery on a blank background and bright, sensuous colors characterize the paintings of 1961 and 1962. One example from this period is *Seascape with Dunes* from 1962 (Illustration 18). A horizon of tans plays with bright reds and greens to create the sense of a beachscape. The title is a reference to the location of the painting’s creation, on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. The air of the sea, the colors of the beach and the mood of the setting in which the painting was created all come through to the viewer. The stained shapes create hazy amorphous and organic forms. The relationship between the composition and the actual landscape is evident. Frankenthaler herself, however, was critical of landscape readings: “The title is misleading. It is actually a play of reds and of rhythms and of the ambiguities of symmetry. It might have a playful quality, but it is seriously playful, thought out.”<sup>61</sup> *Seascape with Dunes* is an abstract visual playground but is connected to the environment through mood and suggested imagery. However, the language of abstraction was displacing Frankenthaler’s interest in landscape.

In 1963 Frankenthaler began to use acrylic paints. Acrylics are water-based pigments in contrast to the oil-based paints that had been used for centuries. When applied to the unprimed canvas, oils spread out, creating a haze around the color areas. Frankenthaler did not like this haze and began to use acrylic paints, which gave a crisp edge to the shapes. Oil paints also take a long time to dry. While wet, the spreading effect can be uncontrollable and can fade quickly on

unsized and unprimed canvas. Acrylic paints were developed from plastics; they are fast drying and do not fade in the staining technique. They are also easier to clean up because turpentine is not needed. Frankenthaler first began to use acrylic paints experimentally but found their use more conducive to staining.

*The Bay*, (Illustration 19), from 1963 was one of the first paintings that Frankenthaler created with acrylic paints, which gave her greater control. She could bring the blue and green shapes together to form a clean-edged line. A large round blue shape dominates the center of the canvas. Below the blue shape a light green spreads from one side to the other hugging the edge of the blue. The composition marks a shift away from the smaller intermingled shapes and lines in her previous works towards larger separate areas of color. The blank, unstained areas of canvas used in the composition would be minimized in most subsequent works.<sup>62</sup>

Frankenthaler assigned the title, “*The Bay*,” to the work in the midst of its execution, which is unusual for her. The large blue shape reminded her of the bay and the weather outside her window. Yet, the painting is not a representation of the bay itself but of Frankenthaler’s experience of the bay.<sup>63</sup> *The Bay* can easily be read as an abstraction of the bay – perhaps an overhead view of the bay. In any case, Frankenthaler wants the viewer to sense the bay and ocean.<sup>64</sup>

The painting *Interior Landscape* (1964 Illustration 26) is perhaps the quintessential balance between abstraction and landscape in the work of Frankenthaler. *Interior Landscape* is part of a series of square compositions from the mid 1960s. It is composed of a succession of irregular “organic” square

shapes. The background is dark blue and creamy white. A yellow square shape with ragged edges is the background for a light blue rectangular shape with a curvilinear green shape on top of it. The square shapes are like a window frame looking out on the green and blue world. The irregular squares act as perspective, suggesting space. The ambiguities are vital to the work. It could be an interior of a room or the interior of Frankenthaler's mind or both. It is reminiscent of the natural world because of the green and the horizontals near the bottom. It is a depiction of the natural world abstracted from Frankenthaler's own mind. It is interior and exterior at once.

The use of the natural color of the canvas became an integral part of the paintings in the late 1960s. One of these works is *The Human Edge* (Illustration 20) from 1967 in the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York. The work is comprised of large irregular rectangular blocks of bright orange, pink, and blue, and the negative space between the colors – the off-white canvas. This painting, like many others by Frankenthaler, is massive, measuring ten by eight feet. The banners of color evoke a sea breeze and the band of blue evokes the sea below. There is a sense of movement, airiness and environment created.

*The Human Edge* is similar in many ways to Minimalist geometric abstraction but it is also very different. The shapes are not hard edged, ridged and geometric. They have rounded corners and have an organic line. Frankenthaler reacted against hard-edged Minimalist painting and gave the painting a “human edge.”<sup>65</sup>

*Flood* (Illustration 21) of 1967 is different from many of the other more reductive and open canvases. *Flood* is an enormous picture, (10 by 11ft), that is an all-over sweep of waves of color. Orange, green, blue and pink cover the entire surface in horizontal, amorphous shapes. The colors are vibrant and ripple across the surface. It is “free, spontaneous, romantic – full of light, air, and uninhibited *joie de vivre*.”<sup>66</sup> It is one facet of Frankenthaler’s late ‘60s work. Other works of the ‘60s employ more Matisse-like cut-out shapes. These works are full of open, white areas with almost geometrically simplified shapes in bright colors. The 1960s ended with Frankenthaler’s retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1969.

During the 1970s Frankenthaler used more impasto painting techniques on smaller scale canvases. She also reintroduced line and drawing elements into her work. In July of 1972 Frankenthaler diverged from her painting background and created ten steel sculptures in the studio of English sculptor Anthony Caro during a two-week visit to London.<sup>67</sup> She explored all facets of creation and expression.

*Flood* and many other works of the late 1960s and later have a somewhat less direct connection to a landscape idiom but it is still present. The title indicates a natural phenomenon as well as the shapes of sweeping color. The connection of Frankenthaler’s work to nature is never lost. It is always part of her mind and soul. A prime example is *Lush Spring* from 1975. (Illustration 22) It was painted in July but depicts the memory of spring and captures the essence of the fresh green foliage and plants. The greens are modulations from light yellow-green to dark rich greens, like the variation and variegation of a new leaf in spring.<sup>68</sup>

In 1976 Frankenthaler made her first trip to the Southwest where she was inspired by the landscape, colors, and light of the desert. *Natural Answer* (Illustration 23) from 1976 is a response to the colors of the desert. Reds, browns, pinks, blacks and white create slabs of thick paint contrasted with thin stained areas. Frankenthaler employed the palette of the desert. Horizontals suggest the vast openness of the American West. *Natural Answer* would not be the last painting to have connections to nature and landscape. The strength of the connection between actual landscape references and the mood, or inspiration of landscape had varied throughout her career but Frankenthaler will always be connected to the land.

A case in point is *Untitled* from 1979 (Illustration 24), owned by the Syracuse University Art Collection and donated by alumnus Clement Greenberg.<sup>69</sup> It is a small work that still evokes landscape. Green is the base color that was stained into the canvas. A wide brown stroke of color enters the picture plane from the left then stops abruptly. Pink patches on top of the green create an eerie combination. White was applied thickly and remains on the surface of the canvas. The green evokes organic and natural associations. It is an abstracted flowerbed of greens, pinks, browns and white.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Frankenthaler continued to work, often in a darker or subdued palette. She worked the surface, using splotches of paint as well as staining techniques. One good example of this is *Grey Fireworks* (Illustration 25) of 1982. There are explosions in the stained areas as well as in thickly painted blobs. Grays and pinks dominate the colors of the stained canvas.



Brightly color thickly applied paints act like fireworks in the sky. Throughout the canvas there are sparks of color but the mood of the painting remains sober and contemplative. At the bottom edge of *Grey Fireworks* a soft horizontal band of maroon seems to serve as the ground in a landscape. Some of her most recent paintings are dark and glowing as described in a 2003 gallery review.<sup>70</sup>

Frankenthaler continues to explore her technique and style. She revisits issues and problems faced earlier in her career, often looking back at her paintings for inspiration. She has remained consistent to her style to the present day. Her style is distinctive: there is no danger of attributing a Helen Frankenthaler painting to any other artist. There were slight shifts in her work through the decades but her oeuvre is all very clearly linked together. Frankenthaler is still working today and her work will continue to evolve.

This by no means was a complete overview of Frankenthaler's fifty-year career but rather, a brief look at one of the major tendencies in her work – its linking of landscape and abstraction.

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<sup>59</sup> Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 140-141.

<sup>60</sup> E. A. Carmean, *Helen Frankenthaler: A Painting Retrospective* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 1989), 28.

<sup>61</sup> Carmean, 34.

<sup>62</sup> Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 172.

<sup>63</sup> Carmean, *Helen Frankenthaler*, 36.

<sup>64</sup> Carmean, 36.

<sup>65</sup> Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 202.

<sup>66</sup> Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 100.

<sup>67</sup> Elderfield, 228.

<sup>68</sup> The vice president of the United States, Dick Cheney, has *Lush Spring* in his home, on loan from the Phoenix Museum of Art Lynne V. Cheney, "Vice President and Mrs. Cheney: American art prevails in the refurbishing of their Washington D.C. residence" *Architectural Digest* 58 no.12 (2001): 136.

<sup>69</sup> The work is currently displayed in the Lubin House in New York City, in the Chancellor's private suite.

<sup>70</sup> Cynthia Nadelman, "Helen Frankenthaler: Knoedler" *ArtNews* 2 no. 7 (2003), 152.

## Conclusion

Helen Frankenthaler is one of the last Abstract Expressionists left from that magical time of mid-century New York. She was a friend of critic Clement Greenberg and the renowned painters of the New York School, including Jackson Pollock. Frankenthaler was not only an observer and student of the movement, but she became a member and innovator. The stain technique was her groundbreaking innovation which inspired fellow artists and remained her own lifelong technique and pictorial interest. *Mountains and Sea* of 1952 was her watershed masterpiece. Although abstraction was the order of the day, the natural world and the landscape have been an important part of Frankenthaler's inspiration. Landscape and abstraction evolved together in Frankenthaler's paintings. The types of landscapes depicted by Frankenthaler were not realistic views of scenic vistas but were impressions, moods, and feelings associated with nature. Gene Baro explains, "Landscape to her is what the figure was to Pollock, a source of spiritual strength and a servant of method."<sup>71</sup>

Lawrence Alloway has tried to define Frankenthaler's work as "pastoral."<sup>72</sup> He sees Frankenthaler's work as a kind of landscape but not of specific places. A "pastoral" by definition is a landscape, but for Frankenthaler, it is not the exact representation of the natural world; rather, configurations of color and line are metaphors for landscape.<sup>73</sup> Frankenthaler is not trying to create the perfect, ideal landscape but a synthesis of landscape and abstraction filtered through her own aesthetic judgment. It is the person, Helen Frankenthaler, who is more represented in her paintings than a specific place. Hilton Kramer very

tactfully wrote that she is “within the general orbit of feeling,” of landscape painting, but hers is “a style at once very personal, very responsive to the articulations of an individual temperament.”<sup>74</sup>

Frankenthaler’s paintings celebrate beauty. Beauty is about an abstract quality of completeness and simplicity. Frankenthaler best describes its importance. For her:

A really good picture looks as if it’s happened at once. It’s an immediate image. For my own work, when a picture looks labored and overworked, and you can read in it – well, she did this and then she did that, and then she did that – there is something in it that has not got to do with beautiful art to me. And I usually throw those out, though I think very often it takes ten of those over-labored efforts to produce one really beautiful wrist motion that is synchronized with your head and heart, and you have it, and therefore it looks as if it were born in a minute.<sup>75</sup>

Beauty cannot be ignored and Frankenthaler often found it in the American landscape. The beauty around her from the sea to the mountains, in the Northeast and the Southwest, inspired Frankenthaler to paint abstractions with the ambiance of landscapes.

The world knows Helen Frankenthaler because of her invention of the stain painting technique. There are several reasons why this technique was so important. The first is its attempt to resolve many of modern art’s questions in the debate between the inherent flatness of the canvas and the illusion of depth with the qualities of the paint itself. The second is staining’s influence on other artists, for example Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. The last, and perhaps most important reason why staining was a masterful innovation is because the resulting paintings are beautiful, create a sense of atmosphere and have given Frankenthaler

a completely unique style. Writers and critics since the painting of *Mountains and Sea* have defined Frankenthaler's works as lyrical landscapes. I have discovered that a "typical" definition of landscape painting is not broad enough to define Frankenthaler. She creates more than a landscape, she creates a universe.

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<sup>71</sup> Gene Baro, "The Achievement of Helen Frankenthaler." *Art International* 11 (June-September 1967), 34.

<sup>72</sup> Lawrence Alloway, "Frankenthaler as Pastoral." *ArtNews* 70 no 7 (1971).

<sup>73</sup> Alloway, "Frankenthaler as Pastoral."

<sup>74</sup> Kramer, "Landscape Paradigm", 392-94.

<sup>75</sup> Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 85.

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## Illustrations



1. *Mountains and Sea*, 1952, oil on canvas, 7'2 5/8" x 9'9 1/4"



2. *Woman on a Horse*, 1948-1950, oil on sized, primed canvas, 4'2 1/4" x 3'4"



3. *Provincetown Bay*, 1950, oil on sized, primed canvas, 16 1/4" x 20 1/4"



4. *Great Meadow*, 1951, watercolor on paper, 22 x 30"



5. Gorky, *The Liver is the Cock's Comb*, 1944, oil on canvas, 6' 1 1/4" x 8' 2"



6. Rothko, *Blue, Green and Brown*, 1951



7. Pollock, *Lavender Mist*, 1950, Oil on canvas, Oil, enamel, and aluminum on canvas, 7'3" x 9'10"



8. Ed Winston's *Tropical Garden*, 1951, mixed medium on paper on mounted board, 3'1/4" x 15'11/4"



9. *Circus Landscape*, 1951, oil on sized, primed canvas, 40 x 44"



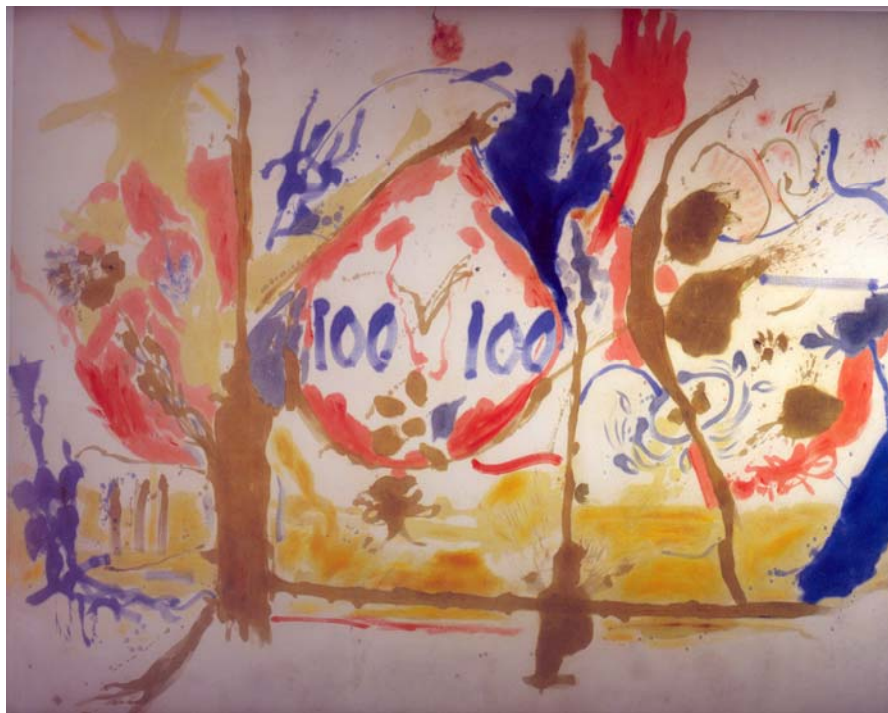
10. *Abstract Landscape*, 1951, oil on sized, primed canvas, 5'9" x 5'11 7/8"



11. *New Jersey Landscape*, 1952, oil on canvas, 9 x 12"



12. *Lorelei*, 1956, oil on canvas, 5'10 5/8" x 7'2 3/4"



13. *Eden*, 1956, oil on canvas, 8'7" x 9'9"



14. *Interior*, 1957, oil on canvas, 5'10" x 7'2"



15. *Basque Beach*, 1958, oil on canvas, 4'10 5/8" x 5'9 5/8"



16. *Italian Beach*, 1960, oil on sized, primed canvas, 5'7" x 6'10"





17. *Swan Lake I*, 1961, oil on canvas, 7' 5 1/8" x 7' 9 3/4"



18. *Seascape with Dunes*, 1962, oil on canvas, 5' 10" x 11' 8"



19. *The Bay*, 1963, acrylic on canvas, 6'8 3/4" x 6'9 3/4"



20. *The Human Edge*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 10'4" x 7' 9 1/4"



21. *Flood*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 10'4" x 11'8"



22. *Lush Spring*, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 7'9" x 9'10"



23. *Natural Answer*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 8 x 11"



24. *Untitled*, 1979, acrylic on canvas



25. *Grey Fireworks*, 1982, acrylic on canvas, 6' x 9' 10 1/2"



26. *Interior Landscape*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 10' 4 3/4" x 9' 2 3/4"