

CONCENTRATION PAPER

HELEN FRANKENTHALER

Submitted by  
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LIST OF PLATES

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Oil on Canvas  
220.1 x 297.8 cm
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Oil on Canvas  
254 x 109.9 cm
- Plate 3. Fransisco Jose de Goya y Lucientes  
Majas on a Balcony. c. 1800-14  
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195 x 125.7 cm
- Plate 4. The Moors. 1963  
Acrylic on Canvas  
274 x 122 cm
- Plate 5. The Human Edge. 1967  
Acrylic on Canvas  
315 x 237 cm
- Plate 6. Nude. 1958  
Oil on Canvas  
257.8 x 115.6 cm
- Plate 7. Mother Goose Melody. 1959  
Oil on canvas  
208.2 x 264.1 cm

The Helen Frankenthaler Retrospective which opened at the Museum of Modern Art in June 1989 represents four decades of painting. When the curators of the Retrospective asked Frankenthaler what she hoped viewers might learn from the show, she replied, "In my art I've moved and have been able to grow. I've been someplace. Hopefully, others should be similarly moved." (Carmean 1989:8) Indeed, when one gets into Frankenthaler's work, "One sees a basic signature that develops over the decades." (Carmean 1990:5)

Frankenthaler was born on December 12, 1928, on New York's Upper East Side. She comes from a prosperous German-Jewish family; her father, Alfred Frankenthaler, was a highly respected judge in the state's Supreme Court. A comfortable New York background enabled her to study at progressive schools.

Frankenthaler was fortunate to find a succession of mentors who encouraged her interests in art. At Dalton, she became the favorite pupil of Rufino Tamayo, the Mexican painter. Later at Bennington College, she studied under the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, the critic Kenneth Burke, and the painter Paul Freeley. In Freeley's seminars, she studied works by Picasso, Braque, Miro, Mondrian, and Kandinsky. It is evident that Frankenthaler's formal studies of Cubist structure provided an invaluable foundation. "My life and

my painting would always be grounded in Cubism because that was how I learned and how I was taught. It made sense."

(Wilkin 1984:30)

Although Frankenthaler abandoned the Cubist style, she remained intrigued with its ambiguities. For instance, she is intrigued with how the geometric planes in a Cubist painting could be read as both a geometric design and as an illustrated subject. More importantly, however, she is fascinated with spatial ambiguity. In Cubism, geometric planes create the illusion of a shallow space that retreats from the surface while they also reaffirm the flatness of the surface. "The "why" of how a picture best works for me involves how much working false space it has in depth. The formal memory of this goes back to the classes in Cubism. The color and light in a picture work in terms of pseudoperspective, whether it be a Cubist Picasso or Braque or a Noland stripe painting. It's a play of ambiguities." (Elderfield 1986:16)

Frankenthaler's early acquaintance with the art literary critic Clement Greenberg put her in touch with the New York avant-garde. Greenberg introduced her to the Abstract Expressionists, William de Kooning and Jackson Pollack. Although Frankenthaler was greatly influenced by both de Kooning and Pollack, she cites Pollack as the artist who most significantly influenced her. "I looked at and was influenced by both Pollock and de Kooning and eventually felt there were more possibilities for me out of the Pollock

framework. You could become a de Kooning disciple or satellite or mirror, but you could depart from Pollock." (Wilkin 1984:36)

Frankenthaler pioneered the "soak-stain" style. Historically, she serves as the key figure that links Abstract Expressionism to the "color-field" movement. In 1953, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland visited Frankenthaler's studio where the hallmark painting Mountains and Sea (Plate 1) was in progress. Upon viewing the painting, Louis described it as a "bridge between Pollock and what was possible." (Elderfield 1989:65) Mountains and Sea has been considered Frankenthaler's most important painting. As Hilton Kramer observed, "The reputation it has acquired (makes it) a sort of Demoiselles d'Avignon of the Color field school." (Carmean 1989:12)

In Mountains and Sea, Frankenthaler established numerous formal traits, such as, washes of color, line in dialogue with painting, and compositional symmetry and asymmetry. Mountains and Sea, however, is more important for how it was painted.

Frankenthaler's method of soaking color into canvas (as opposed to applying it with the brush) was directly influenced by Jackson Pollock's "drip" method. Frankenthaler, however, soaked thin paint into the weave of the canvas, whereas Pollock dripped thick viscous paint onto the surface of the canvas.

Frankenthaler elevated traditional small scale

watercolor to the larger scale of Abstract Expressionism. The stain-painting process that she originated has the look of watercolor, and like watercolor it requires her to be decisive and direct. Frankenthaler's paintings seem to have been completed within a few hours; they have a spur-of-the-moment quality. "Rather than a labored, made, applied look . . . I prefer something that looks as if it were born all at once." (Elderfield 1989:60)

Frankenthaler uses two basic approaches to begin the painting process. She begins with a single unpremeditated mark on the canvas and "takes it from there", or she thinks beforehand about a certain formal problem and then begins an "investigation" of that particular problem. Frankenthaler has said of her characteristic approach, "There was a dialectic and the surface gave an answer back, and you gave it an answer back." (Elderfield 1989:59)

Frankenthaler depends to a large extent on accident and improvisation. Her premeditated ideas and notions change during the painting process. "Very often, midway through, the picture dictates something else to me." (Elderfield 1989:60)

She periodically returns to Old Master paintings for inspiration and a point of departure. Whole sections of Las Mayas (Plate 2), for instance, are based directly on Goya's Mayas On A Balcony (Plate 3). Frankenthaler inverted Las Mayas near completion so many of these structural similarities are not immediately apparent. Several

structural similarities include: the triangular hooded head with eyes in the upper right, the figure with hat in the left, and the suggestion of the Mayas in the center. An abstract line corresponds with the upper railing of the balcony, and the empty unpainted center areas reflect the lighter areas in the Goya painting. Frankenthaler commented on Las Mayas, "It was intended as an incidental but useful takeoff- not a parody. The ideas, the format, and the colors in the Goya fueled my own ideas. Las Mayas, was also painted as an homage to Goya." (Carmean 1989:24)

Frankenthaler has used images from Art history as a point of departure in other paintings as well. Hint From Bassano (1973) is based on Jacopo Da Ponte's Flight Into Egypt (c. 1540), Portrait of a Lady in White (1979) is based on Titian's Portrait of a Lady in White (c. 1535), and For E.M. (1981) is based on Edouard Manet's Still Life with Carp (1864).

Frankenthaler works both on the floor and the wall. Her paintings therefore have an Oriental rug quality. Frankenthaler observed, "There is the aspect of the oriental rug, which can rest above, below, or head on. Pictures of this period have a kind of bird's eye flying-carpet view as if you were looking downward. However, all paintings must be judged on the wall." (Carmean 1989:54)

In 1962, Frankenthaler abandoned oil paint for acrylic paint and subsequently lost the halo effect. Acrylic paints

do not leave the halo-like oil residual and they produce a crisper linear sharpness. The shift from oil to acrylic accounted for other changes as well. For instance, acrylic paint lends itself more to pooling than to staining. In The Moors (Plate 4), Frankenthaler used these characteristics to her advantage. Acrylic paints allowed her to create greater contrasts between soft clouds of color and pooled hard-edged masses.

Frankenthaler is very concerned with color. "For me, as a picture develops, color always comes out of drawing. I never start out only with color. I start out as a spacemaker on a flat thing with four corners. But color is the first message on the picture plane. From there, it takes its place as scale and drawing. Color is also extremely important to my "process". It's born out of idea, mood, luck, imagination, risk, into what might even be ugly; then I let it tell me what might/should be used next, until I get the light and order that satisfies to perfection. The result is color and space, I hope, a beautiful message." (Wilkin 1984:8)

Frankenthaler places great importance on aesthetic beauty, therefore she has been criticized for painting beautiful pictures. The critic Sanford Schwartz has written, "She is too proficient about beauty." (Soloman 1989:62) She rejected the gloomy existential color of Abstract Expressionism and developed her own unique color sensibility.



Her palette is wide, yet localized in individual works. She often unifies an image with subtle variations of a general color. Subtle color variations are evident in The Human Edge (Plate 5). For example, The gray shape is divided into two with a denser tone at the left. The orange and pink are denser at the top, and a pale orange horizontal band crosses at the bottom of the larger orange shape. A deep blue horizontal stroke that runs at the bottom of the picture also has subtle tonal variations.

Frankenthaler deals with symmetrical and asymmetrical composition, (the play of the left-side versus the right side.) While the vertical painting Nude (Plate 6) is a play on symmetry, Mother Goose Melody (Plate 7) represents an asymmetrical organization of pictorial weight. In Mother Goose Melody, the left side of the canvas is filled with dense elongated blackish shapes and the right side is open and crossed with looping circles of red and gray.

In Nude, Frankenthaler pushed the white of the canvas forward by filling in the red silhouette implied by the figure. The role reversal of positive/negative space is a "classic" Frankenthaler formal trait.

Another Frankenthaler motif, the square form, appears in the painting Nude. This squared form serves as an abstract pictorial device because it relates or refers to the rectangular limits of the canvas.

Sometimes Frankenthaler's titles identify a general theme. In Mountains and Sea, the central area conveys a

sense of mass and contrasts with a horizontal passage of blue. The painting's general theme, therefore, as indicated by the title, refers to an abstract landscape.

Frankenthaler observed the relationship between Nova Scotia and the painting, "One of the things that struck me was the unique contrast between the great wooded peaks and the horizontal ocean-the mountains and the sea of its title." (Carmean 1989:12)

Frankenthaler's historic role as the originator of the soak-stain style has been written about in great length. John Elderfield and Barbara Rose, for instance, have written insightful monographs on the artist. Most of this literature, however, focuses on Frankenthaler's importance in a historical sense and therefore obscures her personal development within the style.

The visual diversity of Frankenthaler's paintings, from picture to picture, is extreme. As E.C. Goosen observed, "most of our younger artists, instead of addressing themselves to the problems of art search desperately for a trademark. This is hardly Frankenthaler's problem. She has kept the door open by painting pictures rather than variations on a theme. Her pictures tend to be dedicated to themselves." (Goosen 1961:79)

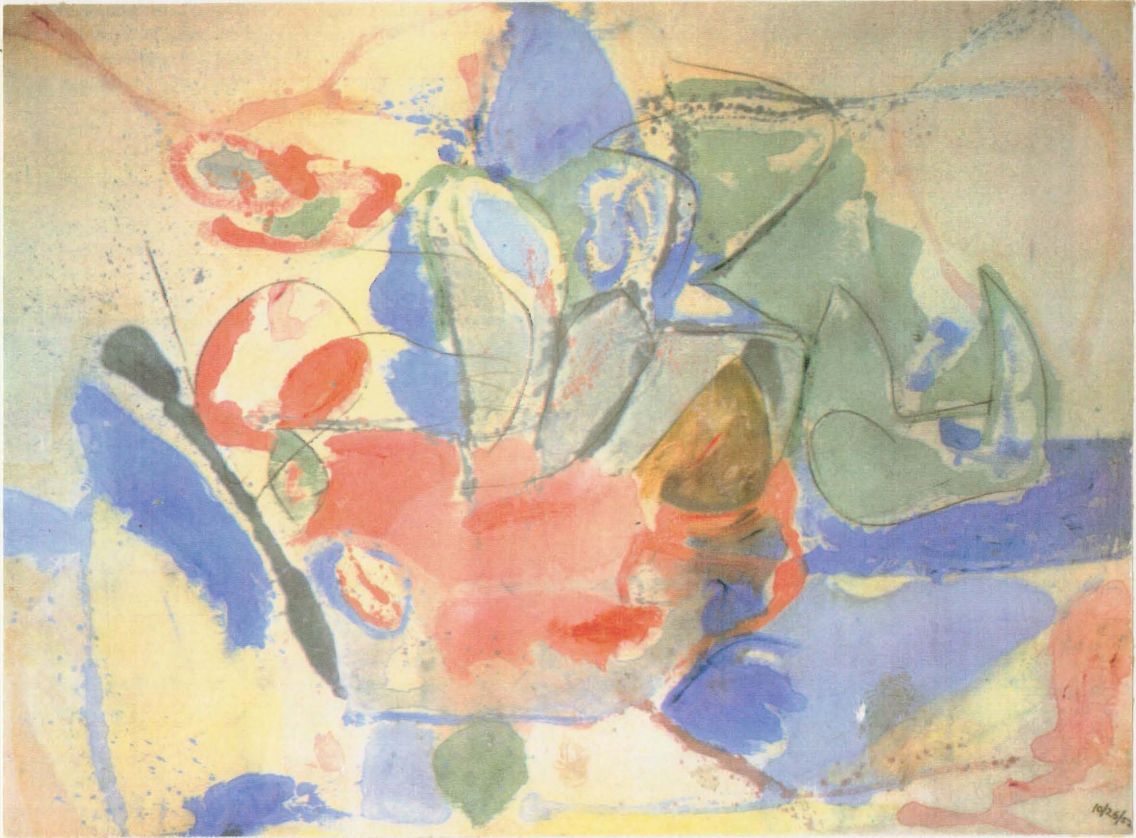


Plate 1. Mountains and Sea.



Plate 2. Las Mayas.



Plate 3. Goya's Mayas on a Balcony.



Plate 4. The Moors.



Plate 5. The Human Edge.



Plate 6. Nude.





Plate 7. Mother Goose Melody.

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