

APRIL SCREEN IV 1972 by H Frankenthaler  
Spotlight Paper by Bev McGill 2017

Artist Background Information  
APRIL SCREEN IV, 1972  
Acrylic on Canvas  
Gifted to PSAM by Steve Chase in 2012

Helen Frankenthaler was born on December 12, 1928 and raised in a wealthy Manhattan family with her two older sisters. Helen, their youngest, was interested in art from early childhood when she would dribble nail polish into a sink full of water to watch the colors flow. Her parents recognized and fostered her artistic talent from a young age, sending her to progressive, experimental schools. The family took many trips in the summertime, and it was during these trips that Frankenthaler developed her love of the landscape, sea, and sky. Her earliest training was with Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo. She attended the Dalton School in New York. Frankenthaler entered Bennington College in 1946 and studied with Paul Feeley. Paul Freely taught her cubism, which is reflected in her earlier paintings. The intellectual atmosphere at Bennington was heady, with instructors like Kenneth Burke, Erich Fromm and Ralph Ellison setting the pace. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1948. She then lived in New York City, although she traveled extensively in Europe.

Frankenthaler's painting style developed in ways counter to the better-known trends of abstract painting during the 1950s. Inspired by Jackson Pollock's black-and-white paintings of 1951, Frankenthaler was influenced by Abstract Expressionist painting practices, but developed her own distinct approach to the style. She invented the "soak-stain" technique, in which she poured turpentine-thinned paint onto canvas, producing luminous color washes that appeared to merge with the canvas and deny any hint of three-dimensional illusionism. Her breakthrough gave rise to the movement promoted by the influential art critic Clement Greenberg as the "next big thing" in American art: Color Field painting, marked by airy compositions that celebrated the joys of pure color and gave an entirely new look and feel to the surface of the canvas.

*"One really beautiful wrist motion, that is synchronized with your head and heart, and you have it" she once said.*

Her staining method emphasized the flat surface over illusory depth, and it called attention to the very nature of paint on canvas, a concern of artists and critics at the time. It also brought a new, open airiness to the painted surface and was credited with releasing color from the gesture approach and romantic rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism.

Helen Frankenthaler more or less stumbled on her stain technique, she said, first using it in creating Mountains and Sea (1952). Produced on her return to New York from a trip to Nova Scotia, the painting is a light-struck, diaphanous evocation of hills, rocks and water. Its delicate balance of drawing and painting, fresh washes of color (predominantly blues and pinks) and breakthrough technique have made it one of her best-known works.

"The landscapes were in my arms as I did it," Frankenthaler told an interviewer. "I didn't realize all that I was doing. I was trying to get at something — I didn't know what until it was manifest."

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Helen Frankenthaler's work influenced Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, who recognized works like *Mountains and Sea* as a mode of abstract painting that moved beyond Pollack's textured, psychologically fraught canvases to compositions almost entirely based on color. On the basis of the soak-stain technique and color wash, Frankenthaler, Louis, and Noland went on to develop Color Field painting. In such works, the entire space of the picture is conceived as a "field" that appears to spread beyond the edges of the canvas; figure and ground became one and the same, and three-dimensional illusionism is completely jettisoned.

In another major departure from first-generation Abstract Expressionism, Frankenthaler was an abstract artist for whom the natural landscape - rather than the existential confrontation with the canvas or search for the sublime - served as the major focus and inspiration. Her pared-down forms were often influenced by her impressions of nature, be they the arid terrain of the American Southwest, a mulberry tree seen in upstate New York, or the Long Island Sound, viewed from the artist's home in Darien, Connecticut.

Later in her career, Frankenthaler applied her breakthrough soak-stain technique to other paint media, most notably, watered-down acrylic, which she used in place of turpentine-thinned paint starting in the 1960s. Subsequently, she also sought to replicate the method's effects in printmaking, creating woodcuts that not only resembled paintings, but also achieved the misty, watercolor-like quality of her color washes.

In 1972, Helen made a less successful foray into sculpture, spending two weeks at Anthony Caro's London studio. With no experience in the medium but aided by a skilled assistant, she welded together found steel parts in a way that evoked the work of David Smith, an American abstract expressionist sculptor and painter.

Frankenthaler showed Louis and Noland *Mountains and Sea* (1952). It clearly reveals the advantages of the staining technique, particularly in the flowing spontaneity of the color areas. Because the thinned pigment soaks naturally into the canvas ground, passages from one color to the next are experienced within a continuous optical field rather than as abrupt jumps from one discrete plane to another. In other words, the space is generated within the acknowledged limits of the two-dimensional canvas surface.

As its title suggests, *Mountains and Sea* bears a lingering resemblance to a natural landscape. In 1989 the editor-in-chief of *American Artist* referred to *Mountains and Sea* as one of the four "landmark paintings in the history of contemporary art." In her work after the early 1950s, Frankenthaler became more abstract in her imagery and devoted increasing attention to the development of her lyrical color sensibility.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Frankenthaler continued to develop her own style, one which emphasizes the notion of beauty. She explored the use of acrylic paints, and her work during this era tended to be larger, simpler, and more geometric than previous pieces. Still, her goal was to capture emotion through the use of color without using scenes or subjects. In the late 1970s she explored cubist ideas of space that she had learned in art school.

Besides her paintings, Frankenthaler is known for her inventive lithographs, etchings and screen prints she produced since 1961. Critics have suggested that her woodcuts have made the most original contribution to printmaking than any other artist.

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In making her first woodcut, *East and Beyond* in 1973, Helen Frankenthaler wanted to make the grainy, unforgiving wood block receptive to the vibrant color and organic, amorphous forms of her own painting. Through trial and error, with technical help from printmaking studios, she succeeded.

For *East and Beyond* which depicts a radiant open space above a graceful mountain like divide, she used a jigsaw to cut separate shapes, then printed the spaces by a specially devised method to eliminate the white lines. The result was a taut but fluid composition so refreshingly removed from traditional woodblock technique that it has had a deep influence on the medium ever since. *East and Beyond* became to contemporary printmaking in the 1970s what Helen Frankenthaler's paint staining in *Mountains and Sea* had been to the development of Color Field painting 20 years earlier.

During the late 1980s critics began to realize more fully how significantly Frankenthaler's work had contributed to the art world. They credit her with many technical achievements and approaches to the use of color during her four decades of creativity. Retrospective exhibitions of her work began to tour museums, even as she continued to create. In late 1996, Eric Gibson, a journalist, noted in *ARTnews*, that her latest round of prints *Spring Run Monotypes*, "convey a wide array of sentiments that were barely noticeable in her earlier works."

Her marriage to Robert Motherwell in 1958 gave the couple an art-world aura. Like her, he came from a well-to-do family, and "the golden couple," as they were known in the cash-poor and backbiting art world of the time, spent several leisurely months honeymooning in Spain and France.

In Manhattan, they removed themselves from the downtown scene and established themselves in a house on East 94th Street, where they developed a reputation for lavish entertaining. The British sculptor Anthony Caro recalled a dinner party they gave for him and his wife on their first trip to New York, in 1959. It was attended by some 100 guests, and he was seated between artist David Smith and the actress Hedy Lamarr.

Frankenthaler and Motherwell were divorced in 1971.

"Helen loved to entertain," said Ann Freedman, the former president of Knoedler & Company, Helen Frankenthaler's dealer at that time. "She enjoyed feeding people and engaging in lively conversation. And she liked to dance. In fact, you could see it in her movements as she worked on her paintings."

Ms. Frankenthaler's passion for dancing was more than fulfilled in 1985 when, at a White House dinner to honor the Prince and Princess of Wales, she was partnered with a fast stepper who had been twirling the princess.

*"I'd waited a lifetime for a dance like this," she wrote in a 1997 Op-Ed article for The New York Times. "He was great!"*

His name meant nothing to her until, on returning to her New York studio, she showed her assistant and a friend his card. "John Travolta.

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In 1994 she married Stephen M. DuBrul Jr., an investment banker who had headed the Export-Import Bank during the Ford administration. In 1999, she and Stephen DuBrul bought a house in Darien, on Long Island Sound. Water, sky and shifting light are often reflected in her later imagery.

As the years passed, her paintings seemed to make more direct references to the visible world. But they sometimes reflected back to the more spontaneous, exuberant and less referential work of her earlier career.

Helen Frankenthaler passed away in 2011.

There is “no formula,” she said in an interview in The New York Times in 2003. “There are no rules. Let the picture lead you where it must go.”

*She never aligned herself with the feminist movement in art that began to surface in the 1970s. “For me, being a ‘lady painter’ was never an issue,” she was quoted as saying in John Gruen’s book “The Party’s Over Now” (1972). “I don’t resent being a female painter. I don’t exploit it. I paint”.*

Helen Frankenthaler Biography, Art and Analysis of works.

[www.theartstory.org](http://www.theartstory.org)

[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

[www.artnet.com](http://www.artnet.com)

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