



Fluid Expressions: The Prints of Helen Frankenthaler

From the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation



Above: *Helen Frankenthaler* using a power tool to carve one of her *Madame Butterfly* woodblocks in *Tyler Graphics Artist Studio*, Mount Kisco, New York, 2000
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Gift of Kenneth Tyler 2002
Photograph: Marabeth Cohen-Tyler

Front cover: *Japanese Maple* 2005
16-color Ukiyo-e style woodcut
26 x 38 in.

Fluid Expressions: The Prints of Helen Frankenthaler

Michaela R. Haffner

Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) believed that a good print “bleeds” the artist’s sensibility. Despite its collaborative process and replicative nature, a successful print should exude the artist’s own “feeling, magic, head, heart.”¹ For more than five decades, Frankenthaler made prints with this resolve, instilling the technical medium with a lyrical verve made famous by her radical “soak-stain” paintings. Although more widely known as a painter, she was an equally inventive printmaker who took risks in a medium not frequently explored by abstract expressionists. This exhibition features the stunning range of print techniques that she innovated and adapted to fit her painterly aesthetic. With vibrant abstractions and luminous washes of color, Frankenthaler’s prints do indeed bleed with a palpable exuberance.

A leading member of the second generation of abstract expressionists, Frankenthaler came of age in the heart of New York’s avant-garde art world. Married to artist Robert Motherwell and close friends with fellow painter Jackson Pollock and art critic Clement Greenberg, she carved out her own successful career in a notoriously male-dominated field. In 1952, Frankenthaler catapulted to fame with her invention of the soak-stain technique, a method of pouring thinned paint onto an unprimed canvas to create a translucent watercolor effect.² Her gestural process—crouching low over a canvas laid on the ground and flicking her wrist to pour the pigment—broadened the practice of Abstract Expressionism and pioneered the Color Field movement.

Keeping with the ethos of postwar art, Frankenthaler’s paintings celebrate the spontaneity of creation. In pooling paint freely on raw canvas, allowing layers of color to flow and seep into neighboring fields of iridescent wash, Frankenthaler’s method embraced chance and emphasized the materiality of the canvas. The artist championed a type of image that “looks as if it were born in a

minute”—effortless, expressive, unstudied—and imbued each work with a pulsating sense of immediacy.³

Understandably, printmaking and its technical, often laborious, process did not immediately resonate with Frankenthaler. When Tatyana Grosman at Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) in West Islip, New York, first approached the painter in 1960 about the possibility of making prints, Frankenthaler was reluctant. “I was very suspicious and full of questions,” she recalled. “It seemed sort of old-fashioned and not the sort of thing that I would be interested in.”⁴ Indeed, many abstract expressionists eschewed the medium because it was antithetical to the direct and instinctive aesthetic they promoted. Printmaking required assistants, long proofing processes, and often resulted in a final print far removed from the initial drawing.

Ultimately, Grosman convinced Frankenthaler of the expressive potential of lithography, and in 1961 the artist printed her initial lithograph, titled *First Stone*, at ULAE. She would go on to make more than two hundred editions of prints over the following five decades, innovating across a full range of techniques—etching, lithography, pochoir, silkscreen, woodcut—and collaborating with workshops at home and abroad. Frankenthaler worked most frequently at ULAE through the 1970s and then at Tyler Graphics Ltd., Bedford Village and Mount Kisco, New York, in the last decades of the twentieth century, finding in both workshops an intimate and collegial collaboration that allowed her the freedom to translate her painterly preoccupations into the graphic medium.

Frankenthaler’s first introduction to printmaking was through lithography, a print medium that most closely paralleled her painting background because it allows for an image to be freely sketched, rather than incised, on the matrix. In the lithograph *The Red Sea* (1978–82), Frankenthaler used tusche wash and crayon to create the image’s diaphanous layers of ink. Foamy swaths of color flow together and pool haphazardly, creating a liquid-surface effect evocative of the print’s title. Printed on pale pink paper with eight colors of ink ranging from light magenta to orange, the lithograph is striking in that it melds the rich colors of the image with that of the paper support.

As a leading member of the Color Field movement, Frankenthaler was particularly interested in this pictorial puzzle of fusing image with support. Her stain paintings of the 1950s had already achieved the optical effect—unprimed canvas



The Red Sea
1978-82
8-color lithograph
24 x 28 in.

allowed paint to seep directly into the cloth instead of resting on top—and lithography offered a new opportunity to continue this investigation. Unlike other print techniques that produced a slightly raised surface, lithography printed the ink flush with the paper, binding picture and paper in one plane. The gossamer yet flat washes of color in works such as *The Red Sea* easily achieve this effect and recall Frankenthaler's belief that "It has to be flat, flat, flat, and also have miles into space."⁵

Although *The Red Sea* has a free-flowing aesthetic that may appear effortless, the lithograph went through twenty trial proofs, many with detailed annotations by Frankenthaler, before arriving at its final composition. From selecting paper and mixing ink to approving registration, Frankenthaler remained intimately involved after completing the initial drawing. Her extensive trial proofs read like a journal of her creative process, each slight alteration signaling both Frankenthaler's learning process and her inclination for sheer experimentation. As the artist once wryly quipped, "I often feel at the end of an edition we should go to the Waldorf or the Mayo clinic."⁶ Alluding to the extreme intensity of the process, which could necessitate either a stiff drink or a stint at a medical facility, Frankenthaler underscored her need to be an active participant until the very end.

Despite Frankenthaler's precision and perfectionism—she insisted on seeing "every hairline of the doing"—her prints exude the same dazzling playfulness as her gestural paintings.⁷ The artist adapted aspects of her soak-stain method for the graphic medium, from pouring pools of ink tusche on the Bavarian stone to installing the print matrices on the ground in order to work above the image. She reflected, "At times I feel that when I'm throwing this tusche down on the stone, it's just like a canvas on the floor in my studio. I want to make the stone have that same gesture and feel."⁸ Frankenthaler's adaptation of printmaking to fit her painterly aesthetic wed the spontaneous and technical impulses of art making.

One of the artist's most significant contributions to the field of printmaking was her resurrection of the woodcut medium. An ancient print technique, the woodcut had largely been abandoned after the German expressionist movement in the first decades of the twentieth century. Although few contemporary artists were working with the medium, Frankenthaler was encouraged by Grosman to make her first woodcut at ULAE in 1973. The woodcut, which would become her "most frustrating, demanding, and satisfying graphic medium," challenged Frankenthaler to fashion her delicate, fluid shapes out of rigid material.⁹ At the same time, wood's



Sanguine Mood
1971
5-color pochoir and
silkscreen
22 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.

granular texture offered the artist an exciting new visual element to incorporate within her translucent, layered compositions.

Frankenthaler redefined the woodcut process through both technique and aesthetic. In many of her early prints, the artist rejected the customary knives and gouges used to carve images into the block's surface. Instead, she wielded a jigsaw to cut out entire wood shapes that were later pieced together to form the image. In some prints, like *Madame Butterfly* (2000), Frankenthaler experimented with using implements such as dental tools and sandpaper to distress, or in her words to "gussy," the surfaces of the blocks.¹⁰ After making her messy cuts and gashes to the wood, Frankenthaler then painted directly onto the panels. Juxtaposing areas of opacity with luminescent veils of ink, the artist allowed the wood grain's striations to materialize through the washes. In *Madame Butterfly*, the use of four different types of wood, more than one hundred different pastel colors, and custom paper that simulated the wood's texture combine to achieve a dazzling effervescence. Frankenthaler's bold experimentation with the woodcut process, employing new methods and tools to achieve her abstract style, ultimately allowed her to infuse life into an ancient and inflexible medium.

Frankenthaler's prolific print career paralleled the American print renaissance during the second half of the twentieth century. With the creation of new graphic workshops, including ULAE in 1957, the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in 1960, and Tyler Graphics Ltd. in 1974, the print medium received long-overdue funding, technical modernization, and artistic attention. Frankenthaler's collaboration with ULAE and Tyler Graphics Ltd. placed her in the vanguard of this graphic revival and inspired diverse innovation across printing methods. Beyond lithographs and woodcuts, Frankenthaler worked adventurously in aquatint, etching, Mixografia, pochoir, and silkscreen. Her etchings such as *Sure Violet* (1979) are remarkable for their ethereal fields of overprinted color, while her Mixografia prints like *Tahiti* (1989) capitalize on a proprietary print process to create dynamic three-dimensional relief surfaces. The raised linear abstractions of *Tahiti* recall impasto painting with their thick and sumptuous marks, challenging traditional notions of print aesthetics.

Frankenthaler continued to make prints until several years before her death in 2011. The last decade of her career saw immense success with the creation of a group of silkscreens that fully captured her painterly style in the graphic medium. Leaving behind the flat color fields of early stencil prints like *Sanguine Mood* (1971)



Madame Butterfly
2000
102-color woodcut
41 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 79 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.



Flirt
2003
42-color silkscreen
26 ⁷/₈ x 39 ¹/₄ in.

and *Green Likes Mauve* (1970), Frankenthaler imbued her silkscreens from the early 2000s with the unfettered animation of the abstract expressionist movement. Looking at *Grey Fireworks* (2000) from afar, it is easy to mistake the print's milky translucency and splatters of pigment for that of an oil painting. Foggy veils of pastel colors are punctuated by bursts of blue, mauve, and orange, evoking the night sky and fireworks referenced in the title. Similarly, Frankenthaler's fluid squeegee marks in blue and pink ink in *Flirt* (2003) trick the eye in their painterly application. The saturated layer of ink on the print's surface, with its apparent continuation beyond the edge of the paper sheet, conjures the free-flowing aesthetic of oil painting or watercolor.

An intrepid innovator and brilliant artist, Frankenthaler expanded the technical and aesthetic possibilities of the print discipline. While her prints share the lyricism and luminosity of her iconic stain paintings, their profound sensitivity in a medium driven by scientific process and replication is unparalleled. Her etchings, lithographs, and most especially woodcuts inspired a fertile period of printmaking and continue to reverberate today in their sheer experimentation. Unlike many printmakers, Frankenthaler did not gravitate toward the medium for its ability to reproduce and share images quickly and economically across a broad audience. Her print editions were small and her process was meticulous, some editions taking several years to complete. Despite the medium's daunting challenges, Frankenthaler lived for what she called the "magic moments" in printmaking—the moments when everything aligns, from the weather to the weight of the



Grey Fireworks
2000
63-color silkscreen
27 ³/₄ x 46 ¹/₂ in.



Sure Violet
1979
13-color sugar-lift
etching, aquatint and
drypoint
31 x 43 in.

sponge, so that “it happens.”¹¹ Richly colorful and alive with imagination, her prints embrace chance and bleed with a powerful creative energy.

Michaela R. Haffner is a Curatorial Assistant at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas.

- 1 Ruth Fine, *Helen Frankenthaler: Prints* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1993), 13.
- 2 For an overview of Frankenthaler's career, see Pegram Harrison, *Frankenthaler: A Catalogue Raisonné: Prints, 1961–1994* (New York: Abrams, 1996).
- 3 Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, *Helen Frankenthaler Prints, 1961–1979* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980. Published in association with Williams College, Artist-in-Residence Program), 29.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 5 Karen Wilkin, “Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011),” *American Art* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 101.
- 6 Clark Art Institute, *Helen Frankenthaler Prints*, 28.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 29–30.
- 9 Fine, *Helen Frankenthaler*, 22.
- 10 For background on Frankenthaler's woodcut technique, see Judith Goldman, *Frankenthaler: The Woodcuts* (Naples, FL: Naples Museum of Art, 2002).
- 11 Clark Art Institute, *Helen Frankenthaler Prints*, 30.



Tahiti
1989
5-color Mixografia
32 x 54 in.



Green Likes Mauve
1970
3-color pochoir
22 x 30 ½ in.

Collector's Statement

Jordan D. Schnitzer

Growing up in Portland, Oregon, where I still reside, I bought my first painting when I was fourteen years old, from my mother's contemporary northwest art gallery, The Fountain Gallery of Art. That initial purchase—of Louis Bunce's *Sanctuary*—was the start of a lifelong passion for art. While my first love has been artists of the Pacific Northwest, who I think are some of the best artists anywhere, I began in the late 1980s to also collect contemporary prints and multiples of the major American artists of our time. As word spread about my growing collection, several museums contacted me for exhibitions. I soon found that sharing the work from my collection was even more exciting than the joy I feel in collecting art. This led to developing an art exhibition program that over the last twenty-five years has resulted in organizing more than one hundred exhibitions from my collection that have been exhibited at eighty-five museums.

After having loaned Frankenthaler's prints to the Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art in Tulsa, I was excited when Curatorial Assistant Michaela Haffner from the Amon Carter Museum of American Art approached me about expanding the exhibition and traveling it to Fort Worth. Following the conversation with Michaela, we were approached by Patricia Phagan, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College, who also expressed interest in the exhibition and we were delighted to add them to the tour.

Michaela's essay about this exhibition is extremely informative. She helps us all better understand the amazing role Helen Frankenthaler played in the context of her contemporaries and her groundbreaking approach in making prints.

My sincere appreciation and thanks to Andrew Walker, Director of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, who was wonderfully supportive about this exhibition, and Michaela for her vision of wanting an exhibition of Frankenthaler's prints. Exhibitions Manager Alessandra Guzman has managed all the exhibition details flawlessly. As with any exhibition, there are so many others behind the scenes, and from all of us who sometimes take for granted how easy it looks to mount an exhibition like this, our sincerest thanks go to all of you!

I have often said that waking up without art around me would be like waking up without the sun. Art illuminates the world around me and inspires me in countless ways. I hope that everyone who visits this exhibition comes away inspired by the way Helen Frankenthaler's art brings us joy and enriches our lives.



Aerie
2009
93-color silkscreen
30 x 39 in.

Acknowledgments

In the same collaborative spirit as Helen Frankenthaler's printmaking, this exhibition and its accompanying publication were a collective effort by those at the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation (JSFF) in Portland, Oregon, and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas. First and foremost, we are grateful to Jordan Schnitzer for sharing his collection of prints by a passionate and pioneering artist whose work continues to set the standard for innovative printmaking today. We are indebted to the whole team at the JSFF for making this show successful, most especially Catherine Malone, who worked diligently to provide us with invaluable information about the collection, as well as Phil Kovacevich and Sigrid Asmus for their graphic design and editorial expertise. At the Amon Carter, we wish to thank Maggie Adler, Stefanie Ball, Lorraine Bond, Will Gillham, Alessandra Guzman, Stacey Kelly, Shirley Reece-Hughes, Claudia Sanchez, Tim Smith, Jodie Utter, and the curatorial and installation-services teams for working to give Helen Frankenthaler her more-than-deserved attention and regard.

Exhibition Schedule

Sherwin Miller Museum
of Jewish Art, Tulsa,
Oklahoma

July 7 – September 18,
2016

Amon Carter Museum of
American Art, Fort Worth,
Texas

March 18 –
September 10, 2017

Frances Lehman Loeb Art
Center, Vassar College,
New York

October 6 –
December 10, 2017



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