

## *Lise's Supper*, 1960

Helen Frankenthaler (b.1928), Oil on unsized canvas, H. 70.5 x W. 76.25 inches, Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of Mari and James A. Michener. Copyright 2009 Helen Frankenthaler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



### Biography

Helen Frankenthaler was born in New York City in 1928. She had three brothers and sisters. Her father was State Supreme Court Justice Alfred Frankenthaler and her mother, Martha Lowenstein, worked at home. Helen went to elementary, middle, and high school at The Dalton School in New York. There she studied with the famous Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo. Throughout her early years, she loved working with paper – painting it, printing on it and making collages.

She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Bennington College in Vermont, traveled throughout Europe, and then moved back to New York City. She met a very important art critic named Clement Greenberg who introduced her to the major figures in New York's avant-garde art world. Inspired by a Jackson Pollock exhibit, Frankenthaler began experimenting with different techniques, which led to her renowned stain paintings and thus secured her place in the world as a prominent artist. She married fellow artist Robert Motherwell. She had art studios in New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut.

### How big is *Lise's Supper*?

*Lise's Supper* measures close to six feet wide by six feet high. That means it is bigger than three doors in your house! How would you make a painting this big?

### How does Helen Frankenthaler make her paintings?

Helen Frankenthaler painted canvas like watercolors and her works on paper like oil paintings. For her canvasses, she often painted with the stain technique that she innovated during the early 1950's. She "watered down" her oil paint with paint thinner so it would be runny and drippy when she brushed or poured it on her canvas. Her paintings on paper are thickly layered with oil or acrylic paint and mixed media so they did not run or drip by themselves. How much of her paintings seem planned and how much seem accidental? Move your arm and your body the way you think Helen did when she made this painting. Can you tell why her style of work is called Abstract Expressionism?

### Why is the painting *Lise's Supper* in a museum? My baby sister could have made it!

Helen Frankenthaler is a modern artist. That means her artwork was influenced by all the changes that took place in art and culture in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>



century. She was an inventor and an innovator, and also a woman. Museums feel the contributions she made to change the face of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century make her an important artist in history.

Like every other art movement in history, Modern Art was influenced by world events, and changes in culture, technology, and attitudes in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The World Wars were over, television was popular, and almost everyone owned a car. Rock and Roll took over the music scene. People started dressing differently, and society became more open. The camera was there to record events, so artists could experiment more with their materials. Artists became more expressive. Most importantly, Helen Frankenthaler was an inventor of an art style when other artists were still making art that looked like things in real life. It was also important that she was a female artist in a time when men were the most famous makers of art in the United States. Museums have collected her art for all these reasons.

### **This painting still doesn't look like anything to me!**

When you first look at the art of Helen Frankenthaler, it appears to be non-representational. That means it doesn't look like anything. However, her work is actually based on real or imaginary landscape and still-life compositions. Do you see anything in *Lise's Supper* that reminds you nature? Of still life objects sitting on a table? Why do you think she titled the work *Lise's Supper*?

### **But it's hard to tell what this painting is about.**

Some modern artists think that the viewer, or the person looking at a work of art, has to work as hard as the artist who created it. Some modern artists think that doing this work – looking carefully, making discoveries and understanding - is fun. How is this true with Helen Frankenthaler's work? Are there other things you look at or use that also force you to look hard, make discoveries and understand?

### **Did Helen Frankenthaler do artwork other than paintings?**

Helen Frankenthaler has made so many works of art in her life that it is hard to keep count! Artist's work always changes over time, as they grow older, meet new people, have new experiences and learn new things. Helen Frankenthaler is no different – many of her works of art are similar, while some are very different. Helen Frankenthaler is considered a very important figure in modern art. So are Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollack. If you learn more about these two artists, you will learn that there are some things about all three artists' styles and beliefs about art that are very similar.

Helen Frankenthaler is most famous for her paintings, but she created a lot of other kinds of art as well. In addition to her paintings and drawings, Frankenthaler produced welded steel sculptures. She worked in ceramics, prints, and illustrated books, and in 1985 she designed the sets and costumes for a production by England's Royal Ballet.



## Learn More

The Michener Museum also has paintings in its collection created by women artists who painted in the same style or during the same time period as Frankenthaler. View some of their work and answer some questions in the activity sheet “Women Artists and Styles,” on this website.

Play a guessing game about up close photos of everyday objects in the activity on this website entitled “Look Up Close.”

Experiment with a new art form and create some unusual results with the activity all about wet on wet watercolor painting, on this website.

## Related Images

To learn more about Helen Frankenthaler and see more of her art work, visit the website of the [National Museum of Women in the Arts](#) in Washington, DC.

To learn about several works of art created by Helen Frankenthaler, visit the website of the [Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York.

## Related Links

To learn more about the Abstract Expressionist art movement, visit the website of the [Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York City.

To learn more about the famous Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo, look at the [Albright Knox Art Gallery](#) in Buffalo, New York.

Watch a PBS film about Helen Frankenthaler’s husband [Robert Motherwell](#).

