

# OBSERVER

## 50 Years of Groundbreaking Work: Kunstmuseum Basel Puts Helen Frankenthaler Front and Center

"We need to move beyond the mythology of tortured masculine genius through which Abstract Expressionism has so often been framed."

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Helen Frankenthaler in her studio on East 83rd Street in New York, with *April Mood* (1974) in the background. Photo: Alexander Liberman, © J. Paul Getty Trust, Works © 2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc / ProLitteris, Zurich.

In 1950s New York, The Irascibles was the name given to a group of Abstract Expressionists who protested a “monster” exhibition at the Met, “American Painting Today—1950.” Eighteen artists signed the boycott, including Rothko, Motherwell, de Kooning and Pollock. Thus began the image-making of hard-hitting, hard-drinking, fierce, trailblazing male artists. Unfortunately, as so often in history, the women were left out except as support for the men—[Lee Krasner](#) with Pollock, and [Elaine De Kooning](#) with Willem. Fortunately, thanks in part to their famous husbands, [some of these women were able to make names for themselves as artists](#). But the way has never been easy for

women, in any field.

That same year, I met [Helen Frankenthaler](#), an educated, wealthy young woman. Because she was beautiful and had the money to train as an artist and rent a large studio in New York, she caught the eye of the powerful art critic [Clement Greenberg](#). During their nearly six years together, they often went to see exhibitions. In 1956, she separated from Greenberg and traveled to Europe, visiting museums. Her work became freer and more self-confident—not surprising, as she was no longer under his opinionated eye. She married [Robert Motherwell](#) in 1958, one of the Irascibles and a famous artist in his own right. She remained with him for 13 years, and throughout that time, they each retained their individual studios. During this period, in 1960, she received her first retrospective at the Jewish Museum. She was 31.

Being beautiful and wealthy certainly opened many doors for Frankenthaler, but that is not the real story. Because she had family money, she could be independent, work in her own studio on her own terms, get the training she felt she needed and arrive in New York when the art scene was charged with vigor and innovation. We also need to consider what the men in her life took from her—not just as an attractive appendage, but because she was extremely intelligent and an independent thinker. Like many women, she was a force to be reckoned with. She never stopped experimenting, taking huge risks with her work that resulted in groundbreaking techniques, like her soak-stain paintings (large-scale, unprimed canvases created by pouring paint directly onto the surface). This was only the beginning. She also made prints, woodblocks and sculpture, and even designed sets and costumes for the Royal Ballet. For 50 years, she never worked in a series, always pushing herself to find new ways of creating. She is a pioneer in the art world.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Sesame*, 1970. Acrylic and felt-tip pen on canvas, 269.2 x 209.6 cm. © 2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ProLitteris, Zurich, photo: Tim Pyle, courtesy Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York

Fast forward to the present. Two years ago, [Kunstmuseum Basel hired only its second female director in more than 350 years](#)—and the first American to lead it. (Institutions like the Met and MoMA have still never had a female director. There is almost no other American leading a major European art institution, even though a number of Europeans lead major American ones.) I recently had a long conversation with director [Elena Filipovic](#)—an art historian by training, she is now two years into the job. Previously, she served as director of the Kunsthalle Basel for nearly 10 years, another important institution in the city devoted to young, emerging artists. “Helen Frankenthaler” is the first major show of an American artist that Filipovic has programmed at the museum. In the months before she started the job, she had negotiated the gift of Frankenthaler’s *Riverhead* (1962) from the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation to the museum. “It’s a bold, monumental example of Frankenthaler’s greatness, and holds its own alongside the key works of abstraction made by men that for too long were alone in the room,” Filipovic said. “Its arrival at Kunstmuseum proved to be a catalyst for the first institutional exhibition of the artist in all of Switzerland, and the biggest in Europe. Helen Frankenthaler is one of those artists whose influence is everywhere, and yet whose central place in the history of postwar abstraction still has not been fully acknowledged, and even less so in Europe.”

The exhibition showcases 52 years of Frankenthaler's work. An important addition is a group of paintings she made in response to other artists—Derain, Mondrian, Fabritius, [Marie Laurencin](#), [Titian](#) and [Hiroshige](#). The museum was able to borrow these specific pieces to hang beside Frankenthaler's, giving viewers a deeper look at just how singular she was. She didn't copy her sources literally but captured their mood, their color, their essential feeling. With [Édouard Manet's](#) *Fish (Still Life)*, for instance, she explores the work through blocks of his color, a black slash for the knife, a surge of white at the center for the fish and a block of brick red above it for the copper pot. The scale contrast is striking too—her vast canvases beside the smaller referenced paintings. [John Elderfield](#), who wrote the major monograph on her work, calls these responses "paraphrasing." [Karen Wilkin](#), a friend of Frankenthaler, has written an excellent and insightful essay in the museum catalogue; she had been planning with Frankenthaler to mount a show of exactly these comparisons before the artist passed away.



Edouard Manet, *Fish (Still Life)*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 73.5 x 92.4 cm. Courtesy the Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Larned Coburn Memorial Collection



Helen Frankenthaler, *For E.M.*, 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 181 x 292.7 cm. © 2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ProLitteris, Zurich, photo Rob McKeever, courtesy Gagosian

Discussing Frankenthaler's "privilege" with Filipovic, she said: "At a moment when women were expected to be doting wives without professional aspirations or, at best, secretaries, Frankenthaler's financial independence gave her the freedom to devote herself fully to painting. This is not an insignificant detail. But the story that is sometimes told is that she came from privilege, was beautiful, dated Clement Greenberg—then the most influential critic of his generation—and later married fellow artist Robert Motherwell. But that framing diminishes her very real artistic achievements rather than acknowledging the misogyny embedded in the culture of the time. Yes, Frankenthaler used her family's financial support to give herself the freedom to take artistic risks rather than producing the kinds of paintings that might have been expected of a woman artist at the time. And regarding the men in her life: the assumption is that the flow of intellect, influence, and power only went in one direction. But, how much did Clement Greenberg take from Frankenthaler as he was forging a new way of looking at and writing about the art of the time? And how much did Motherwell take from Frankenthaler? Because between the lines of the stories that point to the men in her life is the assumption that influence moved toward her, rather than also from her. I'd like to challenge that."



Helen Frankenthaler, *Riverhead*, 1963. Acrylic on canvas, 208.9 x 363.2 cm. © 2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ProLitteris, Zurich, Kunstmuseum Basel, Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc., photo: Max Ehrenguber.

Filipovic feels that for many people who don't yet know Frankenthaler's work, this exhibition will be a revelation. "Many visitors may well ask themselves: Why have we not seen more of her in European collections? Why has the history of Abstract Expressionism so often been taught primarily through its male protagonists? Women artists were not simply sidelined; many were fundamentally under-recognized. Why has it taken so long to rethink the ways art history is taught and represented in public institutions? The idea of a masterpiece is never neutral or divinely ordained. It is constructed through markets, collectors, institutions, critics, and historical narratives. And all of this reflects broader societal structures, including the ways women and artists of color continue to be perceived differently from the canonized figures who dominate so much of art history. For me, there's a real urgency in revisiting the histories we have inherited. People often imagine that exhibitions like this simply add overlooked figures to an existing story. But Frankenthaler does more than expand the narrative of Abstract Expressionism—she fundamentally reshapes it. We need to move beyond the mythology of tortured masculine genius through which Abstract Expressionism has so often been framed: swagger, excess, self-destruction, heroism. In the process, women artists whose work was equally radical and consequential were too often pushed to the margins of the story."

The exhibition catalogue, designed by [Verena Gerlach](#) and published by Deutscher Kunstverlag, is beautifully illustrated and features excellent essays by curator [Anita Haldemann](#) and Karen Wilkin. The front and back covers reproduce Frankenthaler's colorful *April Mood* (1974), and when unfolded, the covers span nearly 3.5 feet—a fitting reminder of the artist's scale. Frankenthaler's paintings are often enormous: 60, 70, 80 inches across, with one measuring 14 feet by nearly 15 feet. She had things to say, and she said them for over 50 years, without cease. She has long carried the image of a privileged artist, but she is something far more complex and deserves far more attention. It is significant that the Kunstmuseum Basel is giving her that attention now; 2028 will mark the 100th anniversary of Frankenthaler's birth, and there will be major shows at SFMOMA, the Whitney

and the National Gallery in Washington, followed by a tour. Finally.

**[Helen Frankenthaler](#)** is at Kunstmuseum Basel through August 23, 2026.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Cloud Burst*, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 201.3 x 173.4 cm. © 2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ProLitteris, Zurich, photo Dan Bradica