

Helen Frankenthaler: A Grand Sweep

Describing her painting *Chairman of the Board* (1971), Helen Frankenthaler said that the work “was about a grand sweep. I had the basic idea in my head—I knew how the lines would dance in. I felt sure of myself.” This statement speaks to the artist’s ambition to paint on a monumental scale, and her confidence in doing so, two decades after her breakthrough moment at the height of Abstract Expressionism in midcentury New York. At the same time, the phrase—*a grand sweep*—also reflects the expansive arc of Frankenthaler’s long career and its continuous innovations.

The paintings gathered here offer a succinct exploration of Frankenthaler’s constant experimentation. In the 1950s, the artist developed a signature technique of pouring thinned oil paint onto raw canvas, allowing the medium to soak into the support. The result was a uniquely atmospheric language of abstraction. By the early 1960s, she shifted to acrylic paint, which allowed for more defined edges and led to a new emphasis on shape. Attentive to the relationship between painting and landscape, Frankenthaler considered these forms in terms that evoke geography, as “districts” or “territories.” By the late 1980s, such material investigations yielded compositions like the moodily resonant *Toward Dark* (1988), a recent acquisition making its MoMA debut.

Ultimately, each development contributes to a distinctive whole. “I’ve explored a variety of directions and themes over the years,” Frankenthaler reflected, “But I think in all my painting you can see the signature of one artist, the work of one wrist.”

Organized by Samantha Friedman, Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, with Elizabeth Wickham, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture.

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Hear archival audio of Helen Frankenthaler and a curator’s reflections on key moments in the artist’s career. Scan the QR code below to listen on the free Bloomberg Connects digital guide.



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