

Helen Frankenthaler

American, 1928–2011

Jacob's Ladder 1957

Oil on canvas

Gift of Hyman N. Glickstein, 1960

With its areas of thinned oil paint soaked into raw canvas, this work demonstrates the staining technique that would become Frankenthaler's signature contribution to abstract painting. While this process was experimental within the context of New York's midcentury art world, the painting's title and composition have a more traditional reference: Spanish painter José de Ribera's biblically themed *Jacob's Dream* (1639), which Frankenthaler had admired several years earlier at Madrid's Museo Nacional del Prado. "The picture developed (bit by bit while I was working on it) into shapes symbolic of an exuberant figure and ladder," she explained, "therefore *Jacob's Ladder*."



José de Ribera. *Jacob's Dream*. 1639. Oil on canvas, 5' 10 ½" × 7' 7 ½" (179 × 232.9 cm). Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.
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Commune 1969

Acrylic on canvas

Gift of the artist, 1970

With a single shape suspended within an unprimed, unpainted, square canvas, *Commune* represents a radically reduced approach to abstraction. Frankenthaler painted it in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where she spent summers for more than a decade. "In the late '60s I wanted to try my hand at more geometric shapes than I had been painting previously," she explained. With its bleeding edges and subtle variations, however, this shape is neither crisply delineated nor uniformly flat.

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Chairman of the Board 1971

Acrylic and felt-tip pen on canvas

Nina and Gordon Bunshaft Bequest, 1994

Hear how Frankenthaler explored a sense of “limitlessness” in her work. Scan the QR code below, or enter the number on moma.org/audio.



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“Big sweep; big scale,” Frankenthaler declared about this painting, her second largest at the time that she made it. She referred to the negative space of raw canvas cutting through the orange, horizontal expanse as a “crevice/cable”: as if it were at once a fissure and a cord. Describing the lines that “‘bridge the gap’ literally— from the outside to the inside of the crevice,” the artist noted that they “were made all at once, in one ‘fell swoop.’”

Helen Frankenthaler

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Mauve District 1966

Acrylic on canvas

Mrs. Donald B. Straus Fund, 1968

Explore the role of edges and corners in Frankenthaler's work. Scan the QR code below, or enter the number on moma.org/audio.



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In the 1960s, Frankenthaler shifted away from oil paint and embraced acrylic as her primary medium, facilitating a new emphasis on shape, after a period devoted to gesture. This is evident in *Mauve District*, a painting that, she reflected, “relates to a theme which appears on-and-off, of pictures that often have one central vast shape, ‘district,’ or ‘territory.’” The geographical sense of those words is, perhaps, not accidental: “If I am forced to associate,” Frankenthaler acknowledged, “I think of my pictures as explosive landscapes, worlds and distances held on a flat surface.”

Helen Frankenthaler

American, 1928–2011

Toward Dark 1988

Acrylic on canvas

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation,
2023

"I often want to experiment with the different ways I know myself," Frankenthaler once said of her work. To hear more from the artist, scan the QR code below, or enter the number on moma.org/audio.



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Reflecting on the arc of her practice over decades of painting, Frankenthaler expressed: "I am essentially true to my own wrist or signature; a continuity with visible changes and developments along the way." While this late painting retains the play between surface and space that continuously preoccupied the artist, she imbues that formal negotiation with a newly somber mood. Flickering at the edges of a velvety-black chasm, thinner veils of lighter pigment and judicious strokes of thick color combine to produce a mysterious nocturne.