

Blue Atmosphere

by Helen Frankenthaler

Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on canvas
- Date: c. 1963
- Size: 50 x 67 cm
- Location: Gemaldegalerie, Berlin
- Genre: Portrait
- Style: Baroque
- Frankenthaler used a technique called "stain painting." This method allows the paint to soak into the paper, mixing the beautiful bright colors.

Artist Facts

- Born, December 1928 in Manhattan
- Died December 27, 2011 (age 83)
- Frankenthaler had wealthy parents and the opportunity to go to good schools. In high school she was able to travel and she took some of her classes in Mexico.
- As a young woman she met famous artist, Jackson Pollock, who was very inspirational to her. His style of painting was to splatter paint on a canvas that was on the floor. Helen didn't copy Pollock's style, but she did develop her own unique style.
- She was thought of as a pioneer and the first artist to use "soak and stain" method. Helen thinned her paint, and used a non-primed canvas, which let the color soak in. She would pour the paint onto the canvas instead of using a brush and leave the splatter marks and drips to show the process of her work.
- Her and Pollock's work are considered Abstract Expressionism. Abstract means there are no recognizable, natural shapes in the artwork, and Expressionism means that the artist was trying to "express" his or her feelings by the way that they painted.
- Abstract Expressionism (also known as "action painting") contains these aspects:
 - Artists apply paint to usually large canvases rapidly with force and using big gestures
 - Artists try to transfer their feelings and emotions onto the canvas by the way they paint and through the use of color. (Example: ask students, if you wanted to paint LOVE without using an object like a heart what color would you use? How about anger? Happiness? Sadness? Nervousness? Embarrassment, guilt, shyness, pride, etc.)
 - non-objective abstract art with no objects or even geometric shapes
 - Artwork appears to look accidental, but is really planned out by the artist
 - The expressive manner in which the artist painted the artwork was often considered as important as the painting itself
- In 1960 the term Color Field painting was used to describe the work of Frankenthaler. Color Field painting is a style of abstract painting that emerged in New York City during the 1940s and 1950s. It was inspired by European modernism and closely related to Abstract Expressionism, while many of its notable early proponents were among the pioneering Abstract Expressionists. Color Field is characterized primarily by large fields of

flat, solid color spread across or stained into the canvas creating areas of unbroken surface and a flat picture plane. The movement places less emphasis on gesture, brushstrokes and action in favour of an overall consistency of form and process. In color field painting "color is freed from objective context and becomes the subject in itself."

- Helen experimented in other forms of art like sculpture and illustrations for books. She also taught art at universities like, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale.
- Frankenthaler received a Lifetime Achievement Award and had countless one-woman exhibitions.

Key Element of Design to Teach

- **Value** is the use of light and dark in an art piece. Higher values are described as being light and lower values are referred to as being dark. In painting, value is often referred to as tint and shade. Tint is light and shade is dark.

Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach Value

- What is your eye drawn to in this painting?
- What do you notice when you first look at the painting?
- Do you see any shapes?
- Point out the lighter and darker values in the painting and how the artist creates darker shades by adding black and lighter tints by adding white.
- Have the students squint at the painting to help them distinguish the light areas from the dark ones. (Dark areas will fade back when you squint.)

Keywords

- Value, Shapes, Abstract Expressionism, Non Objective

Other Possible Questions and Suggestions

- What do you see? Color, shapes? (Outlines with space inside creates shapes)
- Are they geometric or organic shapes? (organic)
- Do the shapes look like anything? (Maybe clouds? Ask the kids if they have ever lay on their backs and looked up at the sky and tried to find shapes in the clouds. Explain that that is how abstract art is. Everyone who looks at it will be able to find something different, and it means something different to everyone who looks at it.)
- Does it look like the artist used a brush-why or why not?
- How do you think she did it? (Show the picture of her pouring paint out of large buckets. Talk about how it is different than Jackson Pollock who flung paint off of his brush.)
- Do you think she planned where she poured the paint or just did it with no planning? (She planned where she wanted things, but there was also the element of chance because she did not have complete control over where the paint would go.)
- Drop food coloring onto art paper. Show how the value changes as the color spreads. The place where the drop is concentrated will be a darker value. The place where it spreads across the paper will be a lighter value. You can also show what happens when you drop one color over another and they mix. It might work better if the first color has already dried.

- What colors do you see? Do these certain colors make you feel one way or another? (You can ask the kids what color they would use to show love: red, happy: yellow, sad: blue, angry: red, etc. Talk about what they think the red in this painting might mean. Love? Anger?)
- Do you see shapes on top of one another? (painted and dried then painted on top)
- Does this change the color?
- Does the painting make you feel a certain way?
- How do you think Helen Frankenthaler was feeling on the day she created this painting?
- Why do you think she called it Blue Atmosphere?
- What would you call it?