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How Helen Frankenthaler's Color-Soaked Canvases Won over the Art Market

Justin Kamp



Portrait of Helen Frankenthaler at work in her studio, 1969. Photo by Ernst Haas/Hulton Archive. Image via Getty Images.

This past June, at a Sotheby's dedicated online sale of works from the collection of Ginny Williams, Helen Frankenthaler's monumental 1975 painting *Royal Fireworks* went to the auction block with an estimate of \$2 million to \$3 million. The last time the 13-foot-long canvas had come to the secondary market was nearly a decade earlier, at a Christie's New York sale in 2011, where Williams bought it for \$818,500, setting the auction record for a Frankenthaler work. By the time the painting's expansive ocher-stained vistas and veins of cerulean returned to the auction floor last summer, the excitement around Frankenthaler had grown a fair amount, her work having been the subject of a smattering of solo shows at Gagosian, and many of her paintings selling above the \$1 million mark on the secondary market. When the hammer came down on *Royal Fireworks* this time, the painting sold for an astounding \$7.8 million — more than double the existing Frankenthaler auction record, and more than nine times the price Williams paid for it in 2011.

The astronomical appreciation of *Royal Fireworks* is perhaps the best encapsulation of Helen Frankenthaler's market ascendancy, which, over the course of the last decade, has demonstrated how growing recognition of her work is cementing her legacy as a pioneering member of Abstract Expressionism.

Frankenthaler's career began in 1950, just a year after her graduation from Bennington College, when the painter Adolph Gottlieb selected her painting *Beach* (1950) for inclusion in the group show "Fifteen Unknowns" at Samuel Kootz's gallery. Her success continued the following year, when she showed in Tibor De Nagy's "The New Generation" exhibition as well as the seminal 9th Street exhibition, where the members of the embryonic Abstract Expressionist movement first announced themselves on the world stage.

Despite this impressive early pedigree, however, Frankenthaler's career did not initially take off to the same degree as some of her Ab-Ex contemporaries like Jackson Pollock, who was already being hailed as "the greatest living artist" in the pages of *Life* magazine, or Franz Kline, who, by the end of 1955, had been included in three Whitney Annuals focused on contemporary painting.

In 1952, Frankenthaler began work on her painting *Mountains and Sea*, a defining work in the development of the burgeoning Color Field movement. The piece was the first example of Frankenthaler's hallmark soak-stain method of painting, in which the artist thinned her oil paint with turpentine to a watery consistency and then poured it across an unprimed canvas laid flat on the floor, an orientation she came to after watching Pollock work at his studio on Long Island.

When *Mountains and Sea* debuted in early 1953 at Frankenthaler's second Tibor De Nagy show, the work failed to sell, and the show was met with a lukewarm critical reception. Though the soak-stain method would go on to influence a generation of Color Field painters, most notably Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, collectors at the time were simply not interested.



Helen Frankenthaler, Mountains and Sea, 1952. © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Gagosian.

According to Elizabeth Smith, the executive director at the Frankenthaler Foundation, while collectors took a while to warm to Frankenthaler's work, critical and institutional spheres were attuned to her import early on. "During the first decade of Frankenthaler's career, museums demonstrated strong responses to the innovations of her painting," Smith said. "Several major works were acquired by institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the

Museum of Modern Art in the 1950s....By the end of that decade, she had won first prize in painting at the Première Biennale de Paris in 1959.” She continued exhibiting at Tibor De Nagy throughout the 1950s, and in 1959, she signed to Andre Emmerich, who showed her work in New York over the next four decades.

While Emmerich helped Frankenthaler’s work connect with more collectors, it wasn’t until a retrospective at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1960 that a wider base of collectors finally began to catch on to the value of her work, Smith said. By the end of that decade, after Frankenthaler had represented the U.S. at the 1966 Venice Biennale and had been the subject of a 1969 Whitney retrospective that traveled to the U.K. and Germany, her collector base had finally begun to establish itself.

As collectors began to catch up, Frankenthaler was already perfecting the aspect of her practice that would be the engine of her market for years to come: her bold, expressive use of color. To date, eight out of the top 10 highest prices for a Frankenthaler work at auction have been achieved by paintings from the 1970s. According to Saara Pritchard, a senior specialist of contemporary art at Sotheby’s, this is no coincidence. “Most of the works that are reaching high prices are paintings from the 1970s, because by then, the works are so fully saturated in color,” Pritchard said. “She’s really figured out how to layer the colors, as opposed to just working more in detail.”



Helen Frankenthaler, Carousel, 1979. © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Sotheby’s.

Smith offered a similar viewpoint. “One might describe her paintings of the 1950s as more gestural and expressionistic, in keeping with her roots in Abstract Expressionism, whereas in the 1960s her work evolved in a bolder, more simplified, and graphic direction, alternating from canvases that are relatively reductive in terms of their forms to those in which the surfaces are flooded with paint,” she said. “In the 1970s she experimented with a renewed engagement with line and also with the making of paintings that were monumental in size, creating some of the largest and most expansive works of her career.”

Nearly two decades after first developing the soak-stain method, Frankenthaler had fully absorbed the technique, incorporating it into her every facet of her approach. Her canvases were now sites of complete chromatic saturation; she used thin washes not only to create gestural forms, but to weave together undulating fields of color that unfurled across the entire picture plane. Works like *Royal Fireworks*, *Carousel* (1979), and *Tunis* (1978) are testaments to this

innovation, their planes of color so expansive and multifaceted that they nearly become landscapes in their own right. Over the latter half of the 20th century, Frankenthaler's career continued on much the same path: formal innovation, institutional acclaim, and steady market interest.

In 1961, she began experimenting with printmaking at the insistence of Grace Hartigan and Larry Rivers, adapting her unique saturated approach to the material confines of lithography and woodcutting. She would continue honing her printmaking practice over the course of the next 50 years. That expertise is reflected in the market for her prints, with some of her woodcuts now selling in the six-figure range on the secondary market.



Helen Frankenthaler, Jupiter, 1976. © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Rob McKeever. Courtesy of Gagosian. Helen Frankenthaler, Pink Lady, 1963. © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Rob McKeever. Courtesy of Gagosian.

In 1972, Frankenthaler began showing with John Berggruen in San Francisco, expanding her domestic footprint and continuing the steady accumulation of interested collectors, though according to Berggruen, she still was mainly a U.S.-centric phenomenon. “I felt that she was underappreciated, undervalued if you want to say, by virtue of European collectors and museums,” Berggruen said. “Her exposure was more domestic, and her success, too.”

He did also note, however, that Frankenthaler enjoyed a different, broader sort of clientele than Ab-Ex painters like Pollock or de Kooning, whose work, by nature of their high prices, was often purchased by a more insular group of collectors. Even today, that broader level of interest persists in Frankenthaler's secondary-market appearances, according to Pritchard. “Many of the collectors I work with who look for Frankenthaler are not Ab-Ex collectors,” she said. “They have very contemporary collections; some of them are Old Masters collectors. Her work crosses categories, because her color has such a human, instinctive quality to it.”

Frankenthaler's institutional recognition continued to grow in tandem with her expanding domestic collector base, showing at the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Modern Art Museum in Fort Worth throughout the 1970s and '80s. Her market continued to gain

new dimensions around this time as well — in the mid-1980s, her works began appearing at auction, often going for prices around \$10,000 or below, with some paintings occasionally breaching the \$100,000 mark. By the 2000s, her work began to more steadily sell at auction for six-figure prices, and by the end of the decade, she had carved out a respectable niche for herself in the global collecting community.

In December 2011, just a month after Ginny Williams bought *Royal Fireworks* at Christie's, Frankenthaler died at her home in Darien, Connecticut, at the age of 83. The following summer, in 2012, Gagosian began representing her estate, kickstarting her posthumous market apotheosis and helping spread the gospel of Frankenthaler's color across the globe. The mega-gallery's debut Frankenthaler show, which was held at its Chelsea location in 2013 and showcased her works from the 1950s, was met with widespread acclaim. The gallery would host four more solo shows over the following seven years while simultaneously promoting her placement in institutional shows in London, Venice, Paris, and beyond.

This robust international presence began to have ripple effects in Frankenthaler's secondary market, as well. The year 2015 marked a turning point in her auction standing — over the course of four days in May, Frankenthaler burst through the million-dollar barrier, with her 1964 work *Saturn Revisited* selling for \$2.8 million at a Sotheby's New York sale. In the days that followed, three more works by Frankenthaler would sell above \$1 million at auction, and an additional two paintings would break that barrier in the fall auctions later that year. Gagosian's representation went hand in hand with broader canonical reconsiderations of women artists to help produce an extremely robust international market for Frankenthaler's work, one primed for an earth-shattering price like the one achieved by *Royal Fireworks* last summer.



Helen Frankenthaler, Madame Butterfly, 2000. © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Tyler Graphics, Ltd., Mount Kisco, New York. Courtesy of Gagosian

While Frankenthaler's market looks poised to continue growing in the post-pandemic art landscape, with institutional shows in Paris, Bilbao, Potsdam, and Vienna planned for the next few years and a 1962 still life recently on offer for €250,000 to €500,000 at Gagosian's FIAC booth, neither Berggruen nor Pritchard see a guaranteed gold rush.

“It’s not like a rising tide situation,” Pritchard said. “I don’t think every Helen Frankenthaler is going to be worth over a million dollars — it’s going to depend on the work. It’s going to be about connoisseurship, which in the case of an artist like Helen Frankenthaler, simply means standing in front of it.” Pritchard also noted that, given the recent appreciation of value in her work, many owners are hanging onto their Frankenthaler pieces: “I think every sale head is trying to get a Frankenthaler for their sale and not having much luck,” she said.

Berggruen also noted the importance of individual subtleties of a Frankenthaler work when determining how it might perform on the market. “It would make sense that if there was a great painting from the ’70s at auction, and the scale was right and it had just the right combination of ingredients, it would sell very well,” he said. “It depends on examples, that’s all I can say. Like any artist, some are more successful than others.”

It’s only natural that Frankenthaler’s posthumous success, like so much of the career that preceded it, would center on the vast emotional possibilities that color can confer upon a viewer. When asked why *Royal Fireworks* was so successful, Pritchard could only resort to describing the experience of it.

“I mean, that painting is exceptional,” she said. “It’s just a thousand shades of pink, orange, and yellow in that painting. When you stand in front of it, you really see how extraordinary it is, and what a hand she had to work on such a large scale, and her understanding of these very thinly applied veils of paint, and her ability to balance color. It’s something that’s very exceptional, and it’s unique entirely to her.”