

BUFFALO AKG ART MUSEUM

Lesson: Soak-Stained Landscapes



Artist: Helen Frankenthaler

Artwork: Round Trip, 1979

Period/Movement: Abstract Expressionism

Grade Level: 6-12

Essential Questions

How do artists and designers find a particular direction that is effective for their work?

How do artists and designers learn from trial and error?

Helen Frankenthaler (American, 1928-2011). *Round Trip*, 1957. Oil on canvas. 70 1/4 x 70 1/4 inches (178.4 x 178.4 cm). Collection Buffalo AKG Art Museum. Gift of James I Merrill, 1958 (RCA1958:1). © Estate of Helen Frankenthaler / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

LESSON

Conceptual Basis:

Conceptual Basis: Inspired by childhood travel, Helen Frankenthaler transformed real and imagined landscapes into deep abstract paintings in which elements of nature became organic shapes and rich fields of color. Frankenthaler created these shapes and colors using her own soak-stain technique, which consists of pouring thinned paint onto large, untreated canvases, thereby staining the canvases with color.

- Become familiar with the artist Helen Frankenthaler and her soak-stain technique.
- Support the understanding of basic art elements and principles.
- Create an abstract painting of a landscape that holds a special meaning to the artist.

Artmaking Activity

Have students use markers to trace the large basic shapes that make up their chosen landscapes, including the horizon line, any mountainous areas, and even any large clouds. Encourage students to only trace the most important parts of the landscapes—this will help them focus on the main aspects of their landscapes rather than the finer details of those shapes.

Once students have identified the key elements of their landscapes, they should begin transferring those shapes onto their untreated canvases. Instruct students to use light pencil lines when drawing on their surfaces so that the pencil marks do not show up in their final works.

Once they have transferred the lines onto their canvases, students should wet their canvases by running them under a sink faucet. Balling the canvases up while under the water will help evenly distribute the liquid. Starting with a damp canvas will allow paint to soak into the surface. Once the students have wrung out and flattened their canvases, they are ready to apply their paints using the soak-stain technique. If you are working with upper-grade students, they could make their own thinned paints. Younger students may require premade thinned paints.

Diluting acrylic paint with water will create a stain. To thin your acrylic paint, add a small squirt of paint into an empty cup, add one part water to one part paint, and mix until combined in a smooth liquid. To make the mixture less transparent, add additional paint. For a more transparent mixture, add water. You will need to make separate mixtures for each color students wish to use in their landscapes. Try to create enough of the paint for the scale of the shapes in the students' works. Larger shapes will require more paint. Applying one large area of color rather than multiple different patches of color will give the work a more fluid, unified look. If you choose to not make your own diluted paints, liquid watercolors can be used as a substitute material.

Once the thinned paints are ready, students should slowly pour the paints into the outlines of the different shapes on their canvases. Instruct them to pour while moving around the shapes to allow for an even distribution of stain. Encourage patience while the paint soaks into their canvases. To move the stains into certain areas of the canvases, students can gently push any puddled colors with small brushes. Allow for the paint puddles to soak into the canvases. Students can lightly dab any excess liquid with paper towels if the paint puddles are excessive.

Colors may run together when you add additional paint. Remind students that these are not imperfections but “well-ordered collisions.” Once complete, allow the paintings to dry completely on a flat surface. If you are relocating the wet canvases to a drying area, be mindful that paint may drip from the bottom.

Lesson Tips

- This experimental project is geared toward experiencing the artmaking process of Helen Frankenthaler. If students get discouraged at the lack of control over their paint, remind them that the focus is meant to be on the process rather than the finished work.
- This project can be quiet messy. Allow for ample drying areas around your classroom. This project would work well outside due to the amount of water and diluted paint used. It would be ideal to work on a plastic surface that can easily be wiped clean with a sponge.
- For older students, suggest adding gestural brush strokes or detailed pen-and-ink designs to enhance the landscape scenes.

- Not all areas of the works need to be filled with color. Raw canvas is an element of many of Frankenthaler’s paintings.
- Pouring the paint might be difficult for younger students. Instead of pouring with cups, try using spoons to carefully ladle the paint or eye droppers to portion limited amounts of color onto the surface. This will allow for fewer paint puddles on the canvas.
- If acrylic or liquid watercolor paints are not available to you, you can use old markers and water to create your own tinted stain. You will need multiple markers in a variety of colors. Pop off the back of each marker, pull out the sponge marker middle, and add the sponge middle to a cup of water. Try to have at least five sponges of one color in each cup. Over a few days, the pigment from the marker will seep into the water, creating liquid watercolor. This is a great way to recycle dried-up markers in your classroom!

Optional Reflections and Lesson Wrap-Up

- Have students present the soak-stained landscapes they created—and what they learned from creating them—to their classmates in order to reinforce the lesson, as well as enhance their understanding of what they learned or experienced. Students can explain the different elements of their works and give insight into the landscapes they chose.
- Having students complete a short writing assignment or reflection about their artmaking process can give teachers insight for subsequent iterations of this project.

Vocabulary:

landscape: a picture that depicts a scene of land

soak stain: technique that consists of pouring thinned paint onto a large, untreated canvas, thereby staining a surface with color

organic: shapes or forms in a work of art that are of irregular contour or resemble a natural element

Materials:

Pencils

Acrylic paints or liquid watercolor

Water

Untreated Canvas

Small paper cups

Eye droppers (optional)

Small paintbrushes (optional)

New York State Standards:

Grade	Code	Standard
6	VA:Cr2.1.6	Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and artmaking approaches in making works of art and design.
7	VA:Cr2.1.7	Demonstrate persistence in developing skills with various materials, methods, and artmaking approaches in creating works of art or design.
8	VA:Cr2.1.8	Experiment, innovate, and take risks to pursue ideas, forms, and meanings that emerge in the process of artmaking or designing.

Standards:

The New York State Visual Arts Standards for High School Students are divided into 3 categories, Proficient, Accomplished, and Advanced rather than by grade level. Please feel free to choose the standard that best applies to the needs of your students and class curriculum.

Grade Level 9-12	Code	Standard
Proficient	VA:Cr2.1.HSI	Generate and develop artistic work in a self-directed manner.
Accomplished	VA:Cr2.1.HSII	Through experimentation, practice, and persistence, demonstrate acquisition of skills and knowledge in a chosen art form.
Advanced	VA:Cr2.1.HSIII	Experiment, plan, and make multiple works of art and design that explore a personally meaningful theme, idea, or concept.

Teacher Example:



Artwork by School Program Coordinator Kelly Macagnone.