

F.A.M.E. May-June 2006
Artist Helen Frankenthaler

Docent costuming suggestion: The first theme to be introduced in the lesson is balance, so a clever costume is to aim to be unbalanced—roll up one pant leg and one sleeve, wear one shoe and one sandal, turn hat and/or comb hair to one side, wear jewelry on one side, etc.

Preparation: Place "Blue Atmosphere" backwards on the easel, with "Sinbad" on top and "Chambered Nautilus" on top of that.

Introduction:

Do you notice anything interesting about my clothes today? (*They're not even, etc.*) What should I do to look more balanced? (*Let them make suggestions and adjust your clothing accordingly.*) Thanks! I feel much more balanced now! Did you know that there are a couple of kinds of balance? One is weight balance, like you need to stack things or walk on a balance beam, and the other is visual or artistic balance, where things look balanced to your eye. Which way was my clothing unbalanced? (*Visual*). Can you think of some examples of things that might have visual balance? (*The way furniture is arranged in a room; pictures on a wall; flower arrangements.*)

For upper grades: Do you know what symmetry is? (*Both sides of something are identical but in reverse.*) Can you think of some things that are symmetrical? (*Shoes, some buildings, a butterfly, etc.*) Does something need to be symmetrical to be balanced? (*No.*) Here's a tricky one: is a face balanced or symmetrical? (*Balanced—no one's face is exactly the same on both sides.*) *Show graphic of symmetric faces and picture "Symmetry."*

The Painting: "Blue Atmosphere"

A few artists create visual art that is symmetrical, but all artists are concerned with balance. In a little bit, I'm going to ask you if our work of art for today seems balanced to you, and why. But first, we're going to do a bit of review of some things we have learned about art.

Do you remember the elements of composition? What are they? (*Show graphic*). I'm going to show you a couple of paintings we've done in FAME, and see if you can tell me whether you think the painting is balanced, and what elements help balance it. (*Show "Chambered Nautilus."*) Do you remember this painting? It is painted in a very realistic style, which means that it looks a lot like real life. Is this balanced? Why or why not? (*It is certainly not symmetrical, but the color, light and shadow, and line help it to look balanced.*)

(*Show "Sinbad at Sea."*) Here's another painting. This style of art is called "abstract." Do you remember what it means when a work of art is abstract? (*It is not realistic, but you can still tell what it is.*) What elements help this work to look balanced? (*Color, line.*)

Are you ready for our painting for the day? It is called "Blue Atmosphere," and it is neither abstract nor realistic—it is a style of painting called "abstract expressionism" and it might look very strange to you. (*Show painting.*) What do you think of it? Do you like it or not? Is it balanced? (*Answers will vary.*)

What elements of composition does this work have? (*Lots of color. Maybe a little bit of shadow. Not much line.*) If we were to see the original of this painting instead of a print, it would have some texture from the canvas.

Helen Frankenthaler is an American woman artist who is still alive today. She pioneered a technique called "color field painting," which features large areas of a single color. She invented "soak stain painting," where she would lay a large canvas on the floor, and then dilute paint with turpentine until it was very thin and liquid, and then would pour or splash the paint onto the canvas. The paint would soak in to the canvas instead of being painted on top. She could move the paint around to make it stain various areas, but not remove the paint like a traditional oil artist can. When she didn't like the result, she would throw away the canvas or tear off part of it and begin again.

Does this painting look finished to you? Why do you think she left so much of it blank and white? Why might it be called "Blue Atmosphere"? (*Answers will vary.*) Helen Frankenthaler has said that she paints landscapes, but landscapes of the imagination rather than landscapes of reality.

I'll let you look at this while I tell you a little bit about our artist.

Artist Biography

Helen Frankenthaler is considered the greatest living woman artist. She is also a very private person, and so we don't have a lot of details about her life. We know more about her painting than we do her life.

She was born in New York in 1928, the youngest daughter of a Supreme Court justice. Her family had enough money to send her to the finest schools. She had an interest in art from a very early age, and spent her school breaks traveling in America and Europe to visit art galleries and meet artists. She lived near the famous Guggenheim Museum in New York, and she visited it often.

Helen graduated from the Dalton School in New York and from Bennington College in Vermont, where she studied art. She was already beginning to exhibit her art when she was in her early '20's, and had her first one-woman show at the age of 23. That same year, she met Jackson Pollock for the first time. Do you remember his painting from F.A.M.E.? (*Show Pollock painting.*) He was also an abstract expressionist painter who

placed his canvas on the floor. Do you see any similarities in the paintings of Pollock and Frankenthaler?

Frankenthaler was married to a fellow painter Robert Motherwell for about 13 years. Besides her paintings, she has designed sets and costumes for the ballet, done sculptures, prints, and ceramics, and has taught art at some famous universities such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and New York University. She has homes in Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Do you know what a nonconformist is? (*Somebody who does things their own way instead of the way most people do things.*) As a woman artist, Frankenthaler is famous for being a non-conformist in her art and in her life. She didn't want to paint the way other people painted, or live the way many women want to live. She has always done things her own way, and has ended up being the most famous woman artist of our day.