

LESSONS

LESSON ONE: Revolutions in Painting



IMAGE THREE: Jackson Pollock. American, 1912–1956. *One (Number 31, 1950)*. 1950. Oil and enamel on unprimed canvas, 8' 10" x 17' 5 7/8" (269.5 x 530.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection Fund (by exchange). © 2007 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



IMAGE FOUR: Helen Frankenthaler. American, born 1928. *Jacob's Ladder*. 1957. Oil on unprimed canvas, 9' 5 7/8" x 69 7/8" (287.9 x 177.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Hyman N. Glickstein

INTRODUCTION

Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler were part of a group of artists known as the **Abstract Expressionists**. They changed the nature of painting with their large, abstract canvases, energetic and gestural lines, and new artistic processes.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider the choices artists make with regard to painting. They will focus on line, **material**, **scale**, and the artistic process.
- Students will learn how to discuss, compare, and think critically about nonrepresentational, or **abstract**, paintings.
- Students will think about the use of **line** in painting.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to return to their definition of painting from the Setting the Scene section of this guide. Ask them what kinds of paintings they have created. Have them spend a few minutes considering and writing down some of the choices artists make when they paint. They may come up with ideas such as **technique**, **style**, **scale**, **material**, and **subject**.
- Ask students to define line. Ask them to look around the room and name the different kinds of lines they see. They may come up with ideas such as curvy, straight, dotted, thick, thin, sinewy, or continuous.
- Ask students to define the word abstract. Return to this definition as you proceed throughout the lesson.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

Jackson Pollock, *One (Number 31, 1950)*, 1950 (Image Three)

Helen Frankenthaler, *Jacob's Ladder*, 1957 (Image Four)

- Show students Pollock's painting *One (Number 31, 1950)*. Ask them to spend time looking carefully at this work. Have them write a list of words that describe this work. Ask them to include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.
- Now show students Frankenthaler's work *Jacob's Ladder*. Ask them to write down words that describe this work. They should include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.
- Ask students to compare and contrast these two works of art, using some of the words from their list. What is similar about these works? What is different?
- Ask students to discuss how these artists use line. What different lines can they see? How might they describe these lines? Can they tell which lines were placed on the canvas first? How?

Pollock and Frankenthaler were both artists working in the 1950s. They both experimented with line, scale, and paint. In doing so, they created a new way of painting.

Pollock broke with the conventions of painting by taking the canvas from its traditional easel and placing it on the floor. He then worked around the canvas, dripping, splashing, flinging, and smearing paint. He put holes in the bottom of paint cans, squeezed paint from a tube, and even used a turkey baster or stiff brush. His process caused the paint to build up, layer upon layer.

Referring to his process, Pollock said: “My painting does not come from the easel....I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or floor....On the floor, I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be *in* the painting. I prefer sticks, trowels, knives and dripping fluid paint....When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.”⁴

- Ask students what it means for Pollock to say that he is “in” the painting. How is this way of painting different from the ways in which they may have painted?
- Ask students if they see evidence that this canvas was painted on the floor. Why or why not? They may notice that the paint does not drip down, as it would if it was created on an easel.
- Read the dimensions of *One (Number 31, 1950)* to the students. Ask students to measure out the dimensions using string or tape to get a sense of the size. Pollock, like many other Abstract Expressionists, painted very large works. The size of these works affects how the viewer interacts with the paintings. Pollock was interested in murals. He was influenced by some of the Mexican muralists, such as Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. He was also influenced by Pablo Picasso’s large painting *Guernica* (www.moma.org/modernteachers/large_image.php?id=130).⁵

Like Pollock, Frankenthaler experimented with line and paint. She said that she was influenced by Pollock’s “concern with line, fluid line, calligraphy, and...experiments with line not as line but as shape.”⁶

- Ask students to look again at Frankenthaler’s painting. How does she use lines to create shapes? What kinds of shapes do they see in her work?

When Frankenthaler saw Pollock’s work for the first time, she said, “It was as if I suddenly went to a foreign country but didn’t know the language, but had read enough and had a passionate interest, and was eager to live there. I wanted to live in this land. I had to live there, and master the language.”⁷

Frankenthaler’s works are large in scale and often have expansive areas of paint. She developed a painting technique in which she thinned pigments with turpentine so that they soaked through and stained the unprimed canvas rather than resting on the surface. The images and colors then become embedded in the picture, in the fabric of the canvas, resembling giant watercolors.

- Frankenthaler has spoken about opposites in her work—about a combination of freedom and restraint; accident and control. Ask students what opposites they notice in the work. Ask them to provide visual evidence for their ideas.
- Ask students to define the term **landscape**. Ask them to discuss the traditional elements of landscape.

Frankenthaler found that a painterly form of abstraction tended to suggest ideas of landscape. She said that the paintings she used to make in the country were “filled with ideas about landscape, space, arrangement, perspective, repetition, flatness, light, all of which was trans-

4. Jackson Pollock, quoted in Kirk Varnedoe, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), p. 48.

5. Ibid., pp. 33–34.

6. Helen Frankenthaler, quoted in *MoMA Highlights*, p. 219.

7. Helen Frankenthaler, quoted in *Helen Frankenthaler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), p. 37.

lated and carried on in my own work and experiments.”⁸ In 1957, Frankenthaler said, “If I am forced to associate, I think of my pictures as explosive landscapes, worlds, and distances held on a flat surface.”⁹

- **Ask students to identify parallels between this painting and a landscape.**

Inform students that this work is called *Jacob’s Ladder*. Jacob is a character in the Bible, the son of Isaac and Rebekah. As described in the Book of Genesis, Jacob, in a dream, saw a ladder reaching toward heaven. Like many of Frankenthaler’s paintings, this work combines abstraction with an allusion to a known reference. Speaking about this work, she said, “The picture developed (bit by bit while I was working on it) into shapes symbolic of an exuberant figure and ladder, therefore *Jacob’s Ladder*.”¹⁰

- **Ask students if they agree that the central shape looks like a ladder. Why or why not?**
- **Now that the students have some information about Pollock’s and Frankenthaler’s working processes, ask them to refer back to their lists of similarities and differences. Do they have any new ideas they would like to add with regard to the two artists’ working processes?**

ACTIVITIES

1. Your Turn!

Ask students to pick a work by Kline, Pollock, or Frankenthaler discussed in this guide and pretend that they are an art critic for a newspaper or magazine. Students should write about the work they chose. Ask them to consider the following questions: What do they like or dislike about the painting? Who is their audience? What tone will the piece take? Will they make comparisons or allusions to popular culture or to contemporary events or artists? Encourage students to use evidence from the work of art itself to support their comments and ideas.

2. Line Dictionary

After looking at and talking about these three artists, have your students create a line dictionary. You can give them a list of words, such as buoyant, calm, angelic, frenetic, conflicted, rolling, and sporadic, or you can create your own list. Ask them to create lines that correspond with the words. Ask them to add their own words and draw corresponding lines. Then have them present their lines to the class. An individual student can hold up a line and the class can guess what word they were trying to represent. The student can explain his or her choices.

3. Significant Others: Lee Krasner

Pollock was married to an artist named Lee Krasner. Ask your students to research Krasner’s work. How did she influence Pollock and vice versa?

4. Significant Others: Robert Motherwell

Frankenthaler was married to the painter Robert Motherwell. Research Motherwell’s work. How did Motherwell influence Frankenthaler and vice versa?

8. Helen Frankenthaler, quoted in *Helen Frankenthaler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), p. 120.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

10. Helen Frankenthaler, quoted in *MoMA Highlights*, p. 219.