against the grain

the woodcuts of

Helen Frankenthaler
There are no rules, that is one thing I say about every medium, every picture ... that is how art is born, that is how breakthroughs happen. Go against the rules or ignore the rules, that is what invention is about.

In 1950, at the age of 22, Helen Frankenthaler met the art critic Clement Greenberg and began mixing with the New York School of artists. Two things immediately set her apart from her contemporaries – her gender and her age. Frankenthaler was one of a handful of female artists who successfully contributed to the artistic territory dominated by such giants as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Much younger than these artists, Frankenthaler emerged as one of the first in what has come to be known as the ‘second generation’ of Abstract Expressionist painters. Frankenthaler accompanied Greenberg to many exhibition openings, visited the studios of other artists and frequented the (now legendary) Cedar Street Bar and the Artists’ Club. She was adept at analysing, discussing and deconstructing the robust action painting produced around her and actively participated in the artistic dialogue of the 1950s. Yet she knew that she was alone in her quest to develop an individual style. Frankenthaler began her search for a departure point – a method of mark-making that was uniquely hers. She found it in 1952 with a large-scale oil painting entitled Mountains and sea.

Mountains and sea was created after Frankenthaler returned to her New York studio from a trip to Nova Scotia, where she had painted numerous watercolours of the rocky seascape. She spread her canvas on the floor, a technique adopted from Jackson Pollock, but it was what she did next that made that crucial, radical departure from his work. Frankenthaler, in the habit of working quickly and using watercolour washes, applied paint diluted with turpentine directly onto the unprimed canvas. The artist has recalled that she felt ‘the landscapes were in my arms as I did it’. Working instinctively, she allowed the diluted mix to soak into the canvas and using subtle washes she filled it with large, lyrical gestures – a style that has since become her signature. The technique, described by the artist as ‘soak-stain’, was a fusion of image and ground that resulted in the ultimate flat surface. This experimental method was a radical digression from what had come before and was the breakthrough that propelled Helen Frankenthaler into the spotlight of the New York art scene.

Frankenthaler was well-equipped for this sudden attention. Born in New York in 1928, the youngest of three daughters to wealthy Jewish parents, she was educated at the prestigious Dalton School, New York, and Bennington College, Vermont. She studied at Dalton under the Mexican muralist Rufino Tamayo and at Bennington under the American Cubist Paul Feeley. It was Feeley who directed Frankenthaler in the development of her early Cubist-derived style and, more importantly, gave her an understanding of pictorial composition and space. Feeley taught Frankenthaler to stand in front of a work of art and dissect it: ‘We would really sift through every
and began in her male artists (one of the first painters is Pollock) and was adept and alone in the point scale of her style and, through every religious idée fixe. She taught us the habit of directly onto my palms as I did so subtle ature. The at resulted that had a lot of light of 128. the religious idée fixe. It style and, taught every
inch of what it was that worked, or if it didn't, why. And
cover up either half of it or a millimetre of it and wonder
what was effective in it ... in terms of paint, the subject
matter, the size, the drawing.” Early encouragement
became involved in the arts, in combination
with Frankenthaler's meticulous training, led to the
development of her unwavering determination to become
an artist.

Determination is an essential characteristic of the
artist whose work evolves from experimentation. It is
Frankenthaler’s intrinsic sense of exactly what is required
to balance line, form and colour within a given pictorial
space that permits her to unleash a spontaneous, yet
controlled gesture. ‘You have to know how to use the
accident, how to recognise it, how to control it, and
ways to eliminate it so that the whole surface looks felt
and born all at once.” Frankenthaler recognised early
in her career that to grow as an artist and to develop
aesthetically it was crucial that she continually challenge
herself and work outside of her comfort zone. Painting
was Frankenthaler’s primary artistic passion, but an
obsession to push her creative limits led her to turn
her attention to print media. What better way to grow
through experimentation than to switch the medium used
to convey the artistic message?

Frankenthaler created her first prints in 1961 with
Tatyana Grosman at Universal Limited Art Editions
(ULAE) in West Islip, Long Island. It was in this intimate
lithographic workshop, where artists were treated as
personal guests and for whom Grosman would go to
any lengths to facilitate artistic needs, that Frankenthaler
began to experiment with print media. There was a long
period of print education and technical trial and error for
Frankenthaler: ‘Whether it be graphics, sculpture, tapestry,
ceramics, whatever the medium, there is the difficulty,
challenge, fascination and often productive clumsiness
of learning a new method: the wonderful puzzles and
problems of translating with new materials... a translation
of my image in a new vocabulary.” While Frankenthaler
also created her first woodcuts at ULAE it was not
until 1976, when she commenced collaboration with
master printer Kenneth Tyler, that she began a sustained
investigation of the woodcut medium.

In a new workshop and with some printmaking
experience behind her Frankenthaler was ready, once
again, to push her creative limits. Kenneth Tyler was
exactly the master printer she required to transpose
her bold gestural experiments into the realm of the
technological. Frankenthaler’s first woodcut with Tyler
was Essence mulberry, produced in 1977. The inception
of this stunning, eight-colour woodcut was inspired by
two factors. The first was an exhibition of 15th-century
woodcuts that Frankenthaler had seen at the Metropolitan
Museum of Art, where she was particularly struck by the
colour of the prints and determined to discover all she
could about the ancient medium. The second was when
the artist, working with Tyler at his Bedford workshop,
noticed a mulberry tree growing outside the studio. She
commented upon the vibrant colour of the berries and
Tyler squashed some of them into juice. Frankenthaler
dipped a paintbrush into the juice and proceeded to paint
on a piece of Japanese calligraphic paper. The resulting
mulberry colour against the delicate paper was the
starting point for the development of the print.

With Essence mulberry both the artist and the
master printer recognised the start of an extraordinary
collaboration. Frankenthaler has confessed that even today
she will look at Essence mulberry and say to Ken, ‘How
did we do it? How did we get it?’, believing that, ‘It is one
thing for the artist to have a certain magic and produce
a certain magic but for the technicians and the press and
Ken to get it’ was something truly special. She admits
that she ‘wanted things that I couldn’t at times articulate
but between our exchange we got this music.’ Essence mulberry
is seen today as a watershed, the first
of Frankenthaler’s woodcuts to employ the traditionally
graphic medium in the production of an image of abstract
and inspired beauty.

The woodcut, a notoriously difficult and rigid medium,
could not be further from the artistic realm of a gestural,
spontaneous painter. As a painter, Frankenthaler’s creative
process is driven by the development of a dialogue with
the work itself, ‘a fighting, loving dialogue with this piece
of material. You force something on it and it gives you
an answer back ... until you know that this is right.” To
a certain extent, the work directs her and it evolves out
of itself. Therefore, when creating a woodcut, a medium
which requires careful planning and numerous technical
adjustments, either the style of the artist or the rules
governing the medium must shift. Frankenthaler saw the
woodcut as a challenge and has been determined not only
to learn its language, but to master it.

In the thirty years that have passed since the creation
of Essence mulberry Frankenthaler has worked with
Tyler Graphics in a collaboration that has dramatically
shifted the parameters of the woodcut. Frankenthaler’s
experimental nature drove her to use paper pulp as a
support for her woodcut Freefall 1993 and hand-dyed
paper for Radius 1996. The artist experimented with
the combination of woodcut and other print techniques
such as lithography in All about blue 1994 and etching
and aquatint in Ariel 1996. By casting the rules aside,
Frankenthaler has succeeded in coercing the woodcut
into yielding printed works bearing the hallmarks of her
unique lyrical style. The woodcut is no longer solely the
medium of the graphic artist working alone in the studio;
it is now also a medium to explore abstraction, a medium
of collaboration – the medium of an entire print workshop
working in sync with an artist.
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colour woodcut
Gift of Kenneth Tyler 2002
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
© Helen Frankenthaler / Tyler Graphics Ltd
Once again, the artist communicated her ideas to the technicians of the print workshop by painting on three pieces of specially selected wood. Paper was skilfully handmade by Tyler Graphics to resemble both the texture and look of the wood grain. The woodblocks used to print the image were carved by Frankenthaler and Yasuyuki Shibata. Frankenthaler marked the wood using her ‘guzzying’ technique, a technique of scratching the wood with items that included sandpaper and dental tools. Frankenthaler was determined to ensure that her wrist, and thus her unique sensibility, be evident in every aspect of the print’s creation, just as it is in her paintings.

The resulting work is one of exceptional beauty. With Madame Butterfly Frankenthaler has triumphed in her attempt to encapsulate a ‘born in a minute’ feeling with a print so painterly in its delicate washes of colour and transient floating forms, that it resembles a watercolour. Frankenthaler has pushed herself, her techniques and the boundaries of print collaboration to bring her unique style to bear upon the woodcut. Madame Butterfly is a work that stands as the jewel in Frankenthaler’s crown, and a woodcut print that truly transforms the possibilities of the medium.

Against the grain: the woodcuts of Helen Frankenthaler reveals the experimental nature of an artist who, by deliberately casting the rules aside, has maintained her innovative edge for over five decades. Frankenthaler was influential to many as a young painter and remains influential today, well into her seventies, not only as an artist in general, but as a superb woodcut artist in particular.

It is not easy to go against the grain but Frankenthaler has always followed her instinct and as a result, is one of few artists today who have imbued the oldest of printmaking techniques with a contemporary vitality. In the printed editioned works, trial proofs and carved woodblocks currently on display at the National Gallery of Australia, it is clear to see that in the woodcut medium Helen Frankenthaler has become the ‘departure point’.

Jaklyn Babington
Assistant Curator
International Prints, Drawings and Illustrated Books

Notes
3 Rose, p. 10.
8 Helen Frankenthaler, Sound Reel 10.
11 Rose, p. 85.
communicated her ideas to the workshop by painting on three woodblocks used to print Frankenthaler and Yasuyuki woodcuts of Helen Frankenthaler’s crown, and a woodcut the possibilities of the medium. woodcuts of Helen Frankenthaler’s experimental nature of an artist ignoring the rules aside, has maintained her for five decades. Frankenthaler as a young painter and remains her seventies, not only as an artist but as a woodcut artist in particular the grain but Frankenthaler has act and as a result, is one of few artists the oldest of printmaking a departure point. 

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Madame Butterfly 2000
colour woodcut
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
© Helen Frankenthaler / Tyler Graphics Ltd 2000
All works are in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia. Measurements are given in centimetres, height before width; images sizes are followed by sheet sizes. Where only one measurement is given this refers to sheet size or woodblock size.

**Helen FRANKENTHALER**
United States of America born 1928

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**CHECKLIST**

- **Essence mulberry** 1977
colour woodcut printed from four woodblocks on off-white handmade Mania gampi paper
right to print proof; edition of 35
71.0 x 71.4 cm
Purchased 1977 1977.331

- **Essence mulberry** 1977
colour woodcut printed from one woodblock on white wove paper
working proof
106.0 x 46.6 cm
Gift of Kenneth Tyler 2002 2002.1.49.7

- **Cameo** 1980
colour woodcut printed from five woodblocks on grey handmade TGL paper
right to print proof; edition of 30
71.2 x 71.4 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.115.1

- **Radius** 1993
white hand-dyed handmade TGL paper
working proof
71.0 x 71.3 cm
Gift of Kenneth Tyler 2002 2002.1.193.3

- **Radius woodblocks A-F** 1993
six woodblocks used in the printing of Radius I A 6 x 80.8 x 1.7 cm (maximum measurements)
Gifts of Kenneth Tyler 2002 2002.1.193.1-6

- **All about blue** 1994
colour lithograph and woodcut printed from six aluminium plates and one woodblock on natural handmade Kozo fibre paper
artist's proof 10/16; edition of 36
123.0 x 73.2 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.164.1

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**Tales of Genji I woodblock 7** 1998
one of 11 woodblocks used in the printing of Tales of Genji I
122.0 x 131.2 x 0.9 cm
Gift of Kenneth Tyler 2002 2002.1.1025.5

**Tales of Genji II woodblock 8** 1998
one of 14 woodblocks used in the printing of Tales of Genji II
131.8 x 121.9 x 0.9 cm
Gift of Kenneth Tyler 2002 2002.1.1021.1

**Tales of Genji IV woodblock 8** 1998
one of 12 woodblocks used in the printing of Tales of Genji IV
133.0 x 120.0 x 0.9 cm
Gift of Kenneth Tyler 2002 2002.1.1026.8

**Tales of Genji V woodblock 13** 1998
one of 21 woodblocks used in the printing of Tales of Genji V
122.0 x 132.0 x 0.9 cm

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**All about blue** 1994
colour lithograph and woodcut printed from six aluminium plates and one woodblock on natural handmade Kozo fibre paper
trial proof 2/6; proof 2 of 6 trial proofs
123.0 x 73.2 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.164.2

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**Tales of Genji VI woodblock 1** 1998
from the Tales of Genji series 1998
colour woodcut printed from 11 woodblocks on light sienna handmade TGL paper
purchased 3/30
106.7 x 71.9 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.166.1

**Tales of Genji I woodblock 1** 1998
from the Tales of Genji series 1998
colour woodcut printed from three woodblocks and one copper plate on white handmade TGL paper
artist's proof 10/16; edition of 45
19.0 x 44.4 cm; 33.2 x 58.8 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.165.3

**Tales of Genji II woodblock 8** 1998
from the Tales of Genji series 1998
colour woodcut printed from 14 woodblocks on light orange handmade TGL paper
edition: 5/30
119.4 x 106.7 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.179.4

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**Tales of Genji I woodblock 7** 1998
from the Tales of Genji series 1998
colour woodcut and stencil printed from six woodblocks and one stencil on tan handmade TGL paper
edition: 3/36
114.4 x 76.4 cm (maximum measurements)
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.178.2

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**Radius** 1993
white hand-dyed handmade TGL paper
working proof
71.0 x 71.3 cm
Gift of Kenneth Tyler 2002 2002.1.193.1

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**Tales of Genji II woodblock 6** 1998
from the Tales of Genji series 1998
colour woodcut printed from 11 woodblocks on light grey handmade TGL paper
edition: 3/30
116.7 x 75.6 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.178.1

**Tales of Genji II woodblock 8** 1998
from the Tales of Genji series 1998
colour woodcut printed from 14 woodblocks on light grey handmade TGL paper
edition: 5/30
119.4 x 106.7 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.179.4

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**Tales of Genji III** 1998
from the Tales of Genji series 1998
colour woodcut and stencil printed from 18 woodblocks and two stencils on grey handmade TGL paper
edition: 3/30
119.4 x 106.7 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.179.4

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**Tales of Genji IV** 1998
from the Tales of Genji series 1998
colour woodcut and stencil printed from 18 woodblocks and one stencil on light grey handmade TGL paper
edition: 3/30
119.4 x 106.7 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.179.4

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**Tales of Genji V** 1998
from the Tales of Genji series 1998
colour woodcut and stencil printed from 18 woodblocks and one stencil on light grey handmade TGL paper
right to print proof; edition of 33
panel A: 106.0 x 67.0 cm
panel B: 106.0 x 67.0 cm
panel C: 106.0 x 67.0 cm
overall: 106.0 x 202.0 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.187.6.A-C

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**Madame Butterfly** 2000
colour woodcut printed from 46 woodblocks on three sheets of paper (two sheets of serina handmade TGL paper and one sheet of light grey handmade TGL paper)
right to print proof; edition of 33
panel A: 106.0 x 67.0 cm
panel B: 106.0 x 67.0 cm
panel C: 106.0 x 67.0 cm
overall: 106.0 x 202.0 cm
Purchased with the assistance of the Orde Poynton Fund 2002 2002.1.194.1-6

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**Madame Butterfly woodblocks L-9, L-11, C-8, C-9, R-3, R—11** 2000
six of 46 woodblocks used in the printing of Madame Butterfly
114.4 x 76.4 x 1.1 cm (maximum measurements)

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**Tales of Genji I-VI and Madame Butterfly woodblock printing sequences** Commentary by Kenneth Tyler of Tyler Graphics, recorded 2005

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**Documentary Videos**
Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Tyler working at the Tyler Graphics Ltd print workshop and extracts from an interview with Helen Frankenthaler at the Tyler Graphics Ltd print workshop, Mount Kisco, New York, 1994. 16 mm footage taken from the Kenneth Tyler Audio Visual Collection.
j) VI 1998
cut and stencil printed from 14
and one stencil on tan handmade TGL
7 cm
with the assistance of the Orde Poynton
2002.1.83.3

j) woodblock 7 1998
woodblocks used in the printing of
j)
6 x 9 cm
eth Tyler 2002 2002.1.1025.5

j) II woodblock 6 1998
woodblocks used in the printing of
j)
6 x 9 cm
eth Tyler 2002 2002.1.200.6

j) III woodblock 1 1998
woodblocks used in the printing of
j)
6 x 9 cm
eth Tyler 2002 2002.1.10211

j) IV woodblock 8 1998
woodblocks used in the printing of
j)
6 x 9 cm
eth Tyler 2002 2002.1.1026.8

j) V woodblock 13 1998
woodblocks used in the printing of
j)
6 x 9 cm
eth Tyler 2002 2002.1.252.13

j) VI woodblock 4 1998
woodblocks used in the printing of
j)
6 x 9 cm
eth Tyler 2002 2002.1.199.4

Butterfly 2000
cut printed from 46 woodblocks
sets of paper (two sheets of sienna
GL paper and one sheet of light sienna
GL paper)
proof; edition of 33
67.0 x 67.0 cm
67.4 x 67.4 cm
202.0 cm
with the assistance of the Orde Poynton
2002.1.187.6.A-C

Butterfly woodblocks L-9, L-11, C-8, C-10 2000
woodblocks used in the printing of
Butterfly
6.1 cm (maximum measurement)

j) I-VI and Madame Butterfly
printing sequences
by Kenneth Tyler of Tyler Graphics, 05

j) Video
embellisher and Kenneth Tyler working at
Tyler Graphics Ltd print workshop and extracts
view with Helen Frankenthaler at the
Tyler Graphics Ltd print workshop, Mount Kisco,
994. Film footage taken from the
Audio Visual Collection.
national gallery of Australia