

You are in Palazzo Strozzi, the building that Filippo Strozzi decided to build in 1489 to be the home of his family. Today, it is an exhibition center that hosts shows featuring a wide range of art, from ancient to modern and contemporary, such as one dedicated to the artist Helen Frankenthaler.



FONDAZIONE
PALAZZO
STROZZI

Kit Teenager is a project
of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi

Design and texts:

Martino Margheri and Azzurra Simoncini

Illustrations and graphic design: Simone Spellucci

High readability font biancoenero®

The Palazzo Strozzi activities dedicated to teenagers
are made possible thanks to the support
of the Hillary Merkus Recordati Foundation.

FONDAZIONE
HILLARY
MERKUS
RECORDATI

Kit

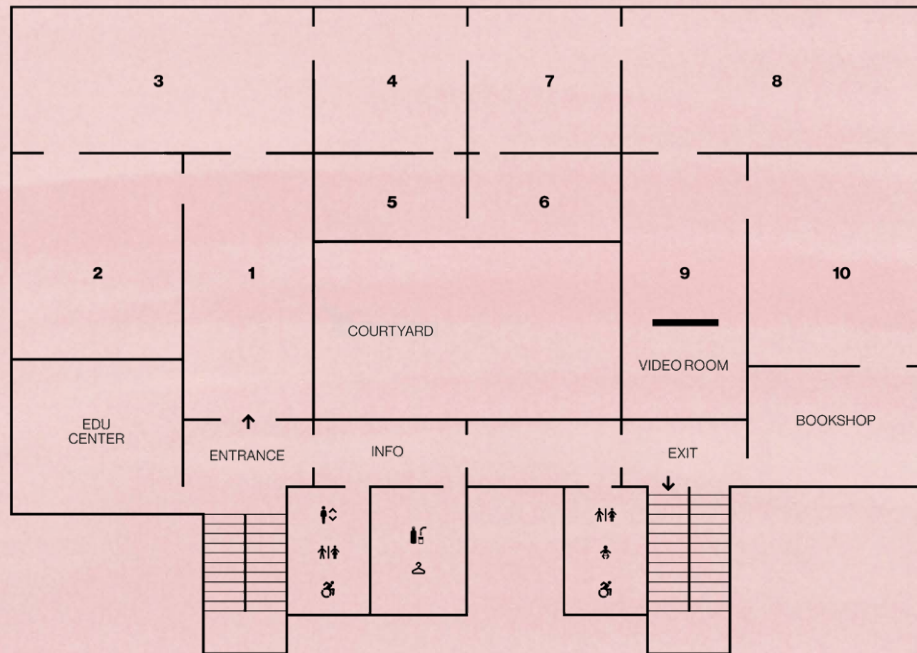
Teenager

A tool for girls and boys aged
12 to 19 to explore the exhibition

HELEN FRANKENTHALER
PAINTING WITHOUT RULES

What is the Teenager Kit?

The Teenager Kit is a tool for teenagers to explore the exhibition *Helen Frankenthaler: Painting Without Rules*, either alone or with friends. It provides insights into Frankenthaler's artistic experimentation, the historical context in which she lived, and the development of her artistic research.

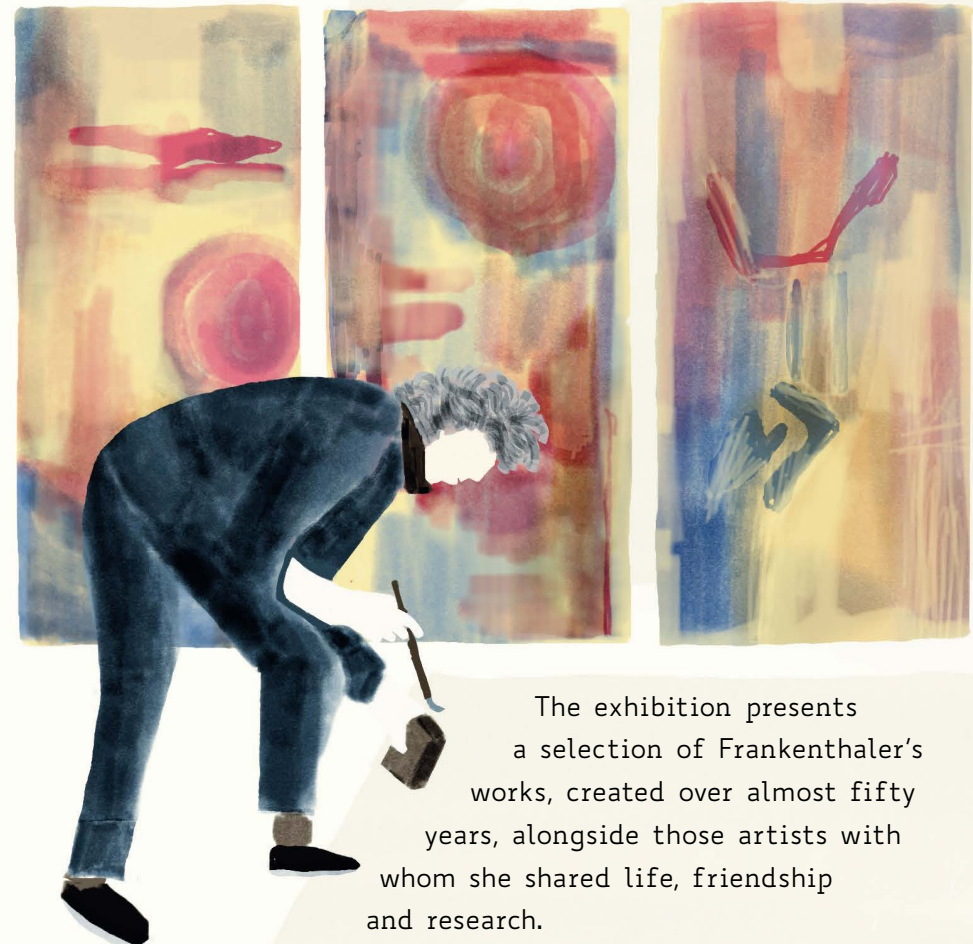


How to use the Kit?

Follow the map route. Numbers correspond to rooms. Remember to keep the right distance from the works. While using the Kit, you can sit on the steps under the windows.

Who is Helen Frankenthaler?

Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) was born and lived between New York and various locations on the United States coast. From a very young age, she was passionate about art and in 1946 enrolled at Bennington College, Vermont, where she deepened her interest in painting. At the age of 21, she rented her first studio, and spent a lot of time there, wanting to learn to paint 'her own way'. After two years she had her first solo exhibition. She describes her life as "square", calm, and orderly, but her art is the exact opposite. She loves to experiment with different techniques and materials, and her works are filled with explosions of color.



The exhibition presents a selection of Frankenthaler's works, created over almost fifty years, alongside those artists with whom she shared life, friendship and research.

ROOM 1

Moveable Blue, 1973

acrylic on canvas

Helen Frankenthaler has been creating abstract paintings throughout her life. Her artworks have no direct connection to the experience of reality and her paintings never depict a particular subject; they are deliberately ambiguous.

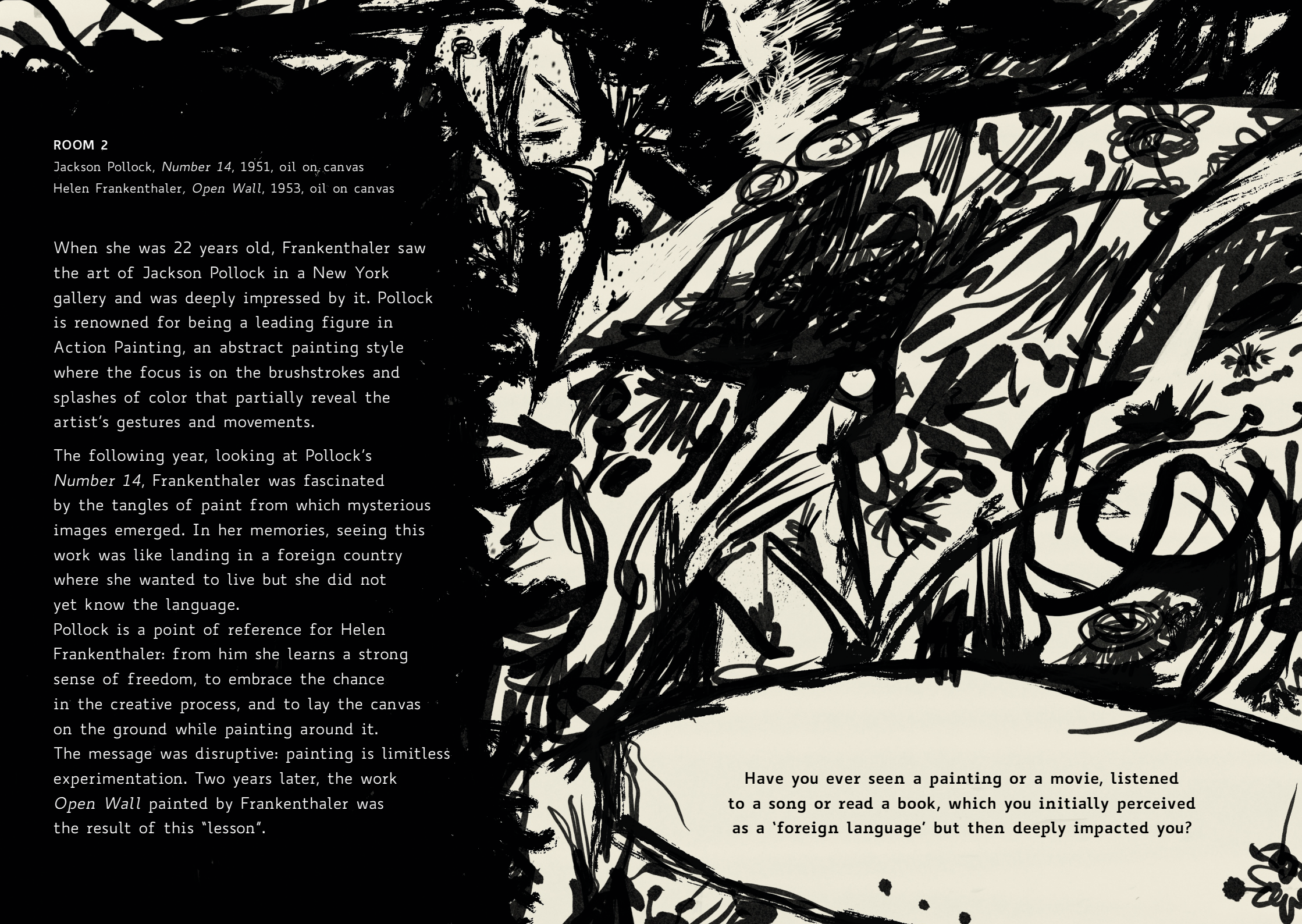
The protagonists of her compositions are spots, colors and lines that suggest feelings and leave multiple interpretations open. Frankenthaler's paintings are influenced by the places she has lived in or visited, as well as her personal experiences, conveying their memories and atmospheres.

An abstract painting speaks a different language from the one we are used to, it requires another way of looking, there is no story to understand, but a surface to explore made up of relationships between shapes and colors.

In an abstract painting, one can observe the balance and rhythm of the composition, the movement of the brushstrokes and the play of depth in which transparencies and opacities of paint alternate. The large painting *Moveable Blue* in this room is representative of the soak-stain technique invented by Frankenthaler. The artist thins the colors until they become very fluid, pours them onto the canvas on the floor directly from jars or sprays them with syringes and droppers, then spreads them with fingers, sponges, spatulas and other tools. The canvas is left to absorb the paint for days until it becomes one with the color.

Pause to observe the surface of the painting and allow yourself time to 'immerse' yourself in all the nuances and gradations of color.





ROOM 2

Jackson Pollock, *Number 14*, 1951, oil on canvas

Helen Frankenthaler, *Open Wall*, 1953, oil on canvas

When she was 22 years old, Frankenthaler saw the art of Jackson Pollock in a New York gallery and was deeply impressed by it. Pollock is renowned for being a leading figure in Action Painting, an abstract painting style where the focus is on the brushstrokes and splashes of color that partially reveal the artist's gestures and movements.

The following year, looking at Pollock's *Number 14*, Frankenthaler was fascinated by the tangles of paint from which mysterious images emerged. In her memories, seeing this work was like landing in a foreign country where she wanted to live but she did not yet know the language.

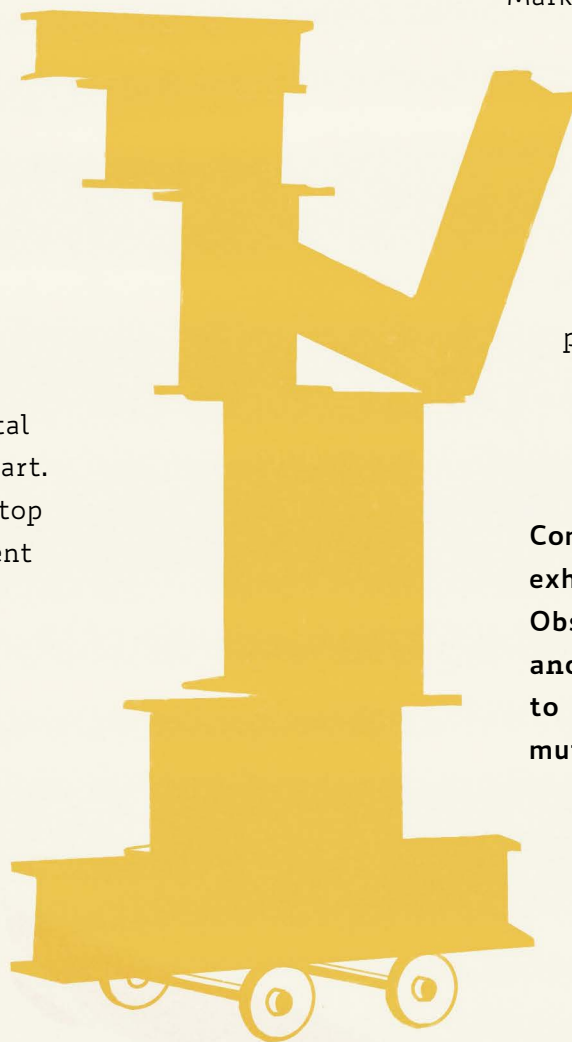
Pollock is a point of reference for Helen Frankenthaler: from him she learns a strong sense of freedom, to embrace the chance in the creative process, and to lay the canvas on the ground while painting around it. The message was disruptive: painting is limitless experimentation. Two years later, the work *Open Wall* painted by Frankenthaler was the result of this "lesson".

Have you ever seen a painting or a movie, listened to a song or read a book, which you initially perceived as a 'foreign language' but then deeply impacted you?

ROOM 3

Helen Frankenthaler, *Tutti-Frutti*,
1966, acrylic on canvas; *The Human Edge*
1967, acrylic on canvas
David Smith, *Untitled (Zig VI)*,
1964, steel, paint

Thanks also to her connection with the art critic Clement Greenberg, Frankenthaler began to frequent the New York art scene, galleries, bars and artists' studios. During this time, she developed a close friendship with David Smith, which lasted until the sculptor's untimely death. The two artists regularly exchanged letters, phone calls, and met in their studios to discuss their work. Frankenthaler and Smith shared a similar sensibility and experimental approach, constantly seeking to reinvent the rules of art. The playful arrangement of "color-forms" stacked on top of each other in *Tutti-Frutti* and the precise placement of forms side by side in *The Human Edge* suggest an affinity with Smith's work, especially his piece *Untitled (Zig VI)* which features irony (small wheels support a heavy load), free assembly of parts, and the use of rigid forms.



ROOM 4

Artists often enjoy engaging with each other, sharing ideas, and finding inspiration in each other's work. In this room, there are four characters who had a close connection with Frankenthaler: Robert Motherwell, her first husband whom she married in 1958, shared not only family and friends with her but also a deep passion for art.

Mark Rothko was part of her social circle, and his paintings influenced a phase of Frankenthaler's artistic exploration. Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, both admirers of Frankenthaler, were so captivated by her soak-stain technique that they incorporated it into their own paintings after visiting her studio.

Compare the artworks of the artists exhibited in both rooms (3 and 4). Observe the forms, compositions and techniques used and try to trace similarities that reveal mutual influences.



ROOM 7

Ocean Drive West #1, 1974, acrylic on canvas
Plexus, 1976, acrylic on canvas

In her continuous pursuit of new visual effects, Frankenthaler started using acrylic paints instead of oil paints from the 1960s onwards. Acrylics are very bright, water-dilutable industrial colors: when using them, Frankenthaler noticed that they "glide across the canvas like raindrops on a mackintosh" and she had to spread and mix them with her hands, feet and brushes to get them to penetrate the canvas. Acrylic paint dries very quickly and allowed her to create sharp edges and dense, vivid color fields.

In the acrylic works *Plexus* and *Ocean Drive West #1*, you can see the marks left by the tape used in the painting process. The artist starts by applying tape to cover specific areas of the canvas before spreading the paint. After removing the tape, the artist decides whether to add color or leave these uncovered areas, which reveal the raw canvas.

SALA 8

Eastern Light, 1982, acrylic on canvas
Star Gazing, 1989, acrylic on canvas

In certain paintings such as *Eastern Light* and *Star Gazing*, Frankenthaler creates a sense of depth by layering multiple diluted colors. She adds lines, dots, and patches of thicker paint, creating the illusion that they are floating on the canvas like they would on the surface of water. These works were created in the 1980s while she was living between New York City and seaside locations. Throughout her life, Helen Frankenthaler sought proximity to water, finding it to have a positive and relaxing effect on her. While on the coast, she observed the changing light and shapes created by the movement of the water and was fascinated by the ever-changing shapes of clouds. She aimed to capture that same fluidity in her paintings.

**Is there a place that makes you feel as good as the sea made Frankenthaler feel?
Can you go back there whenever you want?**



ROOMS 9 and 10

Abstract painting encompasses a wide range of methods for creating an image. Throughout the history of this art form, some artists have exclusively focused on geometric shapes, while others have depicted unidentifiable figures. Some have utilized pure colors and straight lines, while others have concentrated on shading and drips. Additionally, some artists have incorporated chance into the creation of their work, while others have employed precise mathematical calculations before beginning a painting.

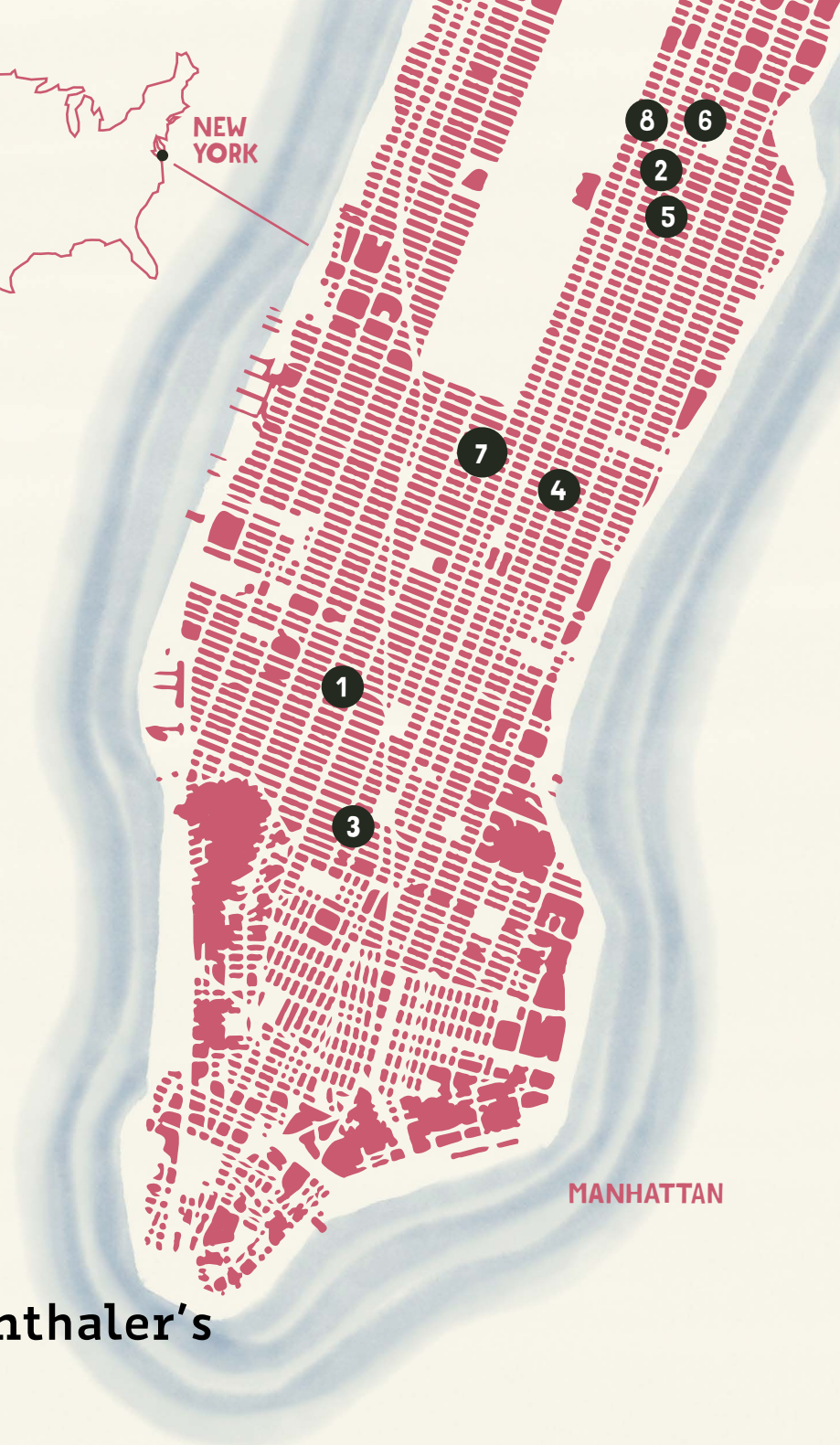
In her nearly fifty-year career as an artist, Frankenthaler has explored various tools and techniques in her abstract paintings. Each of her works represents different stages of her artistic journey, but they are all connected by a shared sensibility. In an interview, she stated: "whatever you do, dream, feel, see, visit, comes to you, enters inside you and your unconscious, into your work and your being. And you are forced to let it out and show its effects."

Frankenthaler transforms the different experiences of life into unrecognizable images that nevertheless preserve the memory of what has been. She says: "My paintings are full of atmospheres, abstract atmospheres, and not of nature itself. But of a feeling."

This interpretation of abstract painting is closely linked to music, which, like her paintings, can transport us to significant places and moments in our lives.

For the final two rooms of the exhibition, choose a song that resonates with Frankenthaler's paintings and listen to it while viewing the works (using headphones for an immersive experience). The music can enhance your connection to the paintings.

Before leaving the exhibition, make sure to visit the Video Room to watch how Helen Frankenthaler painted.



Helen Frankenthaler's places

1 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation
This is where Helen Frankenthaler's artistic legacy is preserved and promoted today.

2 Dalton School
This is the college where she studied painting and graduated in 1945.

3 Cedar Tavern
This was a popular venue among avant-garde artists and poets in the 1950s.

4 Tibor de Nagy Gallery
This is the gallery where she held her first solo exhibition in 1951.

5 Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler's house
This is the place where she lived from 1958 to 1998.

6 Her studio
The place that Helen Frankenthaler used between 1970 and 1991.

7 MoMA - Museum of Modern Art
This was the first museum to buy a work by Helen Frankenthaler in 1953.

8 Jewish Museum
This museum held Helen Frankenthaler's first retrospective in 1960 in New York.

Teenager a Palazzo Strozzi

Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi pays special attention to the world of teenagers with in-depth materials (**Teenager Kit**), special appointments for visits to the exhibition (**No Grown-Ups**) and the PCTO program - Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e l'Orientamento - (**Plurals**) designed at local secondary schools. Discover all the activities for teenagers at palazzostrozzi.org/education.