

Start at home

Soak-Stain Painting



“There are no rules.
Let the picture lead you where it must go.”
Helen Frankenthaler, 2003

About the artist

As a little girl, Helen Frankenthaler experimented by dribbling nail polish into a sink full of water to watch the colours bloom and flow. Her fascination with the physical possibilities of pigment continued through a dynamic practice spanning almost six decades. A persistent and endlessly curious artist, Helen pursued many different approaches to abstract painting and pioneered the soak-stain technique. Later she embarked on a prolonged exploration of woodcut printing, achieving delicate wash effects never before seen in the medium.

About the work

At first glance, *Madame Butterfly* looks like a chalk and watercolour painting on wood. The forms are drippy and transparent and the colours seem to splash against each other. In fact, it is a woodcut, printed from 46 interlocking blocks on paper that has been made to resemble wood grain. The print appears fresh and loose – as if it were created in a few fast, joyful gestures. However, it was laboriously developed and refined over several years of trial and error by Helen and a team of expert collaborators.

**Madame Butterfly is on display in Gallery
10 until April 22 2019**

We would love to see your work! Ask your parent or carer to post a photo on Instagram and tag the Art Gallery of South Australia. Or you can email your photo to us at public.programs@artgallery.sa.gov.au

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Image
Helen Frankenthaler, United States of America, 1928–2011, Yasuyuki Shibata, woodblock carver and printer, Japan, *Madame Butterfly*, 2000, Mount Kisco, New York, coloured woodcut from 46 woodblocks on three sheets of paper, 106.0 x 201.9 cm (image, overall); Gift of Colin and Robyn Cowan, James Darling AM, Lesley Forwood, Dr Michael and Janet Hayes, Kate Jordan Moore, Gosia Kudra Schild, Shane Le Plastrier, Joan Lyons, David and Pam McKee, Diana McLaurin, Jan Murphy and Peter Walker through the Helen Frankenthaler Appeal 2017, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, ©Estate of Helen Frankenthaler/Copyright Agency.

Materials you need

- 3 large canvas boards or sheets of thick watercolour paper
- liquid watercolour paints in 4 colours or more (you can make this yourself by dissolving solid watercolour discs in hot water and mixing well)
- plastic cups
- a spray bottle filled with water
- a lemon, cut in half
- a drop cloth or newspaper

Create your own work of art

- 1 Cover your painting area and put on an apron or painting clothes.
- 2 Lay your three paper sheets or canvas boards on a flat surface and lightly spray them with water.
- 3 Half fill a plastic cup with each colour of paint.
- 4 Choose two colours for your first painting. Tip one colour at a time onto your paper or canvas. With the first colour, keep your hands still so that the paint pours straight down. With the second colour, pour in a different area, and try moving the cup slightly as you pour. See how the paint behaves. Does it pool, bleed, or run together?
- 5 Start your second painting. This time use three colours and experiment with pouring fast or slow, from low or high, in one long swoop or in dribs and drabs.
- 6 While your paintings are still wet, squeeze lemon juice onto different areas and watch what happens.
- 7 Repeat with the final painting, using four or more colours and combining different techniques.
- 8 Leave your artwork somewhere flat for the paint to soak in and dry completely.

Take it further

Experiment on different surfaces: dry canvas instead of wet, paper towel, fabric or felt, offcuts of wood or brown kraft paper.

When Helen started to explore woodcut printmaking, she introduced many of the qualities of soak-stain painting to her new medium. Could you take this technique in another new direction?

Madame Butterfly took many years to create, but looks as though it was made quickly. What other activities are more difficult or complicated than they look?

Presented by

