**Masterpiece: Blue Atmosphere, 1963**
*by Helen Frankenthaler*

**Keywords:** Abstract Expressionism, Non-objective shapes, Color Study

**Grade:** Kindergarten

**Month:** December/January

**Activity:** Color Blending and Stain

**Meet the Artist:**
- Born in 1928 in New York City to wealthy parents. She went to good schools and had the opportunity to travel. She even studied in Mexico while in high school.
- Although she was influenced by other artists of her time, she developed her own style of art that is considered Abstract Expressionism.
- She was thought of as a pioneer and the first artist to use a method called “soak and stain”. She thinned her paint and let it soak into the canvas. She would pour onto the canvas instead of using a brush and would leave the splatter marks and drips to show how she does the process.
- She has had countless one-woman exhibitions, which was difficult for women to achieve during the time she painted.
- She was married to another famous Abstract Expressionist, Robert Motherwell.

**Discussion:**

What is Abstract Expressionism?
- applied paint rapidly with force on large canvases,
- colors used by the artist showed feelings and emotion,
- no familiar objects or shapes, (i.e. circles, squares, triangle, etc.) were used.
  The shapes were personal, playful and imaginative,
- the artwork appears to be accidental but was really planned out,
- the expressive manner in which the artist painted the artwork was often considered as important as the painting itself.

Color Theory: Use the color wheel to demonstrate color theory.

- The color wheel was first developed by Sir Isaac Newton in 1666.
- **Primary Colors** are Red, Yellow and Blue. They are called Primary because no color can create these. They stand alone but are used as the base colors for every other color on the color wheel and beyond (i.e. the spectrum). For example when you mix two primary colors together such as yellow and blue, you get a secondary color – green. That is also why you see green in the middle of these two primary colors. Have the student identify other secondary colors on the wheel.
- Because Primary colors are the most vivid when placed next to each other, they are used when a product or item needs to have a sense of speed or quickness. That is why you will see places like fast food places use primary colors in their logo or inside their restaurant. They want you to eat and go….quickly.
- **Secondary Colors** are Orange, Green and Purple. As discussed above, these colors are what you get when you equally mix the primary colors together. On the color wheel, the secondary colors are located in-between their primary colors or parent colors. Again, point these colors out to the student on the color wheel.
- Secondary colors are usually more interesting than primary colors as they are used to show calmness or taking your time.

Possible Questions

- What are the main colors?
- How do you think the artist felt when she painted it?
- How does this painting make you feel? Certain colors may make you feel happy, sad, angry. These color qualities are what the Abstract Expressionists were trying to achieve in their art work.
- What kind of shapes (Outlines with space inside creates shapes)? Are they alike or one of a kind? What do the shapes look like (clouds)?
- Do you see shapes on top of one another? Does this overlap change the color?
- Do you think the artist used a paintbrush? why or why not?
- How do you think she did it? Example: Was the canvas hanging up or lying on the floor while she was painting it? How can you tell?
Do you think she planned where she poured the paint or just did it with no planning?
Why do you think she called it Blue Atmosphere? What would you call it?

**Explain Activity:** Students will create their own non-objective, abstract expressionist piece and gain knowledge of color theory using primary colored liquid watercolors.

**Materials needed:** 12"x18" watercolor paper, primary liquid water colors, small bowls or egg carton (one for each color), eye dropper (one for each student), spray bottle with water, salt, art mat to cover desk, art shirts or smock,* a large piece of the butcher paper for drying...can be placed in the hallway.

* A few weeks prior to the lesson, the art shirt request will be sent to teachers to send home with student. There is a bin of art shirts in the supply closet as well. Note: the liquid watercolor is washable.

**Process:**

1. Brainstorm with the students an abstract idea or feeling -- energy, freedom, empty, sad, happy, angry - have them try to depict that idea or feeling using only color and shapes that do not have a recognizable image. It is important that the student NOT depict a symbol for their expression.

2. Place three small bowls each filled with a color of the liquid watercolor and a couple of small spray bottles at each workstation. Each student receives a mat for their desk, a watercolor paper, and a dropper.

3. Explain some ground rules for use of the liquid watercolor as this is also a lesson in listening (and this product is new to the students and this activity):
   a) The watercolors will be shared between 4-5 students;
   b) The watercolors are to be dripped on their paper only;
   c) The watercolors should not be mixed in the bowls;
   d) Their paper should not get soaked...leave some white spots.

4. To begin color, have students follow as a class.
   a) Lightly spray the watercolor paper;
   b) begin with one of the colors, have them apply and wait a few minutes to observe the color spreading on the paper;
   c) only move on to the next color when they are finished with current color and again, have them apply and wait a few minutes to observe the color mixing with first color;
   d) repeat for third color;
   e) sprinkle salt on wet colors.
Ask them to observe what happens when you drip colors on top of each other: How does it blend? What new color appears? What happens when salt is sprinkled on the colors?

5. Let dry on butcher paper.
Other paintings by Helen Frankenthaler