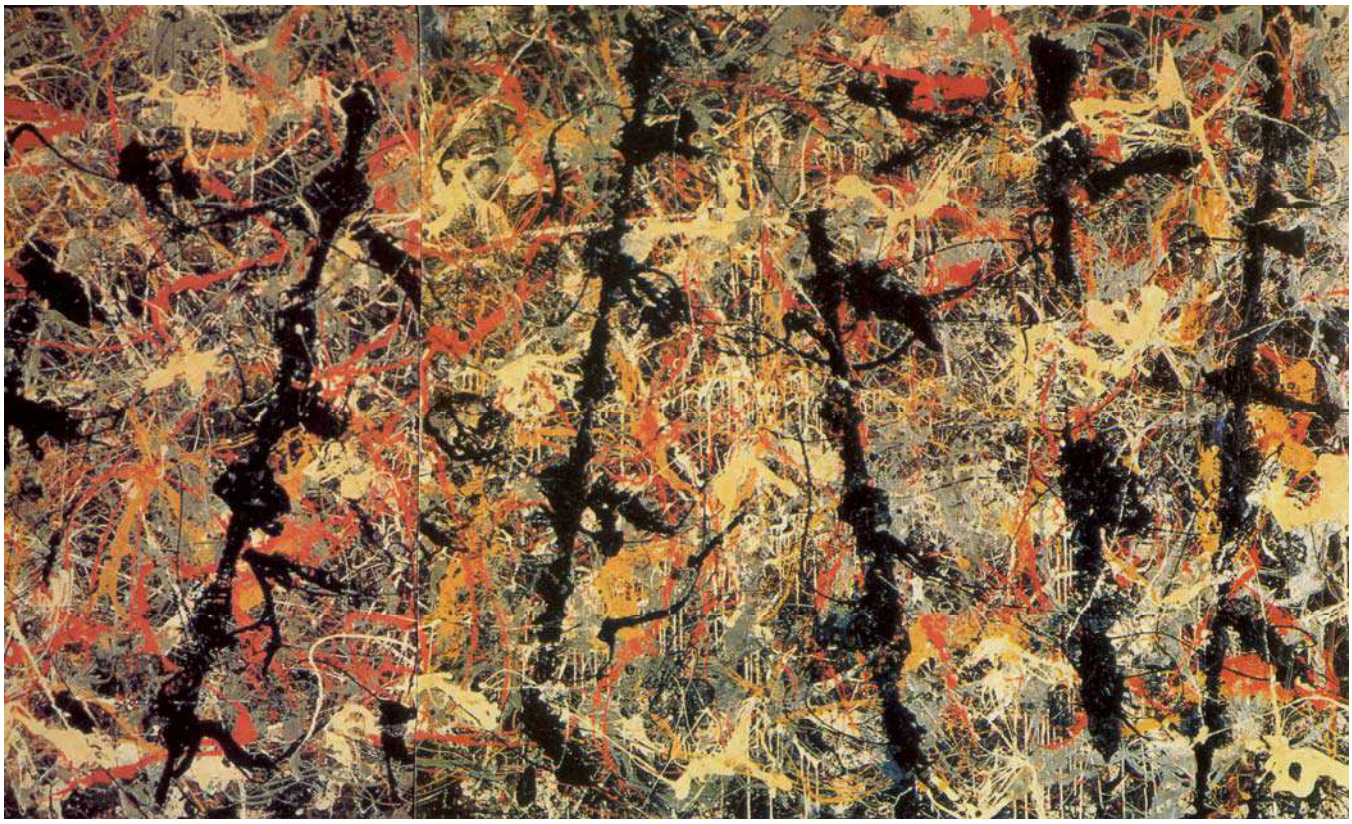

JACKSON POLLOCK: MODERNISM'S SHOOTING STAR

by Phyllis Tuchman, *Smithsonian*, November 1998

Pollock embellished the dense, mural-size surface of *Blue Poles: Number 11*, 1952 with a rhythmic series of tilted verticals. The iconic figures (insets, left and following) are details from drawings he made c. 1938.

When Jackson Pollock died in a car crash in August 1956, the 44-year-old artist hadn't made a painting in over a year. During the previous two and a half years, Pollock had executed only four significant pictures, but he seemed ready to get back to work. He had just put in a supply of canvas and paint; and he finally had installed lights in his studio, a former barn, on Long Island. In a few months he was to become the first artist of his generation—the then-emergent Abstract Expressionists—to be honored with a mid-career survey of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In December 1956, as planned, MOMA mounted a spectacular exhibition of 35 paintings and nine drawings and watercolors by Pollock. The show, however, had become a memorial to the most important abstractionist in American art history, then as well as now. According to no less than Willem de Kooning, the Dutch-born painter to whom Pollock is most often compared in terms of both stature and influence, and who just died last year at the age of 92, "Jackson broke the ice." These four words describe the story of American art during the 20th century more fully than any book ever written on the period or its legacy.

With several astonishingly eloquent wall-size paintings done in 1950, Pollock did something few other American artists have ever achieved: he showed how an abstractionist could make beautiful, profound, enigmatic, graceful canvases endowed with poetry and meaning. These "portable murals" are as fresh and original today as they were when they were made, almost 50 years ago. This will be evident November 1 when Autumn Rhythm, One, Number 32 and Lavender Mist, along with 150 other canvases and works on paper executed by Pollock in a career of approximately 25 years, go on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition runs through February 2, 1999.

Pollock retrospectives are rarely mounted. Baby boomers were still in school when the last one was done in New York in 1967, again at MOMA, ten years after the first survey. Until this current exhibition, the only other extended, in-depth look at Pollock's career was put together by the French at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris

in 1982. Because the paintings are large and fragile, many owners are hesitant to lend them. Also, the insurance premiums are huge. Since fewer and fewer Pollocks remain in private hands, they keep increasing in value.

During his lifetime, Paul Jackson Pollock was almost always poor. Born in Cody, Wyoming, on January 28, 1912, he was the youngest of five sons. His parents, who met in Iowa, married in Nebraska and moved on to Wyoming, had a hard time making ends meet. Short, dark and handsome, LeRoy Pollock was variously a stonemason, cement worker and surveyor who tried to run a series of failing farms in Arizona and California.

Stella Pollock, a robust matriarch with a fair complexion and light-brown hair, cooked, cleaned and made clothes for herself and her sons. The boys did the chores. They weren't athletes; instead their mother encouraged them to be creative. Three became painters, one was a horticulturalist and one worked as a rotogravure etcher.

Though he was growing up on the land, young Jack, by the time he was 10, already knew a more sophisticated world existed. In 1922, Charles Pollock, the oldest of the boys, got a job in the layout department of the Los Angeles Times while studying at the Otis Art Institute. Four years later, after moving to New York to attend the Art Students League and work with Thomas Hart Benton, who would soon emerge as America's leading Regionalist artist, Charles would suggest in his letters home what should be seen and read.

The future Abstract Expressionist was an indifferent student who for a variety of reasons kept getting expelled from high school. In Riverside, California, he was kicked out of the local high school's ROTC program. When the family moved to Los Angeles in 1928, he entered Manual Arts High, where he became friends with two like-minded teens, Philip Guston, ne Goldstein, then an aspiring cartoonist, and another would-be artist, Manuel Tolegian. There, too, he was taken under the wing of his art teacher, who, besides nourishing Pollock's talent, would introduce him to theosophy, the teachings of Krishnamurti and extrasensory perception.

This round, Pollock got himself expelled for distributing a broadside attacking athletics. "Instead of yelling 'hit that line,'" Pollock maintained, "we should cry, 'make that grade.'" After being reinstated and expelled once more, he had time to pursue other interests. At the Los Angeles County Museum of Art he noticed *Dia de la flor*, a painting from 1925 by the Mexican artist Diego Rivera. To his two brothers living in New York, he wrote: "I became acquainted with Rivera's work through a number of Communist meetings I attended after being ousted from school last year. He has a painting in the museum now." This picture, with its amply scaled shapes, limited vocabulary of forms and abundance of curves, features flowers and figures that fill the entire canvas. The "apathetic" student mentioned to his brothers how he had "found the Creative Art [magazine] of January 1929 on Rivera," adding, "I certainly admire his work."

Readmitted to school to study part-time, Pollock, with Charles, who was visiting, went out to Pomona College in Claremont, east of Los Angeles, to see Jose Clemente Orozco's new mural, Prometheus. This other important Mexican artist had depicted a 20-foot giant dominating a composition of a doomed world populated by a throng of much smaller figures. On his own, the teenager trekked to Pomona several times to view the fresco.

That fall, Pollock joined his brothers in New York. He later told his friend sculptor Tony Smith that he had come to New York to learn "to sculpt like Michelangelo." To that end, Pollock, now all of 18, went to Greenwich House to study stone carving. He also registered at the Art Students League and, like his brother Charles, hit it off with the 41-year-old Benton. For five semesters, the high school dropout studied with the famous Missourian. He joined in evenings of music making at Benton's home, baby-sat for his son, became a class monitor and, after Benton left the League to paint the mural commissions then finally coming his way, spent summers with the family on Martha's Vineyard. On Benton's property, overlooking Menemsha Pond, Pollock converted a former chicken coop into "Jack's shack"—his own studio. One of the earliest paintings in the MOMA retrospective is a scene from Pollock's time here (p. 98) that calls to mind the work of another favorite of the young artist, Albert Pinkham Ryder, the creator of moody, nocturnal seascapes.

Yet it was the ideas that Benton outlined in five articles published in *The Arts* in 1926-27, entitled "Mechanics of Form Organization in Painting," that were to make the most lasting impression on his protégé. In these pieces, Benton analyzed ways to distribute multiple figures laterally across broad fields. But instead of using recognizable images in his diagrams, he introduced a series of lines and geometric forms to represent the figures. By doing this, he also achieved visual rhythms. It would be years before Pollock grasped Benton's notions more completely than

anyone else, including his teacher. Just a hint of Benton's impact is apparent in drawings from Pollock's sketchbooks that are included in the current MOMA survey. These books contain studies, based on old master paintings by El Greco, Michelangelo and others, in which one finds figures grouped representationally and then massed more abstractly.

An early Pollock oil, Seascape *(1934) depicts a scene from Martha's Vineyard. The all-over composition and almost abstract rendering of the sea prefigure his later canvases.*

Over the years there would be other mentors, little money, continual bouts with alcoholism, marriage to a talented painter, who would put her own career aside to nurture his, and rave notices from one of the most important art critics of the century—Clement Greenberg. While Pollock never went to Europe, never saw in person Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, Rubens' Marie de Medicis cycle in the Louvre or the Titians in Madrid, he knew how these masters styled their images, created action and got their meanings across. He had taught himself to recognize when a painting or sculpture "worked," his shorthand for two thumbs up.

About the perspective he garnered traveling across Depression-era America by boxcar, and Model-A Ford, Pollock once said, "You get a wonderful view of the country from the top of a freight car." Like the great landscape painters of the 19th century, he, too, drew vistas large and small—it's just that his were along Route 66.

Beginning in 1935, and almost continuously for seven years, Pollock, like his contemporaries, eked out a living working for divisions of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). As a 24-year-old in 1936, he also became acquainted with David Alfaro Siqueiros, another great Mexican muralist, who ran a workshop in Union Square where artists experimented with spray guns, airbrushes and synthetic paints. And after reading "Primitive Art and Picasso" in the April 1937 *Magazine of Art*, he got in touch with its author, John Graham, a charismatic, visionary artist. Their friendship expanded his circle.

When Pollock's drinking got out of hand during the summer of 1938, he was hospitalized. Released about four months later, he saw several analysts over the following years. His treatment tended to be unorthodox. For example, with one young doctor he would discuss drawings he had executed in the spirit of Picasso and the Mexican muralists.

Late in 1941 John Graham invited Pollock to participate in a group show he was organizing in which American artists such as de Kooning and Stuart Davis would appear with the likes of Matisse, Braque, Bonnard and Picasso. Lee Krasner, a New York painter who had studied with the legendary abstractionist Hans Hofmann, was also slated to exhibit in the show. She later said, "I thought I knew all the abstract artists in New York." But she insisted that she had never heard of Pollock. Impulsively, she knocked on his door one day. About five-foot-eleven, he conveyed the impression of being even taller, perhaps because he was big-boned, had a strong face and heavy, powerful

hands. Within a year the two painters were living together in his apartment at 46 East 8th Street in Greenwich Village.

Krasner, the sixth of seven children raised by Russian-born Orthodox Jewish parents in Brooklyn, truly did know everybody. Introducing her new companion could be an adventure, however. Having been told that Pollock "worked from his heart," Hans Hofmann suggested that he come to his school and work directly from nature. "I am nature," replied Pollock, as if he were Prospero in Shakespeare's Tempest.

Totemic forms flank an ovoid beast bearing a stick-like figure in *Pasiphae* (1943). Though it references the tale of the Minotaur, its fragmented imagery borders on abstraction.

Like a number of European Surrealists and other modernist artists, dealer Peggy Guggenheim settled in New York soon after World War II began. Having decided to organize a juried show, she found herself discussing Pollock's Stenographic Figure, a horizontal work from c. 1942, with the Dutch abstractionist Piet Mondrian. "Awful. Dreadful, isn't it?" she asked. But Mondrian eventually answered, "I believe it's the most interesting work I've seen in America yet." Guggenheim changed her mind. And after the exhibition opened, Pollock won acclaim from eminent critic Clement Greenberg, who would become his greatest champion, and from others as well. Next Guggenheim invited Pollock to have what would become the first of four solo shows in her gallery, Art of This Century. (When she closed her space, he would move on to Betty Parsons; thus, in eight years he had nine one-person shows in New York.)

Guggenheim also commissioned from Pollock a mural for her town house. Now in the University of Iowa Museum of Art, it is the largest work he ever painted. Originally intended for exhibition in his first show at her gallery, the piece was so large that Pollock had to knock out a wall in his apartment to make it. He contemplated the bare canvas for hours on end, but the show came and went before he finally, in just one day, covered the entire surface of the work with a series of rhythmic strokes that suggests a group of figures. "I had a vision," Pollock reportedly told a friend, "It was a stampede." The parade of black marks across the canvas also calls to mind the diagrams Benton first published in 1927 and some of the steel sculptures David Smith would weld during the 1950s.

In the early '40s, a number of artists who would later become known as Abstract Expressionists or members of the New York School were painting quasi-abstract images inspired by Greek mythology. Pollock never opted for anything as erudite or delicate as the images of Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb or Barnett Newman. The pictures in

his first show with Peggy Guggenheim were denser, with imagery stretching from edge to edge, and entire surfaces animated by forms that seemed familiar but somehow undecipherable. His palette was darker, too. To paint *The She-Wolf*, he used an easel and traditional brushes, but he also put the canvas on the floor and dripped color onto it. While art historians have identified the subject with the story of Romulus and Remus, Pollock probably had American Indian sources in mind in much the same way that Mexican muralists appropriated Pre-Columbian imagery for their frescoes. *Male and Female*, *Guardians of the Secret* and *Pasipha* also tellingly reveal how Pollock blended all sorts of ideas into his unified works. Variously one can detect whiffs of Picasso; American Indian symbology; Jungian archetypes; and murals by Benton and Mexican artists such as Rivera. Carried off masterfully and with panache, these classics of 1942 and 1943 are uniquely Pollock.

In October 1945, Pollock and Krasner married. Having visited an artist friend whom he had known since his days in Riverside, Pollock decided to move permanently to The Springs, a rural community on Long Island, near East Hampton, whose backwoods character is little changed today. Money borrowed from Peggy Guggenheim helped the couple buy a small house facing Accabonac Creek.

After the initial cleanup, a routine set in. As Pollock once put it, "Painting is not a problem; the problem is what to do when you're not painting." And he worked in spurts. He'd rise late, often having slept for 12 or 14 hours. As Krasner ate lunch, he had his breakfast. If he wasn't working in the garden, he might be baking bread or pies. At some point, he rigged up a special sound system for his record collection, which ranged from readings by James Joyce to the music of Louis Armstrong. According to Krasner, Pollock "thought [jazz] was the only other really creative thing happening in the country." There were his books, too. In his extensive home library, Camus and Proust share shelf space with Dante and Whitman; works by Freud, Jung and L. Ron Hubbard are mixed in with books on El Greco and Miro. And, if he wanted to know anything about Native Americans, Pollock owned 12 volumes of a set of reference books published at the turn of the century by the Smithsonian Institution.

Pollock loved, also, to go to the beach, day or night. He would drive all the way out to Montauk or just ride a bike to Louse Point, an enchanting spot favored by de Kooning, who became a neighbor. Tony Smith related how "on clear nights we would get out of the car and look at the stars." In an article from 1951, painter Robert Goodnough stated that Pollock's art "may be thought of as coming from landscape," and suggested that viewers might even be reminded of "the movement of the stars—with which he seems almost intimate at times."

Male and Female *(1942) reflects the influence of Picasso and European modernism. In the splashes and swirls of color at top left one can see hints of Pollock's later "drip" paintings.*

Five months after he and Krasner moved to the country, the 34-year-old Pollock held his third solo show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century. He painted a number of the pictures at his new home. During the night he'd hear the sounds of birds, insects or an occasional fox from his windows; and the next day, in a converted upstairs bedroom, he'd work on his paintings. In preparation for his next show, Pollock began two series of works. One was more refined, more colorful and more Cubist than anything he had done. The other had a muscular quality with swirls of paint forming heavily impastoed surfaces. One large picture, *The Key*, which resembles a fragmented Picasso colorfully painted by Matisse, was entirely executed with the canvas on the floor.

Having cleaned out the old barn that came with the five-acre property, the new owners had it moved—it had been blocking the view to the water. Once a large new window was punched high into the north wall, Pollock started to work in the unheated, unlit studio. If it was cold and Pollock wanted to do some work, Krasner later recalled, "he would get dressed up in an outfit the like of which you've never seen." He was so assured and confident, he hardly ever abandoned a canvas he was having trouble finishing. The dimensions of his paintings grew in size, while the internal scale of his forms got larger, too. Surfaces became airier; his touch lighter. The imagery appeared to get more and more abstract.

In the fall of 1948, Pollock fell off his bike and went to the nearby medical center. By the time he left, a new young physician had convinced him to stop drinking and to come regularly to his office. Tragically this talented doctor died in a car accident in early 1950, but for two years Pollock was on the wagon. During this period, he painted his greatest artworks.

With a slight twist of the wrist, Pollock drips paint onto one of his wall-size canvases as his wife, artist Lee Krasner, looks on. The photograph was taken in 1950 by Hans Namuth.

Pollock's reputation spread so quickly beyond the confines of the art world that several photographers, including Martha Holmes of Life magazine, came out to his studio to record what he was doing there. Their timing was uncanny. He had then begun working on his breakthrough "drip" or "poured" paintings, huge portable murals that he created by dripping Duco and other house paints—black, white, silver, taupe, teal—from hardened and worn-out brushes, sticks and such onto cotton duck canvas spread across the studio floor. To explain how these wall-size paintings were made, Pepe Karmel—an adjunct assistant curator who worked on organizing the MOMA retrospective with Kirk Varnedoe, chief curator of the department of painting and sculpture—had fed into a computer a variety of stills and outtakes from a film shot by Hans Namuth, a photographer who lived in nearby Water Mill. Analyzing the resulting images, all of which were taken between July and November 1950, Karmel discovered that Pollock's greatest paintings were not as abstract as they have always been assumed to be.

Lines of color are interwoven to create a sense of lively harmony in *Autumn Rhythm*. "My paintings…dep end on the same amount of interest throughout," Pollock once said.

In his catalogue essay, Karmel describes how Pollock, with a series of fluid lines, drew loopy figures and animals across the first layer of these astonishing pictures. While representational, they are not lifelike. If anything, they resemble the quirky drawings, some with several scenes to a sheet, that Pollock had made years earlier. Also, the artist distributed what Karmel calls a "series of self-contained configurations" across the unstretched surfaces, as if he were heeding Benton's composition lessons—or putting down preparatory marks for a fresco.

Once the paint dried, Pollock connected the spread-out shapes with darker, thicker slashes of pigment. Again, he would wait for that session's efforts to dry. The next tier would probably also be nonfigurative, but not necessarily so. There were no hard-and-fast rules, but eventually the painting would emerge as an abstract, all-over composition. To be sure, the painting's thickest elements appeared closest to viewers, suggesting a relation to traditional perspective and deep space. Moreover, shiny pools of black and white and occasional threads of aluminum paint reflected light and animated whole sequences of nonrepresentational design.

Reading Karmel's description of the imagery is a bit like standing next to a friend who is pointing out how the stars can connect into the wonderfully mythic forms that have been admired by all cultures and civilizations. Pollock may have had just this notion in mind. Shortly before he started to use numbers rather than words to designate one painting from another, he variously titled a group of works from 1947 *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, *Comet*, *Shooting Star* and *Galaxy*. He'd previously used the words "night" and "moon" for several others. And about *Portrait and a Dream* (below), Lee Krasner has indicated that the "dark side of the moon" is depicted in the upper-right area of its left section. Perhaps when Pollock thought about what it would be like to look up at Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling, he associated such an action with craning toward the heavens at night. In his majestic canvases Pollock appears to have been creating simulacra of the cosmos in constant motion. Thus his explanation that in his art one finds "energy and motion made visible." During the following years, Pollock continued to express these interests, but he avoided explaining what he was doing. The "black" paintings he next executed incorporated recognizable images and were viewed by some critics as a regression or the onset of a decline. In later canvases, Pollock reintroduced color and texture, but increasingly depressed by the reception of his work, he made fewer and fewer paintings before his tragic death.

Pollock's art has lived on in unexpected ways. As Pepe Karmel points out, his efforts should be seen "not as modernism's conclusion but as its starting point." That's how, for more than 50 years, such open-ended work has variously inspired Helen Frankenthaler's early abstractions and their influence on color-field painting; Allan Kaprow's development of Happenings; Donald Judd's brand of Minimalism; and the eloquent abstract paintings of Brice Marden. Some 30 years ago, Clement Greenberg articulated how Pollock's art expressed "inspiration, vision, [and] intuitive decision." It was also the act of a brave and daring spirit.

Pollock combined two methods of painting in *Portrait and a Dream* (1953). He used oil and brushes while the canvas was upright, then moved to the floor to pour enamel.

By Phyllis Tuchman, who last wrote for these pages in January 1998 on artist George Segal.