

35 pgs - 9 drawings + watercolors

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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EXHIBITION OF WORK BY JACKSON POLLOCK TO OPEN AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The first major exhibition of paintings by Jackson Pollock will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from December 19 through February 3. It has been organized and installed by Sam Hunter, Associate Curator of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, and includes 35 oils, and a number of water-colors and drawings which are being shown publicly for the first time. Covering the period from 1938 to 1956, but concentrating on the last decade of Pollock's career, the exhibition is the first in a new Museum program of one-man shows which emphasize the more recent work of middle-generation artists in America and Europe. It was discussed with Pollock before his untimely death in an auto accident last summer at the age of 44.

Jackson Pollock was one of the primary innovators of the post-war period in American abstract painting and became for many younger artists the symbolic painter of his generation by reason of his spirit of revolt. Summing up Pollock's revolutionary contribution, Mr. Hunter writes in the exhibition catalog*:

With a handful of contemporary painters and sculptors, a heterogeneous group who have been linked in an informal movement sometimes called Abstract Expressionism, Pollock was responsible for injecting into American art a vitality and confidence best compared to that of the period immediately following the Armory show. His work pointed to an unexpected way around the clichés of a doctrinaire non-objective art which dominated advanced American painting in the thirties, and it helped generate new resources in method and released new energies. If Pollock's painting style was aggressive in its self-determination and finally distinctly American in temper, it was also deeply nourished by the radical modern forms of continental painting, and by spiritual attitudes which recognize no national boundaries. One of his significant achievements was to rejuvenate the European sense of art and make it viable again for native sensibility.

Mr. Hunter also points out, however, that Pollock's great influence among American artists was based on his distinctly individual modifications of modern European precedent; these were his dynamic concepts of pictorial space, his original and expressive use of medium and, lastly, his continuing search for new freedoms.

Pollock was born in Cody, Wyoming in 1912, and until the age of seventeen lived in the West, principally in Arizona and California. His first introduction to the larger world of American art was the painting of Thomas Benton, with whom he studied at the Art Students' League in New York from 1929 to 1931. Although Pollock soon after repudiated his teacher's American scene subject matter, the

* JACKSON POLLOCK by Sam Hunter. 36 pages; 26 plates (1 in color); paper; 75¢. Published by the Museum of Modern Art, distributed by Simon & Schuster.

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director of the exhibition suggests that, "in Benton's work Pollock might have found hints of that coarseness, rhythmic sweep and addiction to grotesque caricature which some ten years later characterized his first original painting style." In a statement reprinted in the catalog Pollock describes the tenacity of his early attachment to Benton's style, but he also declares that Ryder was the American artist who actually interested him most deeply. The influence of Benton in the early thirties was offset by Pollock's adoption of many of the mannerisms and something of the dream-lime atmosphere of Ryder's paintings.

In the middle thirties Pollock continued exploring romantic and expressionist idioms, turning for inspiration to the Mexicans, Orozco and Siqueiros. And then, at the end of that decade, perhaps the most important single influence in his evolution came into play, that of Picasso. Mr. Hunter writes:

Picasso's Cubism gave Pollock his first intimations of the radical nature of modern painting, impressing on him the overriding importance and the transforming function of plastic values. A vivid appreciation of the painting surface as a potential architectonic organism has lent a consistent stylistic logic throughout his career even to Pollock's freest inventions. Equally important were the suggestions he found in Picasso's paintings of the thirties that abstraction could be more than a language of pure esthetic relation, and could embody its creator's fancies, disquiet and passions. By the late thirties Pollock was filling notebooks with fantastic drawings that were free variations of the Spanish master's figuration in the Guernica period. But some ineradicable suspicion of authority impelled him to fragmentize Picasso, to create more evenly distributed effects and continuous linear rhythms. These random, undirected doodles supplied many of the aggressive animal motifs for Pollock's paintings of the early forties and also anticipated a later cursive writing which dispensed with image suggestion entirely.

A number of drawings from the late thirties are included in the exhibition, indicating Pollock's direct relationship to and his departures from Picasso's style in the same period.

Pollock's first one-man exhibition was held in 1943 at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century. It showed the influence not only of Picasso but of the Surrealists, many of whom were living in New York at the time and exhibited at the gallery. The revival of American interest in the international surrealist movement had much to do with that collective burst of energy among younger artists which later became known as Abstract Expressionism. Mr. Hunter writes that Pollock was indebted to Surrealism in his earliest exhibited works, as were a number of his younger contemporaries, but these American artists adapted such surrealist methods as "automatic writing" to their own artistic purposes:

They purged the style of mystification and literary content and applied its quality of freedom to rehabilitating pure pictorial values. In their hands the expressive means of painting rather than associated ideas became the essential content of the work of art. Although American vanguard artists were drawn to Surrealism because its exasperations and atmosphere of scandal suited their sense of crisis, they were not driven into an art of fantasy and private dreams primarily, as might be expected, but one of immediate sensation. They revealed themselves as sensitive
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materialists even when they crusaded against the materialism of contemporary American culture.

In 1946, with the paintings Shimmering Substance and The Blue Unconscious, Pollock began consistently to paint in a non-objective manner, discarding the surrealist-tinctured symbolism of his earlier paintings. Then, in the following year he executed the first of his so-called "drip" paintings; one of the many examples of this new manner is Cathedral, painted in 1947, loaned by the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. Here Pollock for the first time employed enamel and aluminum paints, and those radical techniques of application which were part of his search for a new spontaneity and freedom. These techniques incidentally earned him a good deal of unwarranted public notoriety since they were mistaken for a gratuitous pictorial license and lack of discipline. Mr. Hunter describes Pollock's painting methods as follows:

From 1947 his pictorial energies were released centrifugally, no longer respecting either the delimiting spatial boundaries of the picture frame or the traditional uses of paint matter. The application of silver and enamel paint, and his 'drip' methods were designed to destroy the very integrity of medium, to free those forces within it constrained by association with weight, mass and the physical properties of bodies. But all such associations, built into painting by history, custom and rule, comprise the very flesh of the oil medium. When Pollock broke down the conventional painting means with his radical techniques, his works were drawn into a new gravitational system and could unfold a stirring new drama of space.

Pollock's radical new style reached its culmination in 1949 and 1950, in paintings of colossal size such as One, Autumn Rhythm and Number 32. Then in 1951 and 1952 he seemed to return to an earlier idiom, introducing once again compact, anatomical motifs and a recognizable figuration. And in those two years he also turned his back on color and painted almost exclusively in black and white. A number of the impressive works of this period are included in the exhibition. In the years between 1953 and his death, Pollock completed very few canvases. Those he did combined a variety of the elements which comprised the two main facets of his style, for throughout his career he had worked alternately in a vigorously rhythmic, linear manner, gothic in its attenuations, or in the more sensual baroque of emphatic surfaces loaded with impasto and often with foreign matter.

The assertive pigmentation and the industrial textures of Pollock's mature painting point up some of its specifically American characteristics. The question of Pollock's national artistic identity is touched on in the concluding section of the catalog:

In his unapologetic materialism there are refreshingly and unregenerately American qualities, as there are in his effort to breathe spirit into the refractory matter he chose to make the substance of his art. These distinctly native qualities mix matter-of-fact realism with respect to materials, and an innocent idealism. Only a supreme innocent would have felt

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free to disregard the intrinsic appeals and the cultivated uses of the language of paint, and gambled with raw pictorial effects to the degree that Pollock did. And only an idealist of transcendent powers could have won from such patently non-artistic content a deep and moving lyricism.

It is worthy of note, however, that Pollock's style was formed within the general framework of international abstraction, and that on the matter of artistic nationality he had made the following remarks which are reprinted in the catalog:

The idea of an isolated American painting, so popular in this country during the thirties, seems absurd to me just as the idea of creating a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd....And in another sense, the problem doesn't exist at all; or, if it did, would solve itself: An American is an American and his painting would naturally be qualified by that fact, whether he wills it or not. But the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any country.

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