POLLOCK

ONE: NUMBER 31, 1950

MoMA

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CHARLES STUCKEY

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956). *One: Number 31, 1950*. 1950. Oil and enamel on unprimed canvas, 8′ 10″ x 17′ 5⅝″ (269.5 x 530.8 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. SIDNEY AND HARRIET JANIS COLLECTION FUND (BY EXCHANGE)

A CENTERPIECE AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART SINCE 1968, JACKSON POLLOCK'S eighteen-foot-wide *One: Number 31, 1950* comes as a big surprise to anyone who visits the museum's painting galleries chronologically. When *One* is finally reached, it looks intentionally revolutionary, assertively different from everything earlier except Pollock's own works—more extreme in abstraction and more engulfing in scale. In art, and much else, large presupposes important.

Today's museumgoers will see *One* differently from their counterparts twenty-five or fifty years ago, when museum galleries were less crowded and it was easier to experience the sublime emotional complexities of *One* in private. Also, while it's true that Pollock **[FIG. 1]** was already something of a celebrity before he painted *One,* having been promoted in 1949 by *Life* magazine as possibly America's greatest young painter, by now he has become a legend, dramatized in Ed Harris's highly acclaimed film about the artist's fitful life, released in 2000. (I would be surprised if anyone reading this book had not already seen *Pollock* the film.) More important, Pollock's so-called "drip" style initiated something like a seismic shift in the culture of images, and since 1950, large-scale abstract works suffused with myriad scattered details are less the exception than the rule.

Rendered in the drip style, which Pollock had refined through the late 1940s, *One* shows his ostentatious disregard for every pictorial tradition and strategy except for the idea of painting a flat rectangular canvas for display on the wall. Instead of painting with the expensive oils manufactured for artists, he bought quick-drying alkyd paints from the hardware store, and instead of brushes he used sticks and basters, with expert skill, to drip, pour or squirt these paints onto his canvas, which he worked on not on an easel but on the floor. Even though his hand seldom touched the canvas, Pollock claimed to prefer the resistance of a hard surface while painting. Liquid paints congealed where he applied them, never running down the canvas the way paint can when applied to a vertical surface if not carefully brushed. As a result, when Pollock transposed his drip paintings for wall display, the spots and linear trails of paint appear to be suspended on the riotous surface by some galactic or oceanic current. Painting on the floor allowed Pollock to reach into his paintings every which way, but he made them for walls.

One was a wall of paint for Pollock, with all the emotional overtones relating to barriers and confinement. At wall scale, Pollock's painting is a billboard for his message, however that can be understood—surely, though, a message of liberation, of paint let loose. Pollock's drip paintings have no preconceived subject other than paint itself, which "represents" nothing but the self-referential

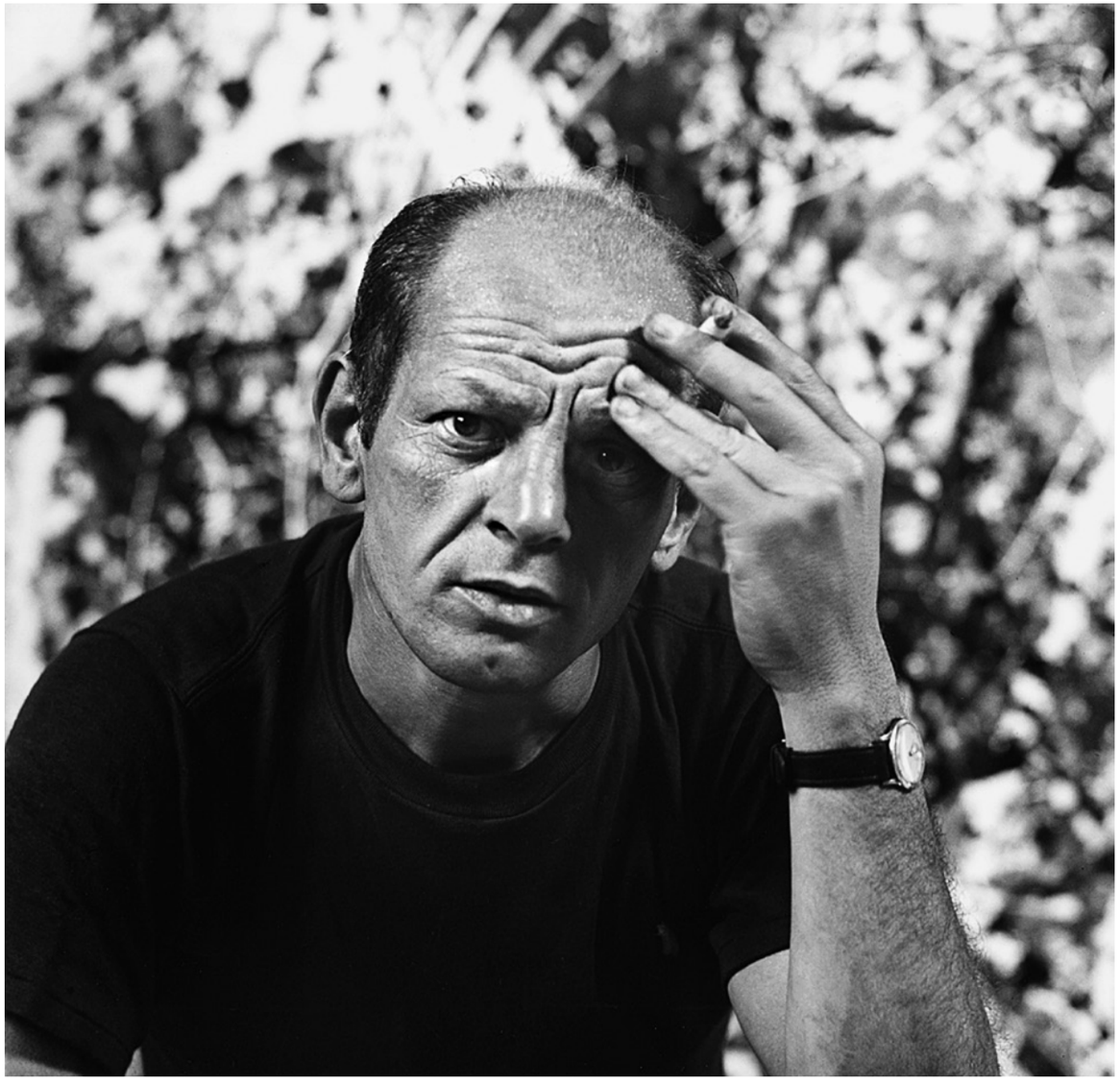

FIG. 1. *Jackson Pollock*, 1950. Photograph by Hans Namuth. COURTESY CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY, UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

actions of the painter painting. As Pollock put it succinctly in a note to himself that has been dated to 1950, with reference to a work like *One*: "Energy and motion made visible."[1] *One*'s first owner, Ben Heller, wrote to Pollock in early 1956: "Great God it is a thing for the ages."[2]

In an interview around the time *One* was first publicly exhibited, at New York's Betty Parsons Gallery in late 1950, William Wright asked Pollock how someone should look at a painting of his. "I think they should not look for," the artist replied, "but look passively—and try to receive what the painting has to offer and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what they are to be looking for." He quickly added, "I think the unconscious drives do mean a lot in looking at paintings," and "I think it should be enjoyed just as music is enjoyed."[3] Amazingly enough, no one seems to have asked Pollock where best to stand in relationship to his paintings: far back to see the full sweep, or close-up to marvel at intricacies. Should a viewer stand aligned with the center, the way viewers have looked at paintings since the Renaissance? They rather share Pollock's own freedom to dance about the painting, moving back and forth and from side to side. In this sense works like *One* initiated a new mode of viewing, commonplace by now. Unlike viewers of previous art with a finite number of parts and relationships for consideration, viewers of a painting by Pollock may never feel finished, as if they could ever notice every feature it has to offer. "Abstract painting is abstract. It confronts you," Pollock told a writer for *The New Yorker* who came to his home on Long Island around June 1950, when he was about to start work on *One*. "There was a reviewer a while back who wrote that my pictures didn't have any beginning or any end. He didn't mean it as a compliment, but it was." Pollock's wife, Lee Krasner, herself a no less serious painter, added, "That's exactly what Jackson's work is. Sort of unframed space." For Krasner, thanks to Pollock's childhood in Wyoming, Arizona, and California, "Jackson's work is full of the West. That's what gives it that feeling of spaciousness. It's what makes it so American."[4]

"Jackson used to give his pictures conventional titles . . . but now he simply numbers them. Numbers are neutral. They make people look at a picture for what it is—pure painting," explained Krasner.[5] Conspiring with his fellow artists at the Parsons Gallery, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko, who had already begun to replace titles with numerical designations in 1947, Pollock began to use numbers rather than titles in 1949. A word of caution: from 1950 until 1955, *One* was identified as *Number 31, 1950*. Indeed the Museum's decision to maintain both its original and its present title (thus *One: Number 31, 1950*) exemplifies how Pollock's numbering system led to confusion from the start. *Number 31, 1950* (today called *One*) was in fact painted after *Number 32, 1950* and before *Number 30* (today called *Autumn Rhythm*), or even before *Number 27, 1950*. Patience please.

FIG. 2. Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956). *Untitled (Overall Composition)*. c. 1934–38. Oil on canvas, 15 1/16 x 20 1/8" (38.3 x 51.1 cm). THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON. MUSEUM PURCHASE WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY THE BROWN FOUNDATION ACCESSIONS ENDOWMENT FUND

Aware that many collectors had neither the space nor the money for art made at institutional scale, like *One*, Pollock made drip paintings in many different sizes, but mural art was a long-standing obsession with him. When he was a teenage art student in California, his favorite works had been the socialist-minded public murals of the Mexican artists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, and when he came to New York in 1930, he took classes from Thomas Hart Benton, one of the Depression era's most successful mural painters. In the summer of 1935, when Pollock and his older brother Sande enlisted as unemployed artists with the Federal Art Project, they joined the mural division, and a year later they joined the experimental workshop organized on Union Square by the Stalinist muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, who encouraged the use of unconventional paints and techniques like dripping, pouring, and airbrushing. There is no indication whether Pollock considered some of the easel paintings he made during the 1930s as studies for murals, but *The Flame* (c. 1934–38) and some other untitled paintings of the 1930s and early '40s **[FIGS. 2, 3]** already manifest the rollicking allover compositional style that he perfected in his mural-scale canvases of the 1940s and early 1950s.

FIG. 3. Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956). *Untitled (Composition with Pouring I)*. 1943. Oil on canvas, 35¾ x 44¾" (90.8 x 113.6 cm). PRIVATE COLLECTION

FIG. 4. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) installed in the exhibition *Picasso: Forty Years of His Art*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1939

Nothing enhanced the uniquely high status of contemporary mural art in New York as much as the May 1939 exhibition of Pablo Picasso's twenty-five-foot-wide *Guernica* (1937), along with his numerous masterful studies for individual details of the painting, in a show at the Valentine Dudensing Gallery to benefit refugees of the Spanish Civil War. Like everyone else, Pollock came under *Guernica*'s spell. Later the same year, Picasso's portable mural returned to New York as the climax of the major Picasso retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art **[FIG. 4]**. Effective July 26, 1943, the Museum accepted the vast painting as a long-term loan. Made without studies, *One* and Pollock's other murals may be understood as in some way his intensely spontaneous response to Picasso's violent call for peace.

Pollock's gallery career began in 1943, with help from different branches of the Guggenheim family. That year he worked briefly as a janitor, art handler, and guard at Solomon R. Guggenheim's four-year-old Museum of Non-Objective Painting on 54th Street, where recordings of Bach and Chopin were gallery background music. Ambitious to paint as non-objectively as possible, Pollock absorbed the collection, rich in work by Vasily Kandinsky **[FIG. 5]**, and he followed the 1943

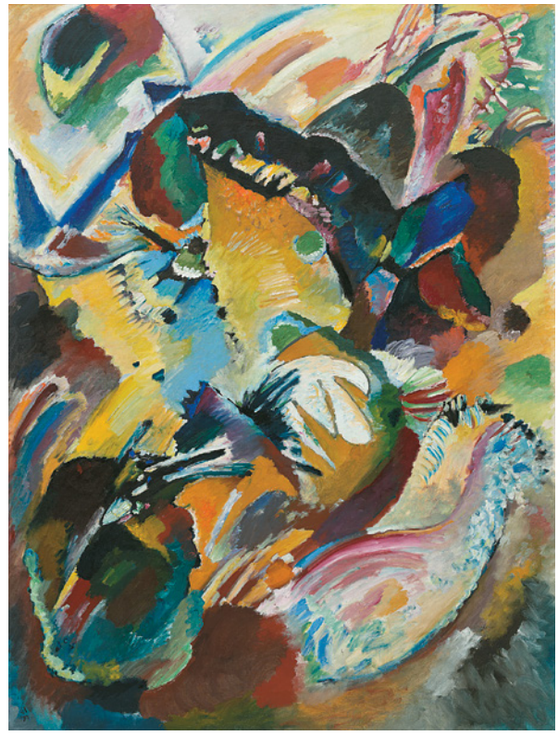

FIG. 5. Vasily Kandinsky (French, born Russia, 1866–1944). *Panel for Edwin R. Campbell No. 2*. 1914. Oil on canvas, 64⅛ x 48⅜" (162.6 x 122.7 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART. NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER FUND (BY EXCHANGE)

FIG. 6. Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956). *Mural*. 1943. Oil on canvas, 7′ 11¾″ x 19′ 9½″ (243.2 x 603.2 cm).
THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA MUSEUM OF ART. GIFT OF PEGGY GUGGENHEIM

commissioning of Frank Lloyd Wright to design the current Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum on Fifth Avenue, an institution committed to the ideal display of abstract art. Guggenheim's flamboyant niece, Peggy, had already expressed a competing intention to open a museum for her own rich collection of both Non-Objective and Surrealist art. In October 1942, recently married to the artist Max Ernst, she opened a lavish commercial gallery named Art of This Century at 28-30 West 57th Street, which featured the work of by European artists exiled to New York by World War II. With many expert advisers, Guggenheim put Pollock under gallery contract in mid-July 1943. Simultaneously, as if aware of his ambition to work large, she commissioned him to paint a portable mural for a twenty-foot-wide wall in the entrance hall of her duplex apartment at 155 East 61st Street, headquarters for her entourage of art-world celebrities **[FIG. 6]**. Seizing this opportunity, Pollock removed an interior wall in his downtown studio to make enough space to paint this ambitious non-objective work. *Mural* was ready by early November, coinciding with the opening of Pollock's first solo exhibition of easel paintings at Art of This Century.[6]

Installed in Guggenheim's apartment with the supervision of Marcel Duchamp, *Mural* introduced the generally subdued coloration Pollock would use for *One* and his other 1950 mural-scale works. It is easy to sense a kinship between the long ropy lines all over Pollock's painting and Duchamp's decoration of the

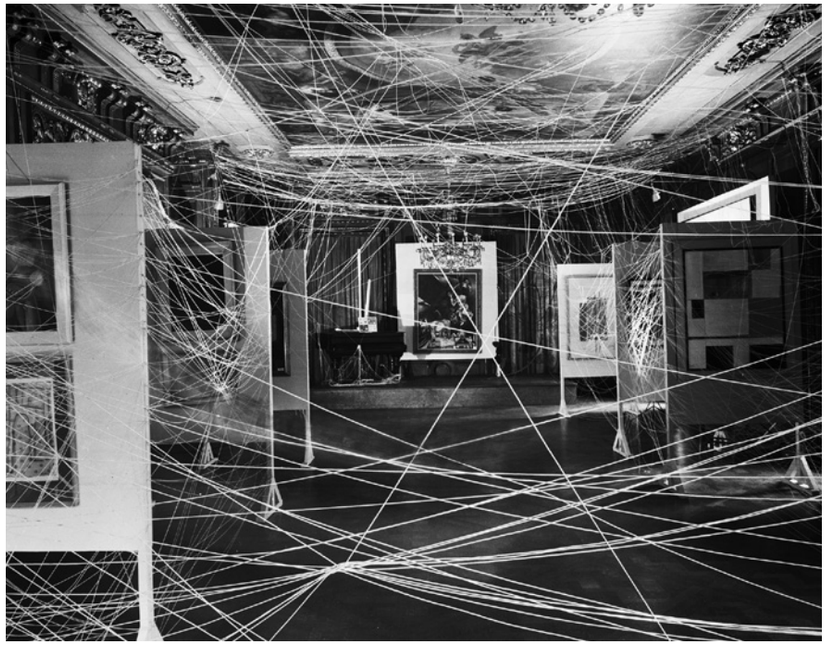

FIG. 7. Marcel Duchamp's string installation in the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism*, Whitelaw Reid Mansion, New York, 1942. Photo: John D. Schiff, gelatin silver print, 7⅝ x 10" (19.4 x 25.4 cm). PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART. GIFT OF JACQUELINE, PAUL, AND PETER MATISSE IN MEMORY OF THEIR MOTHER, ALEXINA DUCHAMP

painting gallery at the *First Papers of Surrealism* benefit exhibition in New York in October 1942, where he obstructively crisscrossed the entire space every which way with nearly a mile of string **[FIG. 7]**. By then Pollock had learned the various automatic techniques at the theoretical heart of European Surrealism—how to draw, paint, and collage while relinquishing control, seen as an obstacle to psychically revealing expressive instincts. Made by pouring and scribbling paint in this spirit, a few of the paintings Pollock included in his first exhibition prefigure his ideas about how to express inner vision with unprecedented graphic freedom. He was not the only artist working this way: Ernst felt that his own automatic techniques **[FIG. 8]** had inspired Pollock's. The critic Clement Greenberg and the future art dealer Sidney Janis, two of Pollock's earliest champions, pointed out precedents for his drip style in works by older artists, citing both Janet Sobel **[FIG. 9]**, who showed at Art of This Century, and Hans Hofmann **[FIG. 10]**, a mentor for Krasner **[FIG. 11]**. In the opinion of the composer John Cage, overall graphic freedom appeared first in works by Mark Tobey. Like-minded artists aside, Pollock emphasized that his art involved spontaneity, but never Surrealist accident or chaos.[7]

ABOVE: FIG. 8. Max Ernst (French, born Germany, 1891–1976). *The Bewildered Planet*. 1942. Oil on canvas, 9' 2" x 11' 8" (279.4 x 355.6 cm). TEL AVIV MUSEUM OF ART. GIFT OF THE ARTIST

RIGHT: FIG. 9. Janet Sobel (American, born Russia, 1894–1968). *Milky Way*. 1945. Enamel on canvas, 44⅞ x 29⅞" (114 x 75.9 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF LEAH AND SOL SOBEL, COURTESY GARY SNYDER GALLERY, NEW YORK

FOR FURTHER READING

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Produced by The Department of Publications
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Edited by David Frankel
Designed by Miko McGinty and Rita Jules
Production by Matthew Pimm
Printed and bound by Oceanic Graphic Printing, Inc., China

Typeset in Ideal Sans
Printed on 157 gsm Gold East Matte Artpaper

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013936363
ISBN: 978-0-87070-848-0

Published by The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53 Street
New York, New York 10019-5497
www.moma.org

Distributed in the United States and Canada by ARTBOOK | D.A.P.,
155 Sixth Avenue, 2nd floor, New York, New York 10013
www.artbook.com

Distributed outside the United States and Canada by Thames & Hudson Ltd.,
181A High Holborn, London WC1V 7QX
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