

Jackson Pollock : screenprints, a new discovery

[Audrey Isselbacher]

Author

Pollock, Jackson, 1912-1956

Date

1999

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art, Department
of Prints and Illustrated Books

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/225

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—
from our founding in 1929 to the present—is
available online. It includes exhibition catalogues,
primary documents, installation views, and an
index of participating artists.



Jackson Pollock

**Screenprints:
A New Discovery**



Jackson Pollock Screenprints: A New Discovery

The six works by Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) shown here, all variations of a single composition of c. 1943–44, were purchased by the Museum in 1996 with great excitement.¹ Previously unknown and undocumented screenprints, they, and sixty-three others, were found among the possessions of the artist's wife, Lee Krasner, upon her death in 1984. They were neither documented nor shown anywhere publicly until 1995,² and, as such, they represent “newly discovered” works and are considered to be significant additions to the Museum's major holdings of Pollock's art.

The new screenprints contribute to our understanding of Pollock by providing insight into his working method and his creative process. For the past twenty years, since the publication of the definitive catalogue of his work,³ Pollock's relatively small output of prints was thought to reflect his preference for a spontaneous approach to making art, an approach at odds with the exacting, technical demands of printmaking. It is now known, however, that Pollock created many more screenprints than was previously believed, and that these six are from a group of over twenty carefully thought out variations of a single image. Moreover, the range of Pollock's depiction of the subject matter, evolving from a recognizable vertical profile head into an indecipherable horizontal composition, graphically illustrates the struggle between figuration and abstraction in his art of the early 1940s.

The Early 1940s

The tumultuous decade of World War II proved to be a momentous period in American art. In New York, a diverse group of artists, including, among others, Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko, searched for a new pictorial language to express the universality of our experience. They assimilated the diverse influences of European émigré artists, from the abstraction of Piet Mondrian to the surrealism of Max Ernst, and also studied the latest innovations of Pablo Picasso, the biomorphic compositions of Joan Miró, the psychological principles of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and the mystical aspects of primitive and indigenous art. Rejecting the social realist and geometric abstract styles prevalent in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, they

based their compositions on the surrealist technique of automatist drawing—uncontrolled doodling used to tap into the subconscious—and embraced the use of archetypal symbols and mythical subject matter. Their reliance on spontaneous execution ultimately led to an emphasis on the act of painting itself. This new pictorial means became known as Abstract Expressionism, and with it, in an atmosphere of America's political dominance, the art world's center dramatically shifted from Paris to New York.

For Pollock, both hardship and success marked the period between 1938 and 1943. After being hospitalized twice for alcoholism, he entered Jungian psychoanalysis and was exempted from military service for psychological reasons. In addition, his eight-year stint with the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project was terminated. But in 1942, he began his lifelong relationship with Krasner and, in 1943, was introduced to Peggy Guggenheim, owner of the influential gallery Art of This Century. She soon offered him a one-year contract, scheduled his first one-person show, and commissioned a mural-size painting for her private residence.

Guggenheim's patronage initiated one of the most productive and prolific times in Pollock's life, a seminal period in the development of his imagery. By the early 1940s, he was creating evocative paintings characterized by mythic and “primitive” subject matter depicted in colorful, dense, and turbulent compositions. In them, Pollock's coarse, thick layering of paint and speedy, improvised drawing at times suggested legible forms, like humans, animals, and symbols, but at others precluded any coherent reading. The result was a style of painting that seemed to flow directly from the unconscious, one that daringly straddled representational and abstract art.⁴

Creative Process

Unlike painting or drawing, in which the final composition may conceal the steps leading to its realization, printmaking has the unique ability to record the development of an image through the printing of successive stages of a composition, giving us insight into the artist's creative process. These six screenprints reveal Pollock's gradual and

ambivalent path from figuration to abstraction, with the vertical black and yellow composition coming first and the horizontal yellow and orange composition last.⁵

The initial depiction describes a profile head attached to two flailing arms. An arrow pierces the head, and three diamond shapes adorn the bottom of the sheet. A large eye appears in the upper right; to its left a vertical line delineates the contour of the nose and mouth. Beneath it, two circular forms indicate nostrils, and a figure eight describes an ear. In both the orange and black and green and black versions, Pollock accentuates the mouth with a black triangular tongue. However, in the black, orange, and blue version, by coloring in an orange shape suggested by existing lines, he now moves in the direction of abstraction. In the heavily reworked black and white version, basic components of the head are still discernible, but the composition is more complex and difficult to decipher. And finally, in the yellow and orange version (the composition Pollock used for a 1944 New Year's greeting card), the artist effectively camouflages the subject matter by rotating it to a horizontal orientation.

The screenprints' stylistic characteristics demonstrate how Pollock was able to create a palpable tension between figuration and abstraction. The group's vibrant, saturated, matte color, achieved through a clever use of colored inks and papers, lends a rhythmic quality to the works. Within tightly compressed and shallow space, the nervous lines seem randomly dispersed, reducing their representational impact. In the first image, there is no specific focal point, and the effect is that of overall design, an impulse that would culminate in Pollock's renowned poured paintings. Our eye scans the sheet, initially unable to integrate the disparate figurative components. As Pollock reworked the image, he created compositional focal points by adding the black triangle/tongue and the imposing orange shape surrounding it, forms which also stressed abstraction. Pollock's radical revision in the black and white version renounces the composition's original linearity yet maintains a sense of continuous pattern. Turning that composition horizontally produces new structural accents and rhythms, substituting the previous figuration with suggestive, indecipherable, organic forms similar to those in his paintings of the period.

Pollock's imagery has been subject to numerous interpretations, including those based on details of his life, the prevailing political and social climate, the general development of Abstract Expressionism, and the tracking of his specific artistic sources. Although Pollock's depiction of an anguished face could be thought of as an unconscious expression of his ongoing battle with alcoholism and depression following the ambivalent reviews of his one-person show, or the horror of war, or feelings of alienation from American consumerist culture, a primary source for this imagery was undoubtedly Picasso. Pollock had seen his masterpiece *Guernica*, and its related studies, when it was exhibited at the Valentine Gallery in New York in 1939, and incorporated some of its compositional elements, such as grimacing heads with open mouths and triangular, sword-like tongues, into his art. Moreover, the three diamond shapes at the bottom, while resembling dice or playing cards, may originate from the background in Picasso's 1932 painting *Girl before a Mirror*. But there were other possible sources. The outstretched arms resemble those of Miró's figures; the arrow may be derived from prehistoric and indigenous art; the figure-eight shape of the ear, similar to a yin-yang emblem appearing in numerous of his drawings, implies a Jungian reference to sacred nature symbolism.⁶

Working Method

Taken together, these screenprints reveal an orderly, even methodical, artistic process. The more than twenty variations that exist of these screenprints are printed on papers ranging from common white bond to flowered wallpaper to colored tissue. Some are even printed side by side on larger sheets. It is also possible that, since they were found along with three studies for dust jackets with accommodating dimensions, Pollock was considering using them for a book.⁷ This exhaustive, systematic approach was facilitated by the ease of the screenprinting process. Although the stereotypical image of Pollock is of an artist wildly pouring paint onto huge canvases, the deliberate strategy of these small-scale screenprints is, in fact, consistent with aspects of his working method, generally. His art, while articulating the uncensored unconscious, was not merely the product of spontaneous impulses. What began as uncalculated,

automatist execution was often resolved with more measured, multiple revision, a practice evidenced in the works shown here.

The story of these screenprints is a rich one, encompassing crucial aspects of Pollock's era, biography, and development. Beyond providing visual pleasure, they document his artistic concerns during a pivotal period in his career. In addition, their importance within the context of his printed oeuvre changes our view of his involvement with the screenprint medium. Most importantly, though, their investigation furthers our understanding of the dynamic forces propelling a unique artistic vision.

Audrey Isselbacher
Associate Curator

Footnotes

1. These are six of a total of nine screenprints purchased by the Museum in 1996; the three remaining are of a different composition.
2. Exhibited at the Jason McCoy Gallery, New York, on the occasion of the publication of Francis V. O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works. Supplement Number One*. New York: The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Inc., 1995.
3. O'Connor, Francis V., and Eugene V. Thaw. *Jackson Pollock—A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978.
4. Although he created his first purely abstract, poured paintings in 1943, his true commitment to abstraction did not occur

until 1947. The Museum's three remaining newly acquired screenprints (not discussed in this brochure) demonstrate his early experimentation with the pouring technique.

5. This interpretation differs from the sequence suggested in the supplement to the catalogue raisonné. It is based on the premise that Pollock worked directly on the screen, adding a blocking out substance allowing less ink to pass through the screen for the radical revision of the black and white composition. Examination also indicates that additional stencils were used to add the elements of the black triangle/tongue and the abstract orange shape to the profile head.
6. While under Jungian analysis with Dr. Joseph Henderson in 1939 Pollock used his drawings as a therapeutic tool. Many of these drawings contained numerous Jungian symbols.
7. Stephen Cadwalader of the Jason McCoy Gallery, New York, brought this suggestion to the author's attention.
8. Francis V. O'Connor. "Printing through to Paintings: Jackson Pollock's Serigraphs." In *Jackson Pollock: The New-Found Screenprints*. Exhibition brochure. East Hampton, N.Y.: The Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, 1995.

Suggested Reading

Williams, Reba and Dave. "The Prints of Jackson Pollock." *Print Quarterly* V, no. 4 (December 1988): 346-73.

Harrison, Helen A. *Jackson Pollock: Prints*. Exhibition catalogue. Dallas: The Gallery, Division of Art, Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University, 1997.

This brochure is made possible by Bank of America. Generous support is also provided by The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., The David Geffen Foundation, EXOR America (Agnelli Group), and the Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw Charitable Trust.

Screenprinting

In the late 1930s, screenprinting, a commercial printing technique also known as silkscreening and serigraphy, was being championed as a fine art medium. Pollock learned the process from his friend Bernard Steffen, who ran a screenprinting workshop.⁸ In addition, his brother, Sanford McCoy, was a professional screenprinter. Pollock was employed briefly as a "squeegee man" (referring to the tool used in the process) at the commercial Creative Printers workshop in early 1943. It is thought that Pollock obtained his own screen by the early 1940s. Although he experimented briefly with the medium in 1938, more concentrated activity occurred in the early 1940s, 1946, and 1950-51.

Screenprinting requires little equipment and technical know-how while lending itself to easy revisions and rapid printing, facts that surely appealed to Pollock's desire for spontaneity. Paper is placed under a screen of tightly stretched fabric attached to a frame, and ink is then pushed with a squeegee through the fabric onto the paper. An image is created by masking out portions of the screen, which prevents the ink from passing through those obstructed areas. This can be achieved by attaching a stencil to the screen, or by applying a blocking-out substance directly onto the screen itself. Because of the freedom with which they were executed, it is the latter, more immediate method that Pollock must have used to create these six screenprints.



Six untitled screenprints. c. 1943–44. Printer: Jackson Pollock, New York. Edition: approximately twenty-three unique variants. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, in honor of Lily Auchincloss, unless otherwise noted. © 1998 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artist Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.

LEFT TO RIGHT:

Printed in black ink on yellow cardstock, $8\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ " (21.5 x 14 cm)

Printed in orange and black inks on black construction paper, $8\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{5}{8}$ " (21.5 x 14.2 cm)

Printed in black ink and yellow encaustic on black construction paper, $8\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ " (21.5 x 14 cm)

Printed in black and orange inks on blue cardstock, $8\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ " (21.5 x 14 cm)

Printed in black ink on white paper, $8\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{5}{8}$ " (21.5 x 14.2 cm). Purchased with funds given by John Loring in memory of China Loring

Printed in yellow ink on red construction paper, with screenprint, printed in black ink on verso, $5\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ " (14 x 21.5 cm)



Produced in conjunction with the exhibition
Focus: Pollock and Printmaking
 October 29, 1998–February 2, 1999

**The Museum
 of Modern Art**
**Department of Prints
 and Illustrated Books**