



Jackson Pollock at work on
One: Number 31, 1950, c. 1950.
Photograph by Hans Namuth

This book presents eleven works selected from the nearly one hundred pieces by Jackson Pollock in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. In 1944, with the acquisition of *The She-Wolf* (1943) (discussed here on p. 13), MoMA became the first museum to purchase a painting by Pollock. Other works by the artist soon entered the collection, including *Number 1A*, 1948 (p. 26) in 1950 and *Full Fathom Five* (1947) (p. 23) in 1952. In 1956 the Museum planned to inaugurate a series of exhibitions of artists at midcareer with a show of Pollock's work; following his death that year the survey was augmented to become his first posthumous retrospective. A decade later, in 1967, the Museum organized *Jackson Pollock*, a major retrospective, and it mounted a landmark exhibition of his drawings in 1980. Continuing its long association with Pollock's oeuvre, in 1998 MoMA mounted the most complete exhibition to date of the artist's work in all media; in the accompanying catalogue, curator Kirk Varnedoe describes Pollock as "a central hinge between the century's two halves; a key to how we got from one to the other in modern art." This book is one in a series featuring artists represented in depth in the Museum's collection.



The Flame c. 1934–38
Oil on canvas mounted on fiberboard,
20 1/2 x 30" (51.1 x 76.2 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Enid A. Haupt Fund, 1980

The Flame (c. 1934–38) At age eighteen, in the early fall of 1930, Jackson Pollock left Los Angeles and went east, bent on becoming an artist. He had very little going for him other than his vocational fixation—his belief that “being an artist is life its self—living it I mean.” This unpromising, uncompromising young man only lived about a quarter of a century longer. At his death his art was the most consequential and controversial ever to have been produced by an American. Reflecting on the immense success of Pollock’s work, his brother Sande offered his thoughts on its beginnings, which might, he said, have prompted a kindly counselor to suggest a career switch to tennis or plumbing.

Pollock’s most significant early adviser was Thomas Hart Benton, his teacher at the Art Students League, the school in which he enrolled almost immediately after arriving in New York. Although quick to note his new pupil’s apparent lack of facility, Benton—insightful as well as kind—saw Pollock’s “intense interest” in art and “intuitive sense of rhythmical relations” as the makings of “some kind of artist.” Had Benton been able to look into the future at Pollock’s defining works, the then-unimaginable

poured and dripped paintings of 1947–50, it is a fair bet that he would have found no more precise words to describe exactly what kind of artist his student had become.

With the advantage of hindsight, we can see *Flame*, painted some years after Pollock was no longer under Benton's direct tutelage, as a distant forerunner of the revolutionary canvases to come. While the painting's curvilinear dynamics and contrasts of light and dark retain Benton's expressionist chiaroscuro and Albert Pinkham Ryder's moody, nineteenth-century symbolist effects, their deployment in the service of a quasi-abstract subject whose essence is flickering movement seems to have liberated Pollock for this early experiment in free structure. If the writhing flames seem too thick, too muscular, they nonetheless combine to conflate figure and ground in a centrifugal allover composition. Roughly organized on what would become governing principles in Pollock's "classic" works of almost a decade later, *Flame's* rude, nearly savage facture is a far cry from the virile lyricism of the fluidly intertwining skeins and webs of paint to come. Yet, like Paul Cézanne's early, awkwardly affecting handling of the medium, Pollock's painting exhibits a raw, uncivilized intensity, as if each stroke of the brush were imbued with his own anxiety. Painter Peter Busa's subsequent observation that Pollock could give "painting an organism of existing" is already evident in *Flame*. More than any other early Pollock, *Flame* proposes, as its grand successors proclaim, that art's deepest powers are rooted in patterns of energy, independent of representation.



Bird (c. 1938–41) A compelling image, this odd bird commands its small canvas with the panache of imperial heraldry and the raw energy of Pollock's unresolved ambition. Like the eagle of armorial insignia, its head is profiled, its body four-square on the support, its wings outspread, and its legs astride paired heads of the symbolically vanquished. Its pseudo-Prussian authority undermined by thick, clotted brushwork and its own organically swelling forms, this hybrid creature is an amalgam of Pollock's assertive, untamed individuality and the influences he was trying to both subdue and assimilate—here, most apparently, American Indian art, Pablo Picasso, and Surrealism.

While the canvas will not yield to any definitive parsing, the bird's breast and, to a lesser extent, the fallen foe beneath its feet exhibit a direct kinship with Inuit art. Similar configurations in the contemporaneous painting *Birth* (fig. 1) have been shown to derive from Pollock's interest in wooden masks like the one his friend John Graham featured in his 1937 article "Primitive Art and Picasso" in New York's *Magazine of Art* (fig. 2). Evidently, the shapes in *Bird* do not replicate those in *Birth*, yet they unmistakably share a genealogy. Indeed, the breast surrounded by

1 *Birth* c. 1941
Oil on canvas, 45 ¹³/₁₆ x 21 ¹³/₁₆"
(116.4 x 55.1 cm)
Tate Gallery, London. Purchased 1985

2 Mask; wood, one eye, one nostril, crooked mouth. Hooper Bay Region, Alaska. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia



Bird c. 1938–41
Oil and sand on canvas,
27 ³/₄ x 24 ¹/₄" (70.5 x 61.6 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Gift of Lee Krasner in memory of
Jackson Pollock, 1980



3 Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973)
Girl before a Mirror 1932
Oil on canvas, 64 x 51 ¹/₄" (162.3 x 130.2 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim, 1938



4 Joan Miró (Spanish, 1893–1983)
The Hunter (Catalan Landscape) 1923–24
Oil on canvas, 25 ¹/₂ x 39 ¹/₂" (64.8 x 100.3 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Purchase, 1936

ethnographic earthiness of *Bird* reflect Pollock's obsessively repeated visits to the Heye Collection in New York and the Northwest Coast and Inuit collections at New York's Museum of Natural History.

Pollock's museum going also included The Museum of Modern Art. He saw its 1941 exhibition *Indian Art of the United States* several times and made sure to attend a demonstration of Native Americans "painting" an image on the ground with colored sand dropped from their fists. Whatever this experience meant to Pollock, its chief impact must lie in his development of the poured, dripped paintings of 1947–50. It could, however, have prompted him to add sand to his pigment as he was painting *Bird*.

Of larger consequence to *Bird's* conception, however, were works by Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró. In *Girl before a Mirror* (fig. 3), acquired by MoMA in 1938, Picasso's deployment of thick, aggressive passages of paint and blunt, swelling contours combined with intimations of ritual could well have provided Pollock with the validation he needed for pictures such as *Bird*. More directly related to the imagery in *Bird* is Miró's painting *The Hunter (Catalan Landscape)* (fig. 4), a surreal, fantasy-filled view of a Catalan landscape dominated by an all-seeing

eye, which had been on view at MoMA since late 1936. For Miró, the eye in his painting was that “of the picture which gazes out at me.” However Pollock may have regarded his own bird’s eye, its viewers will likely be surprised to sense its gaze—an experience that will persist even if, as Jungian criticism has claimed, the eye is not centered in the animal’s head but “hovers in the sky.” Pollock’s widow, the artist Lee Krasner, believed that he meant the eye to gaze out from the animal’s head, and as such it leads not to the theories of Carl Jung but, via classical symbolism, to a straightforward phallic interpretation. Her reading is supported by the overall configuration of the bird’s anatomy as well as her recollection that Pollock had associated it with an untitled canvas of a naked man with a bird’s head or mask that he had been working on at the same time.

Stenographic Figure (c. 1942)

This slightly daffy, deeply felt picture is of double significance to the unfolding of Pollock’s career. Publicly, it marks the beginning of his art-world renown; privately, it signals his plunge into the open-ended pictorial experimentation that would culminate in the classic paintings of 1947–50. In early 1943, when Pollock submitted *Stenographic Figure* to the Spring Salon for Young Artists at Peggy Guggenheim’s now legendary gallery, Art of This Century, the salon’s jurors—Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, James Johnson Sweeney, James Thrall Soby, Howard Putzel, and Guggenheim herself—were not completely in agreement about



Stenographic Figure c. 1942
Oil on linen, 40 x 56" (101.6 x 142.2 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Mr. and Mrs. Walter Bareiss Fund, 1980

including it. Any hovering doubts were, however, resolved by Mondrian's reaction to it: "I'm trying to understand what's happening here. I think this is the most interesting work I've seen so far in America. . . . You must watch this man." Coming from the twentieth century's most revered apostle of rectilinear purity, these unexpected words brought the painting's detractors around and were a persuasive force in Guggenheim's subsequent decision to give Pollock his first solo exhibition. In the show, held the following November, the eight paintings, including *Stenographic Figure*, attracted wide attention. The *New York Times* reviewer reported that Sweeney, in his foreword to the exhibition's catalogue, had struck "exactly the right note" in declaring that Pollock's "talent is volcanic. It has fire. It is unpredictable. It is undisciplined. It spills itself out in a mineral prodigality not yet crystallized. It is lavish, explosive, untidy." The *Times* review goes on to point out that Sweeney had added this: "Young painters, particularly Americans, tend to be too careful of opinion. Too often the dish is allowed to chill in the serving. What we need is more young men who paint from inner impulsion."

The Sweeney lexicon abounds in adjectives materialized in *Stenographic Figure*. In it, *explosive*, *untidy*, *unpredictable*, and *undisciplined* are palpable properties. And its hybrid protagonist, more reclining female nude than anything else, seems to be the embodiment of her creator's fiery, volcanic "inner impulsion." That the "willed confusions of this eccentric, ugly-pretty picture," as Kirk Varnedoe described it, do not dissolve into a cartoonish version of Édouard Manet's *Olympia* in full dementia testifies to the force of the talent Sweeney discerned in Pollock.

For all its apparent undisciplined aspect, *Stenographic Figure* quite deliberately introduces ways of working almost wholly at odds with such recent work by Pollock as *Bird* and *Birth*. Flattened planes and thinly painted surfaces replace built-up, impacted layers of pigment; the choked gives way to the voluble. Overall, *Stenographic Figure* introduces a new lightness and a nimble improvisational execution absent from Pollock's earlier, more obviously labored canvases. Of it Varnedoe wrote, "The whole surface is covered with a teeming swarm of fine line calligraphy in yellow, black, white and orange . . . generally setting the picture abuzz with a frantic infestation of spidery tics disconnected from the heavings underneath." Although the frenetic energy of Pollock's markmaking in *Stenographic Figure* inevitably reads as a herald of the automatism to come, its immediate appeal is still intact. It is still "abuzz" with the heat of the young painter's conviction.

The She-Wolf (1943) At Pollock's first one-man exhibition, at Art of This Century gallery in November 1943, *The She-Wolf* and paintings such as *Guardians of the Secret* (fig. 5) left no doubt about the young artist's ambition. Each is big, its subject reaching for the mythic, the archetype, and its execution a tussle with the powers of paint and canvas. They are arenas in which Pollock's simultaneous need for symbolic figuration and a total visual effect is enacted.

Although her appearance is archaic, almost tribal, *She-*