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Jackson Pollock: The Critical Reception

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Jackson Pollock:
The Critical Reception

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Introduction

In a 1950 radio interview, Jackson Pollock asserted, “The thing that interests me is that today painters do not have to go to a subject-matter outside themselves. Modern painters work in a different way. They work from within.”¹ This statement is a testament to the way Pollock perceived his work, and how he wanted others to perceive it. It poses the issue of whether or not Pollock’s work was truly an exercise of the unconscious, as he claimed it to be. Did the critical reception of his work, or his public image, affect his painting? If so, in what way did it affect his work?

This paper will trace the evolution of how Pollock’s work was received during his lifetime, and analyze the extent to which this criticism affected his work. While it is impossible to ever know exactly what Pollock was thinking, it can be deduced from his critics, paintings, and most importantly his statements, that both his style and intentionality changed over time. Whether it was due to these criticisms, or simply a natural ideological development, the evidence points to a correlation between the publicity and feedback he received and his convictions about his work. Although the connection between Pollock’s work and the criticism he received is hazy, it is likely that he was affected to varying extents by the fame and success he achieved during his short career. What can be concluded for certain is that the perception of Pollock’s career, then and now, has been affected by criticism to an unusual degree given the unprecedented amount of attention he received, and the generalized and somewhat detached nature of that attention.

In the first section, I will examine the early portion of Pollock’s career, beginning with his first solo exhibition. The paper will be largely structured on each of Pollock’s solo exhibitions throughout his career. During this early period, Pollock’s critics were not afraid to disparage his works, constantly referring to the supposedly cluttered, ambitious compositions that Pollock was painting between 1943 and 1947. However, coupled with this critical view of the execution of Pollock’s paintings were both recognition of an inextinguishable vitality and energy in the painting, and a sense of confidence that Pollock would leave a deep mark on the art world. His paintings at this time were generally reminiscent of the surrealist and cubist artists in Europe and maintained some art historical context. However, he made a statement in 1947 attesting to the nature of his paintings, claiming, “When I am painting I am not much aware of what is taking place – it is only after that I see what I have done.” This statement marked a shift in ideas that would launch him into his mature drip style, in which his paintings were created with no predetermined agenda or plan, and were purely an exercise in the unconscious. Earlier abstractionists and surrealists at first recognizably influenced Pollock’s paintings, yet his statement in 1947 marked an ideological shift that would help transition him into his mature style.

In the second section, I will examine the height of his career, when Pollock was not only exposed to an enormous amount of success and criticism, but also simultaneously becoming accustomed to this lifestyle. During this time, he was producing his iconic drip paintings, and became increasingly a public figure as this dramatic and controversial style was more and more recognized. At the same time, Pollock himself was becoming more

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vocalized and vehement in his statements. In an interaction with *Time* magazine in 1950, Pollock declared that his work was in fact not chaotic, as an earlier article had commented. This interaction showed not only his changing mindset about the intentionality of his work, but also his attention to his image in the media. It was also during this time that people became more curious about Pollock’s character, and in some ways garnered opinions of Pollock, a generally mysterious figure, in relation to his art. In this way, his art took a backseat to the public opinion of his personality. Thus, at this time, it appeared that Pollock’s image preceded him in many ways, and criticism began to focus not just on his work, but on his character, image, and other criticisms as well.

In the third section, I will look at his late career, approaching his death in 1956. At this time, Pollock began producing a new, simplified version of his previous works. A statement to his friends Alfonso Ossorio and Ted Dragon in 1951 implied that this development had occurred mainly as a way to shock critics and prove to people that his drip paintings were not merely squiggles on a paper. This statement showed his awareness of his image, but the degree to which that awareness truly affected his work is less clear. Again, there seems to be a shift in intentionality in this new period, in which he had fallen back into his addiction and psychological issues. From 1951 through to his death, there were a number of retrospectives of his work, as he was producing next to no new work due to his physical and mental health problems. Even more so during this time people tied his public image to his work, and instead of becoming more forceful about what his work should mean, he goes essentially silent.
Early Career

November 1943 Art of This Century Exhibition
Pollock’s first solo exhibition opened on November 9, 1943, at Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery, Art of this Century. Some notable works shown were “Male and Female”, “Guardians of the Secret”, “The Moon Woman”, “The She Wolf”, and “Stenographic Figure”.

The exhibition opened to mixed reviews. Throughout the published criticisms, there is undoubtedly recognition of Pollock's potential, yet a noted sense of hesitance about these particular paintings. James Johnson Sweeney wrote the foreword to the exhibition catalogue, stating “Among young painters, Jackson Pollock offers unusual promise in his exuberance, independence, and native sensibility.” However, Pollock's first works were not instant successes, despite the general consensus on his artistic promise. Many critics, including Clement Greenberg, one of Pollock’s longtime supporters, noted that Pollock’s works were lacking in clarity and direction, pointing out that his “forcefulness, coupled with a persistent tendency to overwork his ideas, leads him into turgidity.” In spite of this range of criticisms, Pollock responded confidently in a letter to Sweeney, stating, “I am happy” and “We will fulfill that promise”. This exhibition and its reception were telling of a strong, if slightly erratic, start to Pollock’s career.

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7 Ibid.
The foreword written by James Johnson Sweeney for this exhibition’s catalogue is widely referred to throughout the rest of the criticism. Cited directly in reviews in *The New York Times* and *The Art Digest*, Sweeney’s piece seems to accurately reflect many critics’ position on Pollock’s early works. Sweeney, recognizing Pollock’s strengths, writes:

“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. But 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 without an ear to what the critic or spectator may feel—painters who will risk spoiling a canvas to say something in their own way. Pollock is one.”

From this excerpt, it is clear that Sweeney, along with other critics, feel a new vitality from Pollock’s works that had not been seen before, particularly in America. However, Pollock’s success would be contingent upon his ability to harness his ideas and energy, and use them in a productive way. Sweeney finishes the essay with a similar tone, asserting, “Among young painters, Jackson Pollock offers unusual promise in his exuberance, independence, and native sensibility. If he continues to exploit these qualities with the courage and conscience he has shown so far, he will fulfill that promise.” There is an element of uncertainty in this statement, calling on Pollock to rise to the challenge in a sense.

Along with Sweeney’s praise, Pollock’s first exhibition received other positive feedback. Edward Alden Jewell for *The New York Times* explicitly agrees with Sweeney’s commendation of Pollock’s “volcanic talent” and “inner impulsion”, citing Sweeney’s article.

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8 Sweeney, 1943, 103.
9 Sweeney, 1943, 103.
directly. Maude Riley, writing for The Art Digest, also directly cites Sweeney's introduction, adding, “But, as Mr. Sweeney says, young American painters tend to be too careful of opinion. Here’s one who doesn’t allow ‘the dish to chill in the serving’.”

Robert Coates also notes Pollock’s individuality, stating, “Mr. Pollock’s style, which is a curious mixture of the abstract and the symbolic, is almost wholly individual, and the effect of his one notable influence, Picasso, is a healthy one, for it imposes a certain symmetry on his work without detracting from its basic force and vigor.”

Clement Greenberg writes for The Nation, “The smaller works are much more conclusive: the smallest one of all, ‘Conflict,’ and ‘Wounded Animal,’ with its chalky incrustation, are among the strongest abstract paintings I have yet seen by an American.” As Sweeney earlier noted, other critics also seem to sense there is clear and palpable promise in Pollock’s work and thus identify him as undoubtedly one of the most gifted upcoming artists in America.

However, critics were far from celebrating these paintings. The consensus at the time seemed to be that while Pollock had undoubtedly great potential, his first works were unfocused and muddy. A few paintings in particular emerge more often throughout the criticisms: “Guardians of the Secret”, “Male and Female”, and “Wounded Animal”. Clement Greenberg continues, “The mud abounds in Pollock’s larger works, and these, though the least consummated, are his most original and ambitious. Being young and full of energy, he

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12 Coates, 1943, 51.
takes orders he can’t fill.” In reference to “Guardians of the Secret”, Greenberg states, “he struggles between two slabs of inscribed mud... and space tautens but does not burst into a picture.” Even more bluntly, he writes, “Both this painting and ’Male and Female’ (Pollock’s titles are pretentious) zigzag between the intensity of the easel picture and the blindness of the mural.” Edward Alden Jewell notes, “What looks slightly like a dog begging turns out instead to be ‘Wounded Animal.’ The most recent canvas, a scattered design against pink, represents ‘Male and Female in Search of a Symbol.” There seems to be a consensus among critics that while these paintings show Pollock’s promise, there was still a lot of work to be done.

One painting in particular calls for more in depth analysis. “She Wolf” (Fig. 1) is a canvas heavy in black and white lines depicting a mythological wolf, later speculated as the wolf that raised Romulus and Remus of Rome. It is covered in abstract lines and calligraphic symbols in a gloomy palette. Maude Riley states, is “slaty blue and thoroughly mussed with animated white lines”, and Robert Coates comments that “Mr. Pollock’s forcefulness, coupled with a persistent tendency to overwork his ideas, leads him into turgidity” in this painting. Even in retrospect, scholars tend to agree that this painting was “initially difficult to decipher, as with the majority of Pollock’s work of this period.” When Sidney Janis chose this painting to be illustrated in his book Abstract and Surrealist Art in America, Pollock refused to comment on the work, asserting, “’She Wolf’ came into

14 Ibid
15 Ibid
16 Ibid
17 Jewell, 1943, 49.
18 Riley, 1943, 50.
19 Coates, 1943, 51.
20 Ibid
existence because I had to paint it. Any attempt on my part to say something about it, to attempt explanation of the inexplicable, could only destroy it.” From this statement, Pollock implies that the painting was hardly premeditated and that attempting to find meaning in it would be useless. However, regardless of both Pollock’s statement and critics’ responses that the painting was muddled and without particular significance, later scholarship parses out symbolism and iconography that was present throughout the work. Alexander Herman and John Paoletti argue that through both the sequenced build up of surface paint and the deliberate structures of the composition, Pollock shows that he took care “with clarifying (rather than obfuscating) his imagery.”

A piece written by Harold Rosenberg in 1967 claims that these paintings, “For an artist just turned thirty in the wartime United States, ... show a remarkable inner sophistication and sense of purpose.”

There is a disjuncture between the ways Pollock’s initial works were received, as erratic and without an agenda, and the way later scholars interpreted it, as clearly symbolic and representative of specific influences in Pollock’s life. This disconnect would become a theme throughout his early career. “She Wolf” is undoubtedly complex, but whether it holds intentional symbolic meaning is disputed.

Despite these criticisms, one of the first interactions documented between Pollock and his critics is a correspondence with James Johnson Sweeney after seeing Sweeney’s foreword to the exhibition. The interaction is generally positive, with clear hopes and expectations of the future. Pollock responded in a letter to Sweeney, “I have read your

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forward to the catalogue and I am excited. I am happy—the self discipline you speak of—will come, I think, as a natural growth of a deeper, more integrated, experience. Many thanks—we will fulfill that promise”. This interaction speaks to Pollock’s attitude at the time, as there is a sense of hope, optimism, and excitement for the future, but also a hint of uncertainty as his new and explosive style was uncultivated and experimental in a new art world. Pollock seems invigorated by the confidence instilled in him by Sweeney, assuring him that his predictions will be achieved.

Fig. 1. Jackson Pollock, *The She Wolf*, 1943, Oil, gouache, and plaster on canvas, 41 7/8 x 67” (106.4 x 170.2 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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24 Pollock, 1943, 104.
March 1945 Art of This Century Exhibition

Pollock’s second solo exhibition also took place at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery, on March 19, 1945, about two years after his first. Some notable paintings were “Totem Lesson 1”, “Totem Lesson 2”, “Night Mist”, “Two”, and “There Were Seven in Eight”. Guests were also invited to Peggy Guggenheim’s townhouse to view “Mural”.

Again, this exhibition opened to mixed reviews from critics. Many critics were impressed with Pollock’s unique style and explosive energy, yet even more were still quite critical of the paintings in this exhibition, as they claimed many were poorly executed from a technical standpoint. Pollock’s style was still in its early stages at this point, reflecting European abstract and surrealist influences, particularly of Picasso, and thus had not yet matured into a purely unique and deliberate style as it later would. The criticism of this show is to the same effect as the 1943 exhibition, in that critics are positive about Pollock’s capability, but critical of his execution thus far.

Certain aspects of Pollock’s emerging style again impressed critics of this exhibition. They praised his individuality, originality, and inextinguishable energy in the way that he breaks away from historical conventions. Manny Farber observed that “Mural” (Fig. 2), in particular, “is violent in its expression, endlessly fascinating in detail, without superficiality, so well ordered that it composes the wall in a quiet, contained, buoyant way.”

Farber, in particular, published a lengthy review of this exhibition in The New Republic, commenting, “The style is personal and, unlike that of many painters of this period, the individuality is in the way the medium is used rather than the peculiarities of the subject.

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25 “Pollock Chronology”.
matter.”

His piece admires but expects more of Pollock’s work, as he concludes, “His manner of building form and surface out rather than in has produced original, dramatic and decorative effects, and the painting as a whole demonstrates again that abstract art can be as voluptuous as Renaissance painting.”

Most vehemently, Clement Greenberg, emerging as Pollock’s greatest supporter, clearly states, “Jackson Pollock’s second one-man show at Art of This Century…establishes him, in my opinion, as the strongest painter of his generation and perhaps the greatest one to appear since Miró.”

He cites both “Totem Lessons” paintings as the strongest of the exhibition. He continues, “he is not afraid to look ugly—all profoundly original work looks ugly at first.”

Other critics, while somewhat less enthusiastic about Pollock’s work than Greenberg, still remained optimistic about Pollock’s potential. As in much of the criticism of the 1943 exhibition, many critics recognized Pollock’s unique style and energetic spirit.

Fig. 2. Jackson Pollock, Mural, 1943, Oil and casein on canvas, 97 ¼ x 238” (247 x 605 cm). University of Iowa Museum of Art.

27 Farber, 1945, 53.
28 Ibid
30 Ibid
However, even his strongest advocates remained critical of the works in this exhibition due to their technical execution. An anonymous critic in *Art News* claims that Pollock "suffers from *horror vacui*; scarcely an inch of background is left vacant, and the total effect is labored rather than spontaneous."³¹ Howard Devree of *The New York Times* is also critical, asserting, “These big, sprawling coloramas impress me as being surcharged with violent emotional reaction which never is clarified enough in the expression to establish true communication with the observer."³² Even Clement Greenberg, “the only critic who consistently championed Pollock's work through the 1940s”³³, commented, “Pollock's single fault is not that he crowds his canvases too evenly but that he sometimes juxtaposes colors and values so abruptly that gaping holes are created.”³⁴ As with the works displayed in 1943, critics found his work in this show to be congested, unclear, and too ambitious for this stage of his career. Pollock had not yet developed technically to the extent where the critics were entirely satisfied with his work.

The criticism of this exhibition also brings up the disjuncture between earlier interpretations of Pollock's work and today's understandings of it. In regard to "Mural" specifically, Manny Farber wrote, “The mural is voluminously detailed with swirling line and form, painted spontaneously and seemingly without preliminary sketch, and is, I think, an almost incredible sketch.”³⁵ He specifically notes that Pollock's work is without

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³⁴ Greenberg, 1945, 52.
³⁵ Farber, 1945, 53.
intention or preliminary sketches. However, the write-up on the painting at the University of Iowa Museum of Art states,

“He synthesized these elements in the moment and created a painting that is inundated with personal, cultural, social, political, and art-world references: the work of his early mentor Thomas Hart Benton and the Regionalist style; the landscape of the Midwest and Native American imagery and philosophy; commercial art; the Works Progress Association (WPA); Mexican murals, Soviet Social Realism and Marxism; the influence of refugee artists from wartime Europe; Asian calligraphy; African and other non-Western art; film; the explosion of World War II and America’s response; Picasso’s work, especially *Guernica* (1937); and Jungian psychotherapy.”

By this understanding, “Mural” was entirely intentional and reflective of Pollock’s personal experiences. It would seem that Pollock drew from numerous outside sources to create this painting. There is a noticeable difference between what Farber saw in 1945 and what has been written about the painting in 2014. It would seem that having more cultural context and a broader understanding of Pollock’s beginning as an artist would lead contemporary scholars to observe these trends in his work, as they did not appear as distinctly to critics at the time.

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April 1946 Art of This Century Exhibition

Pollock’s third solo exhibition, which took place at the Art of This Century gallery on April 2, 1946, created less of a stir among critics than his previous two solo exhibitions, yet marked a step forward in his stylistic development. He showed eleven paintings, including “Troubled Queen”, “Water Figure”, “Moon Vessel”, and “Once Upon a Time”. There is much less published material to draw from regarding this exhibition, though what can be found is generally positive. However, this exhibition displayed works that were almost entirely non-objective, demonstrating Pollock’s departure from his prior surrealist and abstract influence. These works, such as “Shimmering Substance” and “The Blue Unconscious”, were truly modern in that they moved away from any formal conventions or historical precedents. This show did not bring Pollock myriads of attention, yet the criticism was generally positive and it marked a change in his style that displays his dynamism as a developing artist.

The small number of criticisms available that discuss this article carry a similar tone to those of earlier shows. Ben Wolf, of The Art Digest, appeared to be unsatisfied by the show, stating, “Pollock suffers from his ability to achieve surface virtuosity that in the final analysis frequently forbids him to the promised land of plastic realization. The artist has the requisite equipment to cross that ’last river’, but somehow seems to prefer to dangle his toes in the warmer water along the shore of his facility.” He continues by addressing individual works, noting, “...One feels a genuine wrench upon viewing the dissipated

composition of *Troubled Queen* that leans too heavily on its color and pigmentation.”\(^{38}\) On the other hand, Greenberg is again impressed with Pollock’s work and certain of his influence, stating, “...What is thought to be Pollock’s bad taste is in reality simply his willingness to be ugly in terms of contemporary taste. In the course of time this ugliness will become a new standard of beauty.”\(^{39}\) He contends that this exhibition “contains nothing to equal the two large canvases, *Totem Lesson I* and *Totem Lesson II*, that he exhibited last year...But it is still sufficient – for all its divagations and weaknesses, especially in the gouaches – to show him as the most original contemporary easel painter under forty”\(^{40}\)

However, despite the somewhat unmoved responses from critics, there is a marked shift in Pollock’s style in this exhibition. In contrast to his earlier, more surrealist or cubist paintings, such as 1943’s “Pasiphaë” (Fig. 3), with its automatism and mythological implications, he begins using “larger, more representational shapes...placed against flat, monochrome backgrounds; clarity increases at the expense of motion.”\(^{41}\) He held onto conventions of his earlier style, “even as he goes away from cubism he carries with him the unity of style with which it endowed him when in the beginning he put himself under its influence.”\(^{42}\) This development seemed a natural progression, as an anonymous critic for *Art News* observed, “This is a logical development in Pollock’s attempt to create a new, abstract, mural style which will sustain a complexity of plastic and literary elements

\(^{38}\) Ibid


\(^{40}\) Ibid


\(^{42}\) Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 1*, 75
previously found only in small, three-dimensional easel paintings.” This stylistic development, while not shocking or groundbreaking, would act as a logical step toward Pollock’s mature style, as he moved away from formalism and into a more abstract style.

Fig. 3. Jackson Pollock, *Pasiphaë*, 1943, Oil on canvas, 56 1/8 x 96” (142.6 x 243.8 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York.

**January 1947 Art of This Century Exhibition**

Again, in January 1947, Pollock’s newest show did not create much of a stir with critics, although again criticisms were fairly positive. This show included sixteen paintings, including the Accabonac Creek Series and the Sounds in the Grass Series. There remains an uncertainty among the few critics who commented on the exhibition; they seem to be waiting for Pollock’s next move. Around this time, Pollock made a statement regarding his

43 Ibid
44 “Pollock Chronology.”
painting process, when he said, "When I am painting I am not much aware of what is taking place – it is only after that I see what I have done."\(^45\) This statement was critical to not only his artistic development but also how he seemed to disregard much of the attention he has been receiving: his intention was not to create something simply to please his audience, but was truly an exercise of his unconscious.

It seems from these reviews that critics felt a sense of stagnancy in the works presented in this show, as their comments are quite general and impartial. Only one of the available reviews even comments on any specific painting, but even then, only remarks that "latest pictures such as The Key, being broader and more colorful, make it easier to assimilate the basic energy which flows through his canvases."\(^46\) Even Clement Greenberg’s review seems relatively unresponsive to the show, stating, “Pollock remains essentially a draftsman in black and white who must as a rule rely on these colors to maintain the consistency and power of surface of his pictures.”\(^47\) In this statement there is a sense of predictability and stagnancy, which is also reflected in each of the other critics’ pieces, showing perhaps Pollock’s work is in need of something new. Greenberg’s review also portrays a sense of expectancy, as it ends with the sentence: “Pollock points a way beyond the easel, beyond the mobile, framed picture, to the mural, perhaps – or perhaps not. I cannot tell.”\(^48\) He seemed to recognize that Pollock was perhaps transitioning into a new phase, as he wrote, “Pollock has gone beyond the stage where he needs to make his poetry explicit in ideographs. What he invents instead has perhaps, in its very abstractness and

\(^{45}\) Pollock, J., Draft of Possibilities/statement, 23
\(^{48}\) Ibid
absence of assignable definition, a more reverberating meaning."49 Greenberg recognizes Pollock was developing in abstraction, and it would seem this show was a phase on the way to a new style.

It is important to here mention the relationship between Greenberg and Pollock. While there is little evidence outside of these reviews at this point of a relationship or friendship, it becomes clear later in Pollock’s life that Greenberg had a profound influence on his career. Greenberg was not just the first, but was always the most vocal of Pollock’s supporters. Florence Rubenfeld contends, “Some in New York predicted that Europe’s half century of war and upheaval meant that America’s day was coming, but in 1944, when Clem observed that Pollock...represented ‘the future of American painting’, he alone was betting that these were the artists who make it dawn.”50 However, by late in his career, Pollock and Greenberg had a strong relationship, although it proved to be rocky, as many of Pollock’s relationships were. Particularly late in his career, Pollock let Greenberg’s criticism specifically have a huge effect not just on his art but also on his personal outlook. As his physical and psychological problems worsened, Greenberg’s opinion seemed to have a much larger effect on him. In one of his 1955 exhibitions, “Grace Hartigan remembered Clem walking around, shaking his head, while Pollock stood off to the side, looking devastated.”51 If any one person’s opinion had an effect on Pollock, it was Greenberg’s. The trajectory of Greenberg’s criticism matches the rise and fall of Pollock’s career, which could explain much of his influence. This relationship is then important to keep in mind throughout the analysis of the criticism of Pollock’s work.

49 Ibid
51 Rubenfeld, 1997, 199.
In winter of 1947, Pollock made a statement in Possibilities on his style and method that would resonate throughout articles and essays for decades. In this statement in Possibilities, he makes it clear that he is working from his own mind, with little to no agenda, and seems to disregard not only the criticism of his work up to this point, but also the historical conventions that many artists had adhered to until this point:

“When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing. It is only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.”  

He asserts that his work is done without an agenda, without a conscious goal. He creates art not to please a certain audience, or achieve a certain status, but as an exercise of the unconscious. Given this statement, it would seem that Pollock was relatively passive, if not actively resistant, to the criticism of his works and shows up to this point.

### Mature Career

**January 1948 Betty Parsons Gallery Exhibition**

Pollock’s exhibition that opened on January 5, 1948 was arguably his first exhibition in his mature style. Peggy Guggenheim had returned to Europe, closing Art of This Century, and allowed Betty Parsons to take over Pollock’s contract. Notable works from the show

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52 Pollock, J., Draft of Possibilities/statement, 23
were “Gothic”, “Lucifer” (Fig. 4), “Reflection of the Big Dipper”, “Cathedral”, “Full Fathom Five”, “Sea Change”, “Magic Lantern”, “Enchanted Forest”, “Gothic”, and “Phosphorescence”. This exhibition was composed mainly of Pollock’s famed drip paintings, which he had begun in 1947, and thus demonstrated a marked difference between the abstract paintings of his early career and his innovative, mature drip style displayed in this 1948 show. There remained some hesitance over the meaning of his work; a number of critics still struggled to parse out meaning and significance in the traditional sense from his work. Although this exhibition was again controversial, there was recognition of a decisive step forward in Pollock's style and technical abilities that would launch him into widespread recognition and celebrity status.

![Jackson Pollock, Lucifer, 1947, Oil on canvas, 267.9 x 104.1 cm. Stanford University Museum and Art Gallery, Stanford, CA.](image)

To be more specific, Pollock’s drip style was groundbreaking in that it created a type of abstraction that removed all sense of formal representation. Parker Tyler later, in 1950, characterized this style, writing,

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53 “Pollock Chronology”. 
“The perspective that invites the eye: this is the tradition of painting that Pollock has totally effaced…In traditional nature representation, the world seen is this one; the spectator’s eye is merely the precursor of his body, beckoning his intelligence to follow it...But the intelligence must halt with a start on the threshold of Pollock’s rectangularly bound visions, as though brought up before a window outside which there is an absolute space, one inhabited only by the curving multicolored skeins of Pollock’s paint.”

Alonzo Lansford wrote for *The Art Digest*, “Pollock’s current method seems to be a sort of automatism; apparently, while staring steadily up into the sky, he lets go a loaded brush on the canvas, rapidly swirling and looping and wriggling till the paint runs out.” To be clear, these paintings demonstrate the early development of his drip style, as Greenberg comments, “It is indeed a mark of Pollock’s originality that he should present problems in judgment that must await the digestion of each new phase of his development before they can be solved.” Although it is noted that Pollock’s style is still developing at this time, this exhibition marks a significant development in his style, to the drip technique that so often characterizes his career, that it arguably marked the departure from an “early” style to a “mature” style.

Critics were not entirely sure what to make of this new style. The work is not exclusively “good” or “bad”, but rather different, new, unique. Robert Coates wrote,

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“Pollock is much harder to understand than most of his confreres. The main thing one gets from his work is an impression of tremendous energy, expressed in huge blobs of color alternating with lacings and interlacings of fine lines. Recognizable symbols are almost nonexistent, and he attempts to create by sheer color and movement the mood or atmosphere he wants to convey.”

The works seem to be initially confusing because of this new, complex technique. One should note that criticisms, particularly from this point on, rarely address specific paintings. Many criticisms became generalized about Pollock’s style, rather than commenting on the value of particular works. In this way, then, criticism was able to take a very different shape than it might have otherwise. Because of the generalized nature of these criticisms, especially as Pollock’s popularity and controversial nature expanded, criticism became more of a ideological or theoretical debate rather than one rooted in the images presented. The content of these criticisms began to shift around this time, as it became more generalized about the works themselves and began to respond to different aspects of Pollock’s image and perception rather than solely his paintings.

Around this same time, Pollock became a much more publicly controversial artist worldwide. The first showing of Pollock’s work in Europe, brought by Peggy Guggenheim, was at the XXIV Venice Biennale in 1948, which would then travel to Florence and Paris. While his earlier work had been fairly indecipherable and received varied positive and negative criticisms, in the scholarship on this show there becomes a visible divide between those who believe Pollock to be a revolutionary artist and those who are quite dismissive of...
his work. Because his work was now being shown abroad, he was receiving more international attention and thus being criticized from different points of view. Alonzo Lansford notes, “At least two foremost critics here and in England have recently included Pollock in their lists of the half dozen most important of America’s ‘advanced’ painters; other equally prestigious authorities have dismissed him, at least verbally, with an oath.” Pollock’s work had not only become much more controversial in general, but also had gained international attention, showing his increasing popularity and influence.

Pollock’s reception in Europe cemented his role as an icon in the international art world. To many European artists in this period following World War II, Pollock’s work represented “a stereotype role model for a European avant-garde that – out of saturation, fatigue, and existential anger – wanted to leave behind the bastions of Old World high culture.” Conversely, in just the same way that it represented a breaking point from high art culture, Pollock’s work also “secured abstract expressionism the status of a somewhat primitive art...comparable to the effects African sculpture had in the early 20th century.”

Traditional artists and scholars in Europe were less inclined toward Pollock’s radical ideas and technique. Europeans tended to see the New York School in one of two ways:

“While confirming the European notion that Americans could not paint properly, it visualized stereotypical expectations of what America was all about, i.e. largeness and expansion, primitivism and rawness, brutality and wildness, extravagance and richness, freedom and recklessness... The

58 Ibid
60 Ibid
liberating effect of abstract expressionism markedly shaped the European image of America.”\(^{61}\)

In many ways, Pollock’s work embodied the entire New York School in Europe, and represented a new idea of freedom in art with which many Europeans could identify in a time of change and new beginnings following the war. By becoming this figurehead for the New York avant-garde, Pollock gained international fame and became the artist the rest of the world associated with the New York School.

**January 1949 Betty Parsons Gallery Exhibition**

On January 24, 1949, Pollock’s second exhibition at the Betty Parsons gallery opened to increasingly positive reviews. It consisted of twenty six paintings, including “Number 1A”, “Number 5”, “The Wooden Horse: Number 10A”, “Number 13A: Arabesque”, “White Cockatoo: Number 24A”, and “Number 26A” Black and White.\(^{62}\) By this time, Pollock was becoming widely recognized for his work and talked about not only in art scholarship but also in popular publications such as *Time* and *Life* magazines. In this year, *Life* would publish a feature on Pollock, entitled, “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” People, besides just art critics, were formulating opinions of Pollock and his work, becoming more opinionated about his style rather than the quality of the execution of his work.

Many critics were increasingly impressed with Pollock’s new style. He had moved away entirely from easel painting and had fully embraced his drip style. Margaret

\(^{61}\) Ibid

\(^{62}\) “Pollock Chronology”.
Lowengrund commented for *The Art Digest*, “There are textural surprises in Jackson Pollock’s latest sailcloth panels...with wondrous and oft–repeated winding lines scrawled across them as if blown by the breezes of the sea.”\(^{63}\) Clement Greenberg wrote a rave review of the show, asserting, “Jackson Pollock’s show this year at Betty Parsons’s continued his astounding progress”\(^{64}\) and a number of paintings on display “seemed more than enough to justify the claim that Pollock is one of the major painters of our time.”\(^{65}\) He argues that “Number One” (Fig. 5), “which carries the idea of last year’s brilliant ‘Cathedral’ more than a few steps farther, quieted any doubts this reviewer may have felt...as to the justness of the superlatives with which he has praised Pollock’s work in the past.”\(^{66}\)


\(^{65}\) Ibid

\(^{66}\) Ibid
In addition, Sam Hunter for The New York Times wrote, “What does emerge is the large scale of Pollock’s operations, his highly personal rhythm and finally something like a pure calligraphic metaphor for a ravaging aggressive virility.” The critics seemed to be pleased with his most recent effort, as it seems to build and develop the drip technique that had captured their attention, and have grown increasingly admiring of his mature style.

However, while there is less negative criticism on the quality of the work, as seen in earlier shows, there seemed to now be a much clearer dichotomy between those who liked Pollock’s work and those who did not. Before, critics had been more negative about the quality of Pollock’s work, yet they generally agreed upon his influence as an artist. By 1949,

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however, it seemed critics either liked or did not like his style. An excerpt from the *New York World Telegram* reads:

> “Most of Jackson Pollock’s paintings, at the Betty Parsons Gallery, resemble nothing so much as a mop of tangled hair I have an irresistible urge to comb out. One or two of them manage to be organized and interesting. Those called, ‘Blue, red, yellow,’ and ‘Yellow, gray, black,’ because of their less ‘accidental’ development and their spatial depth, suggest how good a painter Pollock could really be.”

This piece is critical of Pollock’s style at its core, rather than of just the execution of the work, as seen previously. As Pollock became more successful and more widely recognized, more and more people began to have more pronounced opinions on his style and paintings.

One of the hallmarks of this year for Pollock’s career was his being featured in an article in *Life* magazine, entitled “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” This article was important not just in terms of recognizing Pollock’s great influence in the art world, but also showed his presence outside of the art world by being featured in a lifestyle magazine rather than an art journal. The piece is largely biographical rather than analytical of Pollock’s work. The author, Dorothy Sieberling, gives a brief overview of Pollock’s upbringing and career, telling his story in a way that would appeal to the general American public, who as a whole had little knowledge about Pollock or art. She characterizes Pollock’s technique as such: “Sometimes he dribbles the paint on with a brush. Sometimes he scrawls it on with a stick, scoops it with a trowel, or even pours it on straight out of the can...Finally, after days of brooding and doodling, Pollock decides the

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painting is finished, a deduction few others are equipped to make.”69 This assertion is clearly not an academic one, and certainly trivializes Pollock’s process and ideas. Despite her generalized observations, Sieberling seems to conclude that Pollock is, in fact, “the shining new face of American art”70, but rather for his unique character or style rather than the content of his art. There is a sense that she came to this conclusion merely because it is what everyone else was saying at the time. She does not present substantial evidence to support this claim. This article demonstrates how Pollock had come into the public eye, and thus would announce “the arrival of a new kind of artist and a new kind of art”71 and thus a new type of criticism, one of less academic knowledge and more public opinion.

**November 1949 Betty Parsons Gallery Exhibition**

Pollock’s third solo exhibition opened at the Betty Parsons Gallery on November 21, 1949, and is considered the “breakthrough show that would launch Pollock’s now legendary status.”72 The show consisted of thirty-five works, some of which were works from the previous exhibition that had not sold.73 These paintings were all numbered rather than named, and among them were “Number 3” and “Number 12”. The show not only was well received by critics, but was widely recognized by the general public as well. Aside from the usual reviews, Parker Tyler published an essay in the *Magazine of Art*, which provided

70 Ibid
73 “Pollock Chronology.”
an in-depth and metaphysical interpretation of Pollock’s drip paintings. The centerpiece of this exhibition was the model of a museum to display Pollock’s works designed by Peter Blake, which would bring him a new commission, but also elicit a comment from him that was telling of his mindset about his work at the time as his confidence in his work grew.

The show was generally well received, similarly to the previous few exhibitions at the Betty Parsons Gallery, though there were relatively few reviews written. They comment on his “sweeping movement of the arm, solid networks of thick, shiny paint”\(^74\) and use of large canvases. Amy Robinson for *Art News* comments on “a more intense emotion than ever”\(^75\) that is palpable in these works, asserting, “Emotion is provoked not only by the treatment of lines, which become masses in themselves, but also and especially by the color relationships.”\(^76\) However, the success of this show can also be measured through the buying of the paintings. Although these paintings had not sold at the previous show, as noted above, eighteen of the twenty-seven paintings at this show sold in the first week.\(^77\) This is likely a testament to the exposure Pollock had received from the article in *Life* magazine earlier in the year and his exponentially increasing fame and celebrity.

Also in response to this exhibition, Parker Tyler wrote an elegy in the *Magazine of Art*, published a few months after the usual reviews. The essay is an in-depth analysis of Pollock’s style and work to date, comparing it to the idea of labyrinths of the past. The piece is quite theoretical and metaphysical in its parsing of Pollock’s works. He begins with the key paradox, “His work has become increasingly complex in actual strokes, while it has

\(^75\) Ibid
\(^76\) Ibid
\(^77\) “Lot Notes.”
been simplified in formal idea.”⁷⁸ This article in many ways symbolizes another divide that arose between viewers of Pollock’s work: a “highbrow” versus a “lowbrow” audience. The language and ideas presented in this criticism are entirely different than something that would be published in a popular magazine. The essay is geared to an art-educated audience, which was not a large portion of the population. However, “the popular audience expected its art to be as illustrative, topical, and immediate as that day’s big city newspaper photographs.”⁷⁹ There was a dichotomy between the over-intellectualized, “highbrow” reading of Pollock’s work, as demonstrated by Parker Tyler’s essay, and the “lowbrow” dismissal of it as elementary and overhyped.

A more notable piece of this exhibition was the model museum that Peter Blake designed devoted to Pollock’s work (Fig. 6), a ½ inch = 1 foot scale model that was the center of the exhibition. The museum design was based on an earlier project by Mies van der Rohe, incorporating both painting and sculpture into the plan.⁸⁰ The fact that a museum was being designed solely to display and highlight Pollock’s work alone, as well as being commissioned his second big mural, shows his elevated status and importance in the art world. That fact aside, Arthur Drexler published an article in the 1950 issue of Interiors magazine, commending the design of the museum in meshing with Pollock’s works. This model also drew architect Marcel Breuer to the show, who immediately commissioned Pollock to paint a mural for Mr. and Mrs. Bertram Gellar, for whom he was currently...

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⁷⁸ Tyler, 1950, 65.
designing a house. However, "in his enthusiasm for the concept's plastic and spatial innovations, Drexler failed to recognize that Pollock's imagery is rich with metaphysical meaning." In 1950, Pollock wrote a statement on the back of a Hans Namuth photograph, perhaps partially in response to Drexler and others' trivialization of his work, summarizing the content of his work as "states of order– organic intensity– energy and motion made visible– memories arrested in space, human needs and motives." Again, this statement attests to the confidence Pollock had in his ideas and style, as well as his likely attention to what was being written about him and his shows.

Fig. 6. Peter Blake, Model of the Jackson Pollock Museum, 1949. Photos by Jeff Heatley.

81 "Pollock's Chronology".
82 Harrison, “Pollock: Blake’s 1949 Museum Design”.
83 Ibid
July 1950 XXV Venice Biennale

1950 proved to be a turbulent year for Pollock and his career. Another article published in a lifestyle magazine, this time *Time* magazine, called Pollock’s work chaotic, warranting a response letter from Pollock protesting the claim. This interaction was sparked by three of Pollock’s pieces that had been taken to Venice to be displayed in the XXV Biennale in July: “Number 1A, 1948”, “Number 12, 1949”, and “Number 23, 1949”. Also in this year, Pollock also recorded an iconic interview with William Wright for a Long Island radio station. Pollock became more vocal and opinionated this year, showing not only his reaction to the public’s perception of him, but also his confidence in his work and what he wanted it to represent in the art world.

An iconic piece written about this exhibition written by Bruno Alfieri, originally published in the Italian journal *L’Arte Moderna*, would call more public attention to Pollock, specifically in *Time* magazine. The article discusses Pollock himself, questioning how his personality and character affected one’s understanding of his work. He writes:

“It is true that he does not think; Pollock has broken all barriers between his picture and himself: his picture is the most immediate and spontaneous painting. Each one of his pictures is a part of himself. But what kind of man is he?– What is his inner world worth? Is it worth knowing, or is it undistinguished? Damn it, if I must judge a painting by the artist, it is no longer a painting that I am interested in, I no longer care about the formal values contained in it. On the other hand, however, Pollock never meant to insert formal values in his pastiches. What then? ... That is, I start from the
picture, and discover the man: suddenly, without reasoning, instantaneously, more instantaneously than with any other modern painter.”

By considering Pollock’s work in relation to his personality, Alfieri is elevating Pollock to a kind of celebrity status. This consideration of Pollock’s character is somewhat similar to that of the 1949 *Life* article, in that his character becomes just as essential to the perception of his work as the paintings themselves. His identity as a celebrity seems to come before the art itself, and thus the general public’s conclusions about his art would in actuality become judgments of Pollock himself. This would become a theme seen particularly in this time in career, as Pollock became a more publicly visible figure, yet continuously evades the public eye and remains a mysterious figure.

Most importantly, in this article, Alfieri referred a number of times to “chaos” in Pollock’s paintings, writing,

“In any case it is easy to detect the following things in all of his paintings:

– chaos
– absolute lack of harmony
– complete lack of structural organization
– total absence of technique, however rudimentary
– once again, chaos”

The idea of chaos would come up throughout subsequent writing on Pollock’s work and would become a source of tension for Pollock. In the article published by *Time* in relation to this piece by Alfieri, entitled “Chaos, Damn It!”, the author quoted Alfieri’s criticism

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85 Ibid
explicitly, and stated, "Pollock followed his canvases to Italy, exhibited them in private galleries in Venice and Milan. Italian critics tended to shrug off his shows. Only one, brash young (23) critic Bruno Alfieri of Venice, took the bull by the horns."\textsuperscript{86}

In response to the \textit{Time} article, Pollock wrote a letter to the editor. It read:

\begin{quote}
SIR:
NO CHAOS DAMN IT. DAMNED BUSY PAINTING AS YOU CAN SEE BY MY SHOW COMING UP NOV. 28. I'VE NEVER BEEN TO EUROPE, THINK YOU LEFT OUT MOST EXCITING PART OF MR. ALFIERI'S PIECE.
JACKSON POLLOCK\textsuperscript{87}
\end{quote}

In addition, the editor adds, “The most exciting part of Critic Alfieri’s remarks, at least for Artist Pollock, may well have been the obvious conclusion that he ‘sits at the extreme apex of the most advanced and unprejudiced avant–garde of modern art.’”\textsuperscript{88} Pollock’s reaction shows first and foremost that he was in this instance cognizant of the criticism he was receiving. The criticism bothered him enough to drive him to write a response to it, showing perhaps that he was struggling with his newfound popularity and celebrity status.

Around the same time that Alfieri’s original article was published, Pollock recorded an interview with William Wright for a radio station. He spoke of his ideas on modern painting and his technique, stating,

\begin{quote}
“Most of the paint I use is a liquid, flowing kind of paint. The brushes I use are used more as sticks rather than brushes– the brush doesn’t touch the surface
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid
of the canvas, it’s just above... I don’t use the accident– ‘cause I deny the accident... I do have a general notion of what I’m about and what the results will be... The result is the thing– and– it doesn’t make much difference how the paint is put on as long as something has been said. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.”\(^{89}\)

From this statement, it can be concluded that perhaps through the development of the drip technique, Pollock has developed more of a sense of intentionality in his drip painting than he had originally. He had moved away from the complete intentionality of his early abstract/surrealistic works, but was also moving away from the utter spontaneity he argued drove his earlier drip paintings that he was “not much aware of”, as stated in his 1947 comment.

**November 1950 Betty Parsons Gallery Exhibition**

Pollock's fourth show at the Betty Parsons Gallery opened on November 28, 1950, and included works exclusively from 1950, including “Lavender Mist: Number 1”, “Number 3”, “Number 7”, “Autumn Rhythm: Number 30”, and “One: Number 31”(Fig. 7).\(^{90}\) The critical response was generally positive, and continued to demonstrate Pollock's success. The criticism first and foremost addressed the theme of chaos, which had been a topic of discussion since the *Time* article from a year previous had been printed. However, in response to this show, critics were vehement that Pollock’s work was not at all chaotic, but in fact disciplined and sure of itself. Another essay written at this time, “Pollock Paints a

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\(^{90}\) “Pollock Chronology”. 
“Picture”, was meant to illustrate Pollock’s painting process, but the article had various inaccuracies. Despite these errors, the article was quite influential, showing how Pollock’s fame and success had allowed for the public to make judgments and garner opinions of him that were not based on their own observations of his work.

Again, the theme of chaos is addressed in the criticism. However, this time, many critics refute the idea that Pollock’s work is chaotic, as was suggested by the earlier Time article. Robert Goodnough comments for Art News, “Pollock has found a discipline that releases tremendous emotive energy combined with a sensitive statement that, if to some overpowering, can not be absorbed in one viewing– one must return.”

Robert Coates, writing for The New Yorker, contends:

“Odd and mazy as it is, his painting style is far from sloppy, for the overlying webs on webs of varicolored lines that make up most of his pictures are put on with obvious sureness, while the complaint that it’s all a vast hoax falls to the ground, it seems to me, because of the size and, to date, the unprofitableness of his enterprise.”

Both of these critics are firm in their belief that Pollock’s work is not chaotic; on the contrary, it is intentional and disciplined. Coates continues that a fault of not just Pollock, but his entire school, “is a tendency to let the incidental rule at the expense of the overall concept, with the result that the basic values of a composition are lost in a clutter of more or less meaningless embellishment.”

93 Ibid
about the intentionality of his paintings, and Coates seems to be of the opinion that even if Pollock does have an idea of what he wants to convey in his painting, it does not necessarily come through given the execution of the paintings. However, he ends the article by commenting, “Pollock’s main strength, though, lies in an exuberance and vitality that, though hard to define, lends a sparkle and an excitement to his painting.” This statement was much in line with almost every other criticism at the time, arguing that while Pollock’s work conceptually is debated, his energy and influence as an artist are undeniable.

This debate then specifically requires attention to the nature of these criticisms. As mentioned earlier, the nature of criticisms of Pollock’s work changed as he developed his drip style. It seemed that they became much more generalized, responding to Pollock’s style or image rather than specific, new works that he produced. In this critical debate, it is clear that the critics are responding to each other rather than to the works themselves. Goodnough and Coates, rather than writing on particular paintings in Pollock’s most recent show, write their criticism on “chaos”, in regard to the critical debate that had surfaced a year before. In this way, there emerged two contrasting lines of thought regarding Pollock through this period: one that responded directly to Pollock’s works and one that responded to other critics and their ideas. This debate over “chaos” in Pollock’s work exemplifies a clear example of the kind of criticism that became increasingly written throughout Pollock’s career, a type of criticism that responded to other critics, further removing

94 Ibid
Pollock and his image from his work.

Fig. 7. Jackson Pollock, *One: Number 31 1950*, 1950, Oil and enamel paint on canvas, 8’ 10” x 17’ 5 5/8” (269.5 x 530.8 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Five months after this exhibition, *Art News* published an influential article written by the painter Robert Goodnough, in addition to his brief review, entitled “Pollock Paints a Picture”, which was supplemented by Hans Namuth’s iconic photos of Pollock in action. The article and photos gave readers an inside look at what Pollock’s unorthodox, physical process of painting was like. It was again more biographical and superficial rather than observational or analytical, much like the *Life* article from 1949. The article was quite influential and widely read, despite a number of accuracies in the article, “including the title of the painting, which is given as *Number 4, 1950*)". Goodnough writes the article in a way that implies he was in the studio, narrating what he saw as Pollock painted, but these inaccuracies suggest that he was likely basing his description off of Namuth’s photos,

95 Karmel, 1951, 74.
“supplemented by post facto discussions with Pollock.”96 If nothing else, this piece addresses a phenomenon that Leo Steinberg would later iterate:

“His supporters and detractors share a common vehemence of conviction—which is not necessarily, as some believe, a point in Pollock’s favor. For the detractors are not galled by the pictures themselves, but by the claim that they are art. What annoys them is thus extrinsic to the work and throws no light on its quality.”97

This conviction can be seen in Goodnough’s final statement of the piece. After the in depth description of Pollock’s painting process, he declares, “The experience Pollock himself has had with this high kind of feeling is what gives quality to his work. Of course anyone can pour paint on a canvas, as anyone can bang on a piano, but to create one must purify the emotions; few have the strength, will or even the need, to do this.”98 Goodnough’s statement is somewhat presumptuous, as he insists that Pollock’s work is not just art, but art of the highest intellectual caliber. This connects to the “high brow” reading of Pollock’s work, as something intellectually and metaphysically sophisticated, like in Parker Tyler’s 1950 piece. This article demonstrates how people had begun to gather strong opinions on Pollock and his technique, despite what they actually knew or observed in his work or artistic process.

96 Ibid
Late Career

November 1951 Betty Parsons Gallery Exhibition
This exhibition, which opened on November 26, 1951, marked another shift in Pollock’s style, away from his mature drip technique seen in previous exhibitions. Some of the notable paintings in this show were “Number 11”, “Number 14”, “Number 17”, “Number 18”, “Number 19”, and “Echo: Number 25”, all created in 1951.99 These paintings are limited mostly to thin black lines and lean more toward a formalism that had not been seen since Pollock’s earlier stages of work, in 1947 and before. The simpler palette and composition of these paintings marked a shift from the complex, spontaneous drip paintings from a year previous, garnering a new type of praise from critics, revolving around the emotional and intellectual content that this new form of formalism was purveying in these paintings.

Pollock wrote a letter to his friends Ted Dragon and Alfonso Ossorio in June 1951, in which he seemed to recognize his departure from his drip style. He wrote, “I’ve had a period of drawing on a canvas in black– with some of my early images coming thru– think the non–objectivists will find them disturbing– and the kids who think it simple to splash a Pollock out.”100 This statement first and foremost recognizes a palpable movement away from his drip style, which had brought him incredible success only a year prior. However, this statement is also significant as it is a direct response to certain opinions on Pollock’s work. He specifies the “non–objectivists”, wanting to get a reaction from them, and the “kids who think it simple to splash a Pollock out”, wanting to prove a point to them, to almost validate the work he was doing in a way. In some ways, the statement would seem

99 “Pollock Chronology”.
100 Karmel, 1951, 79.
to bring more of a sense of intention to Pollock’s work than he had stated in earlier years. Before, he was insistent that his work was unprompted and natural, whereas from this statement, it can be inferred that he might have had somewhat of an agenda with these most recent paintings, as he identified a specific audience and reaction he hoped to elicit from them. However, at the same time, this statement from Pollock, again, seems to be responding to the critical reception of his work, rather than the creation of the works themselves. It could be simply a mocking note of the way his work had been received, rather than any indication of the mindset he had while painting. Either way, this statement shows an awareness of his image and critical reception, but the degree to which it actually affected him or the creation of his work is less clear.

The critical reception of this exhibition at the time was generally favorable. They recognize the marked shift from Pollock’s drip paintings to the simplified lines and colors of these newest paintings. James Fitzsimmons wrote for The Art Digest, “By eliminating the problems (and the delights) of color and texture, Pollock has simplified matters considerably.”

This change may address earlier criticism that Pollock’s work was messy, too complex to garner any emotional or intellectual significance. In relation to the simplification of line and color, another key shift in these recent works was that “from the webs and snares of black, faces and figures in ever changing combinations emerge, sometimes distinctly, sometimes only by suggestion.” This observation contrasts with the drip paintings, which “suggest the organic, and since the lines of natural forms are varied and unpredictable, we search longer for the recognizable outline (which, of course,

102 Ibid
isn’t there) and are all the more baffled when we cannot find it.”

The degree to which formalism plays a role in these pieces varies throughout the criticism, with some critics arguing, “By introducing associative elements into his work, Pollock has found his own way of dealing with human experience.” Other the other hand, Clement Greenberg gives the element of formalism less weight, contending “the change is not as great as it might seem” as “the unity of the canvas is more traditional, therefore more open to imagery.” He argues the forms and motifs from his first phase of work are simply repeated and clarified in this new phase, asserting, “The more explicit structure of the new work reveals much that was implicit in the preceding phase and should convince any one that this artist is much, much more than a grandiose decorator.”

“Echo: Number 25” (Fig. 8) in particular was mentioned in Leo Steinberg’s essay published in 1955, after the piece was shown for a second time in a retrospective exhibition at Janis’s gallery. He asserts:

“To me the most hypnotic picture in the show is Echo, done in 1951; a huge ninety-two-inch world of whirling threads of black on white, each tendril seeming to drag with it a film of ground that bends inward and out and shapes itself mysteriously into a molded space. There is a real process here; something is actually happening. Therefore the picture can afford to be as careless of critique as the bad weather is of the objections of a would-be

103 Coates, 1950, 72.
104 Ibid
106 Ibid
107 Ibid
picnicker. With all my thought-sicklied misgivings about Pollock, this satisfies the surest test I know for a great work of art.”\textsuperscript{108}

Steinberg gives specific credit to the fact that this painting appears to be done through a process, apparently a step forward from his spontaneous drip method. Given the other criticisms above, it might seem that because these paintings are easier to read and simpler compositionally, they received even more positive reviews than the drip paintings, which were “the result, as it were, of dispersed particles of pigment into a more physical as well as aesthetic unity- when the air-tight and monumental order of his best paintings of that time.”\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{108} Steinberg, 1951, 83.
\textsuperscript{109} Greenberg, 1951, 80.
This more positive response, it could be argued, could then be from this parsed down version of Pollock's work. In many ways, it was easier to understand and process, as noted by the critics, and they can thus get more meaning from the more formalized figures and paintings. James Fitzsimmons states, “He has added something which reaches areas of meaning and feeling he left untouched before.” 110 There is not necessarily any more or less

110 Fitzsimmons, 1951, 79.
emotion in these paintings, but rather they are arguably more accessible to the viewer. Because of this simplification, these paintings received more positive reviews than Pollock’s most recent drip paintings, from 1949 and 1950. Fitzsimmons continues, “In this sense, his new paintings possess an additional level of meaning and so transmit a more complex kind of experience than did his earlier work. It would seem that Pollock has confounded those who insisted he was up a blind alley.”111 This quote suggests not only that his simplified style transmits a clearer message, but also that he responded to critics that thought he was following a meaningless course of action.

This development, then, poses the question of whether Pollock made this change in response to the criticism of his work. His earlier statement would suggest that he was aware of the criticism he had been receiving, that his drip paintings were too busy or too random. Critics had taken keen notice of how Pollock had simplified his works, and some seemed to agree that this work had a more cohesive emotional and intellectual message as it became a pared down, or rather more developed, version of its earlier self. Alfonso Ossorio offers an answer to this question in his essay for the catalogue of the exhibition, stating, “New visions demand new techniques: Pollock's use of unexpected materials and scales are the direct result of his concepts and of the organic intensity with which he works, an intensity that involves, in its complete identification of the artist with his work, a denial of the accident.”112 This development in Pollock’s style, Ossorio argues, seems to be an organic one, a natural progression from the themes always present in Pollock’s work, such

111 Ibid
as “void and solid, human action and inertia”\textsuperscript{113}. Pollock’s work is entirely from within him, rather as a result of outside influences, and as these paintings are “remote from anecdote or propaganda, stripped of immediate material appeal, they both reawaken in us the sense of personal struggle and its collective roots and recall to us the too easily forgotten face that ‘what is without is within.’”\textsuperscript{114} This essay sheds some light on what could have influenced this development in Pollock’s style, but still leaves questions unanswered.

**November 1955 Sidney Janis Gallery Exhibition**

By the time Pollock’s third exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery opened on November 28, 1955, his physical and mental problems had deepened to a state where he was producing next to no new work.\textsuperscript{115} Between 1951 and this time, Pollock had been struggling with addiction, which had greatly affected his artistic abilities. This exhibition thus took the form of a retrospective, showing a number of his past works, even though he was still alive and technically active in his career. Notable about this exhibition was Clement Greenberg’s negative response, and the increasing awareness within his circle of influence of Pollock’s inner turmoil. There was a good amount of reflection on Pollock’s career “thus far”, as well as talk of Pollock’s character and personality as reflected through his paintings.

One incident worth noting at this exhibition was Clement Greenberg’s visit. The decline in Pollock’s work was noticeable, as “for the first time, even the artist’s friends were taken aback.”\textsuperscript{116} Greenberg in particular was especially unhappy with Pollock’s effort for

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid
\textsuperscript{115} “Pollock Chronology”.
\textsuperscript{116} Rubenfeld, 1997, 199.
this show. Grace Hartigan recalled "Clem walking around, shaking his head, while Pollock stood off to the side, looking devastated."\textsuperscript{117} Clearly Pollock was very affected by Greenberg’s reaction, which had become increasingly disapproving. On this same note, a few days later, Greenberg saw one of Pollock's paintings in the Carnegie International Exhibition, and Greenberg told Pollock, “that it was okay but the one next to it – by a little known German artist – was better.”\textsuperscript{118} By this time, it was more than obvious that Pollock’s physical and psychological struggles had taken a toll on his work, as well as deeply affected his relationships with Greenberg and others. Budd Hopkins said of Pollock, “There was a lot of feeling that the work was falling apart...I think everyone shared my feeling that Pollock was physically, psychologically, personally in terrible shape and the art was in terrible shape too.”\textsuperscript{119}

The most significant piece written on this exhibition was Leo Steinberg’s essay “Fifteen Years of Jackson Pollock”. This article, in some ways, responds to the criticism written by Bruno Alfieri, in which he considers Pollock’s character and personal life in relation to his work. Steinberg states:

“Just as a full understanding of, say, Indian art is denied to one who is not steeped in India’s religious lore, and who ignores the myths of which that art is a prime carrier, so a Pollock painting, charged with his personal mythology, remains meaningless to him from who Pollock himself is not a tangible reality. As Indian sculpture is related to Vedic and Upanishadic
thought, exactly so are Pollock’s canvases related to his self. Ignore that relation and they remain anonymous and insignificant.”

In that sense, he argues, it should be impossible to appreciate or understand Pollock’s art without knowing the artist himself; the artist cannot be separated from the art. He questions whether these paintings are significant because of their artistic integrity, or rather just the milestone they represent in the timeline of art history. He wonders, “How good these pictures are I cannot tell, but know that they have something of the barbarism of an ancient epic. Does anybody ask whether the Song of Gilgamesh is any good?” Thus, the consideration of the art itself is more or less removed and Pollock himself becomes the focus of study rather than his work.

Conclusion

Pollock’s career started off strongly, receiving positive, if slightly uncertain, reviews from a majority of critics. These early works had a sense of explosive energy, perhaps misdirected or unclear, but a fiery emotional charge of which every critic took notice. Critics were not entirely satisfied with Pollock’s efforts, noting their muddled or crowded compositions that were perhaps overambitious for a young artist like Pollock. It would appear that there were traces of formal representations, vestiges of the cubist and surrealist European traditions that were happening simultaneously. However, statements from critics and Pollock at the time implied that he was essentially working from his unconscious. There became a growing disjuncture between the way that Pollock and his

\[^{120}\text{Steinberg, 1956, 82.}\]
\[^{121}\text{Ibid}\]
\[^{122}\text{Ibid}\]
contemporaries viewed his early works, as without intention or preliminary sketches, and the way today's scholars view it, as influenced by many facets of Pollock’s studies and life experiences. During this period, Pollock was enthusiastic, energetic, and relatively unaffected by his criticism, as critics were still unsure of his style and skill. If anything, Pollock seemed eager to prove that he could be as great of an artist as many critics proposed he would be, as written in his 1943 letter to James Johnson Sweeney.

By 1948, Pollock had launched himself into his radical drip style, for which he is most famous. During this period, Pollock began to receive more attention and feedback, both nationally and internationally. His fame also expanded outside just the art world, into the public sphere through lifestyle magazines such as *Time* and *Life*. As his confidence grew as a result of this attention and success of his work, he became more outspoken about his work. His statements showed more conviction about his work and his intentions, contending that his work was not “chaos”, yet it was done from the unconscious. As Pollock moved into the limelight, his character and personality became much more the focus of articles about him. There was a sort of fascination with him personally, as a figurehead of the abstract expressionist movement, and the mysterious or misunderstood artist. As a result of this interest, criticism became less focused on his work and its quality, but rather of his personality, or the idea of his art, whether it was “art” or not. This type of debate opened the door to differing types of criticisms, and a dichotomy emerged between the “high brow” and “low brow” criticisms of his work. It tended to be seen as either extremely intellectually and emotionally advanced, only available to the most educated audience, or as something entirely meaningless. At the same time, people were becoming much more starkly supporters or detractors of Pollock's work. They either liked his work or did not
like it. During this period, in a lot of ways, Pollock’s reputation preceded him, as his fame reached new heights with the development of his innovative drip style.

By late 1951, Pollock opened an exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery that marked another shift in his style. These paintings were pared down versions of his drip paintings, maintaining the dripping, dynamic paint skeins as before, but in simpler colors and compositions. In many ways, as noted by the critics, these new paintings were much more accessible to viewers, who praised them more highly than any of his previous works. He made a statement in this year, identifying the “non–objectivists” and “kids who think it simple to splash a Pollock out”, hoping to prove to them the artistic value of his paintings. Thus he seemed to be responding to some degree to criticisms in these paintings. In his later years, Pollock appeared to respond internally to his image and criticism, as his physical and mental health deteriorated. His output decreased significantly during this period, coming to essentially a halt by 1955, a year before his death. It could be argued that Pollock’s addictions and psychological struggles were a result of his struggle with fame, but no one will ever truly know. During this period, people began to consider Pollock’s career as a whole, his work as representative of an entire movement. It was less a question of whether his work was “good” or “bad”, but rather what his worked represented in the context of art and cultural history, and what kind of legacy he would leave on the art world. Again, his reputation in some ways preceded him, but by this time it was a much more retrospective and generalized view of his career. There was less excitement about what he would come up with next, but more consideration of what he had already done, given the slowing of his output.
Thus it can be concluded that Pollock was, to varying extents throughout his career, affected by the criticism and reception of his work. Early in his career, he seemed eager to prove himself, despite criticism that his work was misguided or overly ambitious. By the time he developed his drip style, he was much more confident in his convictions about his work, contending that his work was not chaotic, yet still an exercise in the unconscious, despite an enormous amount of debate over his radical work. By late in his career, his physical and mental health issues had worsened, perhaps as a result of his struggles with fame, or not. His late work seemed to respond as directly as ever to criticism in the way that he simplified and clarified his drip style by incorporating formal figures again and simplifying compositions. Regardless of how Pollock himself was affected by these criticisms and how accurate they truly were, it is clear that criticisms defined the perception Pollock’s career to an unusual degree. The number of criticisms on Pollock at the time, especially considering those that did not respond to particular works, would set him as a pivotal figure in the history of art. Whether that fame was due to the value of his work or the intellectual and cultural debate that it represented, however, will remain a question. As Allan Kaprow notes in his essay following Pollock’s death, “The young artist of today need no longer say ‘I am a painter’ or ‘a dancer.’ He is simply an ‘artist.’ All of life will be open to him... But out of nothing he will devise the extraordinary and then maybe nothingness as well. People will be delighted or horrified, critics will be confused or amused, but these, I am sure, will be the alchemies of the 1960s.”

Notes


