

## JACKSON POLLOCK: MASS MAN AGONIST

Stephen Polcari



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The religious man wants to be saturated with power.

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11-13

What did Pollock think of the interpretations of his work by 1956: “they never get the point anyway; they always change things around.”

Document 114, 1956

### **Introduction**

Jackson Pollock codified the tensions and issues of his era through his own consciousness. Those tensions and conflicts came to the fore at the same time that his personal problems did in 1938-41. As Pollock associated his psychological needs with the central themes of those conflicts, his work and thought assumed a public rather than an exclusively private meaning. To be sure, Pollock recognized that he had problems resulting from his drinking. To be sure, he might have shared his era’s belief that alcoholism was a product of inner character conflicts and moral failings rather than a tendency to physical compulsion as was thought later, but he nevertheless indulged himself in imaginings that connected his inward thought with the cultural situation of the day. Pollock’s solution to his problem -- conceptual introspection -- led him to his chosen answer -- cultural change and metamorphosis. In other words, Pollock investigated and described what he famously called the “unconscious” not for its own sake but for an end – psychic cultural development or healthy growth. Pollock’s concept of the unconscious, formed and shaped by

contemporary thought, had a teleology. Pollock sought a transformative inwardness, a conception that he shared with his Abstract Expressionist colleagues whether they articulated it as psychological or not. In short, Pollock psychologically recast himself and his world as a kind of therapy for mankind as he attempted to reconstruct and renew the problematic man of his time -- mass man.

How did Pollock do it? With eclectic combinations of Mexican, Bentonesque, and Native American forms; theosophy and the mythic methods of Eliot, Jung, and Joyce ; the ideas of his fellow artists, as well as those found and dispersed in Benedict, Bergson, Spengler, and Lawrence; modern man philosophizing; mass man criticism; European modernism; the English philosophical criticism of Herbert Read; the culture of thirties America; the art and intellectual life in New York, from the Museum of Modern Art to the American Museum of Natural History; the culture and rituals of non-Western peoples, particularly shamanism and sand painting; and Pollock's own life itself, driven by his and his time's need for creative change. While representing the recasting of his psychic personality in his art, then, Pollock drew on much more than psychic theory alone. He drew on the culture of a mythic method for his American, and actually the entire Anglo-American, world.

Four remarks from very different and seemingly unrelated sources suggest how very different arts and cultures came together in Pollock's thinking to make his statement of the contemporary crisis as perceived between the wars and to articulate a conception found in cultures from Paleolithic animism

to modern psychotherapy. One of these remarks was made by the classic American writer Thornton Wilder in the epochal play “Our Town,” which he describes as being about “our [that is, the American culture’s] living and our dying.” Another was made by the critic Jose Juan Tablada about Diego Rivera, an artist Pollock watched at work at Rockefeller Center and admired: “Rivera, inspired and backed by the old Aztec Sun God Tonatiuh did nothing more than paint on the walls of Radio City the historic moment of today, the unstoppable and universal between what is dying and [what is] being born . . . amplified in the Paradigm of the World War.”<sup>i</sup> The third was made by Peter Homans about Jung: “As with liminality, much of the imagery of [Jungian] individuation [that is, the self expresses the themes of birth and rebirth. It seems inevitable that such a motif would appear in the mental life of persons who experience themselves as ‘betwixt and between’—in transition from one order of becoming to another.”<sup>ii</sup> And the fourth was made by Andre Breton, a surrealist leader: “The *Second Manifesto* is the surest way to appreciate what is dead and what is more living than ever in Surrealism.”<sup>iii</sup> *Altogether, these statements express a contemporary recognition of a crisis that would eventually end in war and the need for renewal, the living and the dying.*

Key influences in Pollock’s era then saw most events as the product of a conflict of “life” with “death” coexisting in a kind of bipolar unity where one or the other struggles constantly to prevail. Ultimately the source of this view was World War I, which put an end to the 19<sup>th</sup> century popular idea of linear, uninterrupted progress. Now, darkness had to be acknowledged as a

component of history, although not enough to ultimately destroy the idea of change and progress. Besides the words of and about Wilder, Rivera, Jung and Breton, perhaps the most widespread statement of this dominant new duality was made by Sigmund Freud who in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of 1920 (that is, in the wake of the First World War), restructured the workings of the mind to illustrate it. Eros and Thanatos, he wrote, are in perpetual conflict; the archetypal human drives and the instinct to live create in competition with the will and instinct to destroy and kill as primal human nature.

Ultimately, this new duality took biomorphic form in the new twentieth-century histories of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, and also perhaps in the most famous “history” of all, Sir James Frazer’s anthropological history of human cultures, *The Golden Bough*. In Frazer’s widely influential mytho-ritualist scenario, the gods of vegetation as the king enact a cycle of living and dying known as death and rebirth for the good of society and the principle of life. The living and dying are part of the cycle of life, from birth, initiation, maturation and death, old mythic conceptions revived in the twentieth century. Thus, for Pollock’s generation, the evolution of history is that of the life cycle’s creation and destruction.

Concepts of “creation and destruction” join to foretell or contribute to Pollock’s project, and indeed, to those many in the era. Dying had to be superseded by living, destruction by creativity, and death by rebirth to bring about the transition to a new historical epoch. This was a common idea of the period expressed, from the economics of Joseph Schumpeter’s famous

definition of capitalism as a form of creation and destruction<sup>iv</sup> to myth where many cultures that Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists were interested in from India to Egypt to Christianity itself incorporated a dead and reborn God. It is what was meant by Mark Rothko in his famous introduction to an exhibition by Clyfford Still, when he said that Still partook of the “Persephone” culture of myth-making that was dominating New York. Although Still objected to being included in any group, he himself said that his own work referred, to the “earth, the damned and the recreated.”

In general terms, Jackson Pollock’s art seeks to represent this intricate duality of living (life, germination, becoming and rebirth) and dying (death, destruction, chaos, torment, pain) with an emphasis on the former as much as on the latter although the art world, because of his fall-down drunkenness and his occasional less than temperate behavior, has luxuriated in the latter. Let us be clear. Pollock’s difficulties were projected, as everyone in his era’s often been and are, on the world at large, and vice versa. His difficulties he saw as his culture’s and era’s difficulties. Thus, his work is not a detailed autobiography of his psychic life, as traditional psychologically oriented critics and therapeutized modernists would have it. It is a generalization of inner life as he conceived it for himself and for his era. Pollock sought psychological health – why else would he or anyone go to a therapist as Pollock did? – and his work is full of creative symbols of a new hoped-for psychic life combined with the difficulty of its creation or birth. With Pollock, then, his new birth required and

was intertwined with the symbolic “death” of his troubled self, his creation with personal “destruction,” and his “living” with “dying.”

Before we begin our examination, it is important to state what will become obvious in our study and what will differ sharply from almost sixty years of thinking about Pollock by scholars and critics. It will be seen that Pollock’s work is *symbolic*, that is, it is full of meaningful forms that can be understood. Those forms refer mostly to mytho-ritualist images and processes, Pollock’s primary source. That is, the forms express a set of beliefs or ideology that, as we shall see, is shared by his time. Pollock’s originality is to employ the symbols and ritual forms of the peoples of Native America to symbolize those ideas.

In contrast, most of the literature on Pollock argues, or rather, takes for granted what is the interpretation of the 1950s – which Pollock’s work consists of forms that welled up spontaneously from his unconscious, that are strictly individual and subjective, and that cannot be understood. In this traditional interpretation, Pollock’s basic belief that art comes from the unconscious has been taken to mean that his forms and images are mostly inaccessible and illegible to meaning and understanding. This is a *fundamentally mistaken interpretation* that has kept back Pollock studies almost from the beginning. This study will argue that the opposite is true – that Pollock’s forms and images are legible, that they have meaning that can be determined and that we can thus understand his work. In other words, Pollock’s forms are conceptually chosen and not accidental, arcane fantasies. Pollock’s art consists of *a*

*repertoire of forms, symbols and images* that he repeatedly used such as fire, copulation, babies, x-rays, incorporations, emblems of magic flow and ecstasy, allusions to altered states of consciousness and many more. This repertoire consciously derives from and can be understood from his chosen interests. Those interests can be studied, and they offer a circumscribable set of possible meanings that Pollock used to make his statement. Pollock articulates the struggle of life and death in the history of his time in images drawn from his culture of psychology, anthropology, literature, art criticism and more.

It is high church for Pollock dogma that he said that he believed art comes from the unconscious. Regrettably, that statement was so broad as to open a Pandora's Box of speculation about Pollock's work, especially the so-called abstractions. In his way, Pollock's was responsible for the wide range of contradictory interpretations of his work. Just in the 1980s, for example, Pollock's abstractions were described as exploding A-bomb images created because he was unhappy with American foreign policy, tangles of projected umbilical cords because he may have been born with the umbilical cord around his neck, and the results of pissing contests with his brothers. Ultimately, Pollock has meant whatever the critical author has brought to the table and because he was so important, Pollock is the subject of some of the greatest disputes in modern art. Authors have tried to prove their methodology/ideology through an interpretation of Pollock's drip "abstractions" (the reason for the parentheses will be discussed in the next chapter), treating them as, besides forms from the unconscious, and a *tabula rasa*, uniquely



illuminated by the critic's approach. The Marxist-Leninist T.J Clark writes up a reactionary psychoanalytic Pollock so as to open-up a self-serving social critique.

In contrast, this book argues that we can understand Pollock because he kept repeating himself, or rather, the same motifs, again and again, and that those motifs were drawn from his milieu. To be sure, no understanding or interpretation is written in concrete; but Pollock's work is legible and an accessible repertoire of motifs and images. *Unlike many studies, we will look very hard at Pollock's images and forms.* While Pollock believed that art came from the unconscious, rather than invent from it willy-nilly, he used forms and images to explicate and represent it, that is, he used forms to represent the current cultural understandings of the unconscious. *Pollock's art represents his idea of the unconscious, not the unconscious itself.* He did not need to suffer to show suffering just as a filmmaker or writer does not have to die to show a death scene.

Pollock was self-conscious about inward life and his work consists of repeated combinations of themes and ideas from several sources. Thus, rather than simply being "fantastic," Pollock's forms and images are meaningful. (Keep in mind that Pollock never supposedly began with a subject.) Many will differ as to their meanings, but in the end, the responsible art historian must try to understand them rather than walk away under the rationalizing umbrella that his images came from the unconscious and thus are pure fantasy and one therefore need not bother to try. Pollock's idea of the unconscious is thus

differentiated and comprehensible in terms of the ideas of his time, including those of self-healing, and the repair of his historical and cultural world of mass conflict, strife, war and the threats of mass man, his personality and psyche. Ultimately, it attempts to make a new “satisfactory way of living,” and this is not only personal and subjective, as all art is, but social, historical and cultural, addressing the artist himself as part of his environment.

Although Jackson Pollock has not suffered from lack of attention, major parts of his work have been under-investigated. To be sure, it is generally believed that his work has been thoroughly researched and vetted for its ideas and themes, but most understandings are variants of one interpretation: that of the fifties belief in the subjective, “damaged man” as cultural hero that dominated the period. It is mostly unrecognized that the damaged man paradigm was a product of World War II, after which many men and civilization itself felt crushed by the horror of contemporary history. It is also mostly unrecognized that this was the period when psychology was largely popularized as something more than permission for sex, and that its great and dominant power in American culture was achieved. The damaged man was very much a psychological man, his psyche the battlefield of therapeutic rehabilitation for himself and for civilization.

Meaning in Pollock’s work became trapped by this topical equation of his time, and although there are many seemingly different takes on Pollock, the personally and psychically tormented paradigm underlies most of them. This is not to say that this subtext is not relevant, but rather that the idea of a

psychopathological Pollock biography does not begin to address and come to terms with the Pollock that is of his time, a Pollock richer and deeper than has been imagined. It is this Pollock that I will examine, that is, as something more than the autobiographical.

The standard understanding of Pollock's modernist drip paintings is that there are no ideas at their center other than unpredictable outpourings of the unconscious. In other words; there are few concepts that give them coherence. However, examining the origins of his work will bring clarity to its complete structure, pre- and post- abstraction as well as the so-called "abstractions" themselves. This book will thus challenge the conventional view Pollock, as the expressive alcoholic, as a construct that incorporates the following:

1. That Pollock was such a disturbed character that his art came strictly out of his disturbance. In contrast, we will see that Pollock's illness was most probably *genetic* alcoholism and long-standing friends say he was quite normal when he did not drink and when he worked. In other words, Pollock did *not* drink when he painted and his paintings are thus limited, if any, in the effects of alcohol.

2. That his unconscious was just irrational and fantastic, period, and that it cannot and should not be interpreted. Rather, Pollock's "unconscious" was an intellectualized conception that he held and it was made up of parts that can be demonstrated and that give the viewer understanding. Some of the parts make up deliberate and intentional themes that have been discussed in my earlier book, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York:

Cambridge University Press, 1991). Michael Leja has also noted the deliberateness of the forms in Pollock's "unconscious" in his book *Reframing Abstract Expressionism/ Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), although Leja's concept indicates a pop psychologizing from general culture. In contrast, we will see that some of the elements of Pollock's idea of the unconscious include Jungian concepts, primitive rituals, shamanic processes, and cultural hopes.

3. That Pollock's art is thus only personal and subjective, about himself and his life. On the contrary, Pollock's art is a social and cultural art that addressed both himself and his world together. *The two cannot be separated.*

4. That Pollock's art and his persona as represented by friends, media, and the "movement" of Abstract Expressionism (mostly the Club with its de Kooning-centered bias and others) was about more than the coming of age of American modern art. We will show that it is about that coming of age, but not because of the understandings, or, indeed, misunderstandings of the Club. Rather, because those understandings half-represent the cultural change of America and the emergence of a new view of man that dominated and still does the intellectual life of the second half of twentieth century and beyond: "psychological man" and the "therapeutic state."

Pollock's art reflects a deep sociality; that is, it reflects its context. But it is not the conventionally understood context of newspaper headlines or his position on leftist critics' issues that are paraded as such as though he had a

newspaper in one hand talking of the Cold War and McCarthyism, and a drip can in the other. Pollock's context is more than the topical; it is the deeper issues that course through American society as a whole, and which precede and postdate the specific concerns of his time. The currents that make up Pollock's art and thought run throughout modernity and twentieth-century culture.

This study contains a minimum of biographic information. The artist's life has been well-covered in four biographies and the excellent chronologies of Francis V. O Connor. What has not been covered and what is the thesis of this book is that Pollock's biography with its emphasis on his alcoholism is of limited value in understanding his art. Pollock was intelligent, sophisticated and not simply an emotionally rent man when he painted and viewed art with his close friends. Let us consider his alcoholism.

### Pollock's Alcoholism

With a hospitalization in 1938, Pollock has made his emerging struggle with alcohol the dominant theme of his biography and criticism of his work. It was seen to be an evocation of his "personal failings" where turmoil and disorder are at the center. Yet Pollock's alcoholism has seldom been investigated in any serious way. Fundamental questions as to its nature, causes, duration, and effects have been assumed but not studied. For example, was Pollock's drinking an indication of alcoholism or rather alcohol abuse? It has always been assumed to be the former but the latter shares

many symptoms with alcoholism. Someone who abuses alcohol without actually being an alcoholic is someone who drinks too much and too often but still is not dependent on alcohol; that is, he can do without it at times. Pollock could do without it. Further, like alcoholics, those who abuse alcohol also cannot meet work or family responsibilities, are involved in drunk-driving incidents and arrests, never mind car crashes, and suffer drinking-related medical conditions. For such a person, even social or moderate drinking is dangerous. Thus, Pollock's drinking could have been alcohol abuse. However, the traditional assumption seems to be true: Pollock was an alcoholic or, at least, he exhibited most of its four symptoms.

The first of these is a craving or strong compulsion or need to drink. Pollock seems to have displayed such a compulsion from his youth. When he originally traveled to Martha's Vineyard as a young man to summer with Thomas Hart Benton in the 1930s, he never made it. He got drunk and was put in jail before he arrived at Benton's home. When he was hospitalized at Bloomingdale's Hospital in Westchester, New York in 1938, he was only twenty-six. And, of course, we have the incidents of drinking throughout the 1940s, which became worse in the 1950s. Obviously, Pollock had a compulsion to drink.

Secondly, alcoholism (and alcohol abuse) means an inability to limit one's drinking on any occasion. However, the hospitalization at Bloomingdale's in 1938 and the subsequent four years of Jungian psychotherapy followed by other medical efforts such as homeopathy in the

1950s are indications that Pollock was trying to control his drinking. In fact, he tried to stop drinking completely and was moderately successful at doing so during the late 1940s, the period of his “classic” drip paintings. Yet, over his truncated lifetime – he died at forty-four years of age in 1956 -- he was not able to give alcohol up.

Thirdly, alcoholism means a physical dependency evident in nausea and anxiety when the drinking stops. Much has been made of Pollock's anxieties and depressions -- over his alcohol, over an alleged competition with Picasso, over professional success. Pollock was an anxious man but there are no stories of imminent great physical effects such as nausea, sweating, and the like after he stopped his drinking. This suggests that he was not a complete alcoholic or alcohol abuser.

And, fourthly, another symptom of alcoholism or alcohol abuse is the need for ever greater amounts of alcohol in order to get a buzz. This may be a symptom of increased tolerance. Pollock seems to have drunk in quantity but how he did so is unknown. We will discuss this presently.

Whether as an alcoholic or an abuser of alcohol, Pollock displayed the classic alcoholic's capacity to endanger himself or others from an early age. There were many incidents that demonstrate this: not only with Benton and at Bloomingdale's, not only with the famous incident of Pollock's turning over a turkey-and-fixing-laden Thanksgiving table in 1950 after Hans Namuth finished filming him, and his motoring down the East Side Drive in New York while drunk. Another, sadly, is the best known -- the killing of himself and a

young woman, Edith Metzger, who had come to visit him on Long Island.

Metzger was a friend of Pollock's lover Ruth Kligman. If Pollock had survived, he probably would have been tried for vehicular manslaughter, never mind DWI (although laws were not as stiff at that time, no pun intended) and sentenced to jail, if not sued to extinction. That his drinking led to a motor vehicle crash is frequently considered one of the worse but predictable consequences of heavy drinking. It is repeatedly cited in studies as a standard indication of alcoholism as well as alcohol abuse. Interestingly, though, despite generalities about Pollock and "violence," there is no other known example of Pollock physically hurting someone while drunk, nor is there much evidence of his fighting with others. Yet, no doubt Pollock exhibited the "rock-bottom" behavior that characterizes alcoholism.

Interestingly, too, continuing drinking usually leads to or expands relationship problems. In this case, however, Pollock had Krasner, who was famously able to deal with his alcoholic squalls. As she said, "think of it as a storm that will pass." Throughout their relationship and marriage (1942-1956) her strength and support appears to have been simply extraordinary and there is no evidence of Pollock's physical abuse of her. When the marriage did begin to disintegrate in the 1950s shortly before his death, he had at least two affairs neither of which could stem the tide as Krasner had -- the larger one with Kligman, and an earlier shorter one with the new art dealer Grace Borgenicht. He drank even more during these times.



Alcohol often causes premature death and destruction of organs such as the brain, liver, and heart as well as other traumatic events. Pollock seems to have brought at least some of these on himself. The autopsy report at his death may suggest possible cirrhosis. Liquor can cause brain damage, too, as it may have with his colleague Willem de Kooning.

In America, currently, nearly 14 million Americans -- one out of 13 adults -- abuse alcohol or are alcoholic. Several million more adults engage in risky drinking including continuously heavy and binge drinking. Furthermore, fifty-three percent of men and women in the United States report that one or more of their close relatives have a drinking problem according to National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Ultimately, almost ninety-five percent of untreated alcoholics die of alcoholism. Percentages were probably the same in Pollock's era --- or worse, for alcohol was the drug of choice of his generation.

Beginning with his hospitalization and recurrently throughout his life, Pollock tried to cut down on his drinking. He tried treatment, psychological analysis and pills. Obviously, he felt anxious and guilty. (It is not clear that these feelings existed before he drank or after.) Given that, however, several questions arise. Why did he not stop? His family and friends as well as the culture of the 1950s supposedly knew why. He suffered from moral weakness or internal problems that caused him to drink. This is the standard explanation for Jackson Pollock's difficulties *and* for his work which, because he said art came from the unconscious, has assumed that his drinking was the

result of personal problems. Such a view privileges the unconscious as the explanation.

The idea of the unconscious thus took the form of Pollock's personal behavior. For example, Pollock was alleged to have had problems because of his mother. Lee Krasner asserted this in 1967 when she said she assumed in the early 1940s that Pollock's drinking was associated with "his mother's arrival."<sup>v</sup> This explanation has been repeated constantly. And when thinking in the 1950s made personal problems the largest interpretation of psychology, that is, when the Freudian theory that childhood explained everything was almost universally embraced, this explanation became fixed. Pollock's problem with alcohol would forever be a question of his family problems -- and the reason for his interest in the unconscious, too. This is a limited, if not clichéd, view. I am reminded of an episode in the television sitcom *Frasier* when Niles Crane, his brother, hosts Frasier's radio program. Both men are psychiatrists. He tells listeners that "while my brother is a Freudian, I am a Jungian, so there'll be no blaming mother tonight." Niles Crane gets the pop cant that "blaming mother" is. And after fifty years, nothing much more substantial has convincingly been advanced regarding Pollock, leading one to realize that after all this time, no one really knows what "caused" Pollock's drinking, if "caused" is the right word.

Today, however, we think of alcoholism differently. It is no longer looked upon strictly as a question of moral or personal psychological failing issuing from the unconscious but as a chronic disease with genetic and environmental

factors influencing its development. Significantly, alcoholism is now considered an addiction and an involuntary disability. It is estimated that genetic factors lie behind up to forty per cent of hard drinking and environmental factors account for the rest. It was revealed recently that the artist's father, Leroy Pollock, an alcoholic, moved Pollock on the path of drinking to excess so, in one sense, Pollock physically inherited his habit. His brother Frank, too, was an alcoholic.<sup>vi</sup> Yet I asked Jason McCoy, a surviving nephew and son of Jackson's brother Sande, this question and he related that his father did not drink much while raising him, although that was after Jackson was dead.<sup>vii</sup> Of his earlier life with Jackson and the rest of the family, we know little, although Jackson did drink with his close friend Reuben Kadish.

Alcoholism is a patho-physiologic state that is progressive and fatal. That is, it is a disease and Pollock's behavior expressed its classic symptoms: impaired control, or the inability to limit alcohol use, the quantity consumed, and the adverse behavioral consequences of drinking. Pollock was physiologically addicted to drink and could only periodically withdraw. It was unlikely as thinking in the fifties had it, and art criticism has had it ever since, to be a failure of willpower due to psychic "problems." In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, some alcoholism is newly being addressed with a patch on the arm rather than a visit to the analyst.

Yet, aside from this fifties' fashion, we can return to the fourth symptom of alcoholism here – tolerance, or rather intolerance, of drink. It has always

been simply assumed but never much discussed what kind of drunk Pollock was. However, we have the beginnings of another possibility. The critic Clement Greenberg, who knew Pollock well, has made telling remarks about his particular nature as an alcoholic. In the biography of Greenberg by Florence Rubenfeld, for which she interviewed him often, Greenberg is quoted as saying that Pollock was the most *radical* drunk he ever knew.<sup>viii</sup> And Greenberg himself drank heavily so that is a strong statement. But it became even stronger when, in conversation with me, Ms. Rubenfeld clarified the remark by saying what Greenberg meant, she said, was that he was the most radical because he went off after only one drink. In other words, rather than downing large amounts before he became inebriated, Pollock became drunk almost immediately and, as we know, shortly became incapacitated. That it took only one drink to become drunk means two possible things -- he had drunk so much over his lifetime that he needed little to go over the line (although this contradicts the experience of alcoholics who need more and more drink to get a reaction) or that Pollock had a powerful physiological reaction to drink. The former cases would not be unusual, but neither would the latter. In either case, it is evident that Pollock precipitously reacted to alcohol. He himself felt that his alcoholism was physical. He tried desperately to stop drinking throughout his life – he himself noted “medical treatments, analysis, chemistry, everything.”<sup>ix</sup> He told his friend Jeffrey Potter, “With me, it’s some kind of chemical derangement. Once my chemistry is figured out, alcohol will find its

own level. Anyway, I've proved I can do without it, can turn it on and off like a beer tap."<sup>x</sup>

Indeed, that Pollock had a physiological reaction to liquor only confirms the understanding of today's medicine -- that addiction to alcohol can be genetic and not a question of character or psychological weakness a la Freud, as the fifties preferred to believe. Compellingly, such a view undermines much of the traditional case of Pollock's alcoholism as a product of psychological problems. And with this weakening, it also substantially subverts the traditional interpretation of Pollock's art as only emanating from the unconscious of a troubled man. (Further study today has begun to indicate that drinking is a creative stimulus and not simply a depressant. As Winston Churchill said, "always remember that I have taken more out of alcohol than it has taken out me." That seems to be case with Pollock's colleagues such as de Kooning and others.)

It must be said that one does not want to over simplify or rather, turn from one "one and only" cause to another. Why people do things is in the end mostly unanswerable. No one perhaps can accurately unravel the relationship between the artist's personal life and his work. It is a little naïve and absurd to ascribe Pollock's artistic expression to his drinking. It is like saying that Churchill and Boris Yeltsin chose their policies based on their heavy drinking. Did Yeltsin have a few vodkas for breakfast and say let's invade Poland? For Pollock, drinking was an embarrassment and a distraction, not an artistic expressive choice. Pollock's art is more than episodes in his life. The idea that

he had to live a certain kind of life to make the art he did is false. While no doubt in his work because he was interested in the unconscious and he was an alcoholic he may do the unconscious in general terms, ultimately Pollock is doing a story and one can make a story of anything. Pollock's work shows distance from most things personal; instead it is about interiority in the broadest terms.

If Pollock's alcoholism was at least partly physical and not exclusively psychological, then the heavy emphasis on biography and on his personal subjective experience in the later American Freud- and therapy- saturated culture is thrown into question. Pollock's hospitalization and subsequent problems, then, can be considered possibly physical and not simply psychological. Indeed, he seems to fulfill the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's principle that "people who are not alcoholic sometimes do not understand why an alcoholic can't just 'use a little willpower' to stop drinking . . . alcoholism has little to do with willpower. Alcoholics are in the grip of a powerful 'craving,' or 'uncontrollable need, for alcohol that overrides their ability to stop drinking. This need can be as strong as the need for food or water" and Pollock reached this point even with one drink.

Besides an incurable desire to drink that was at least as physical as psychological, Pollock also had an environmental impetus, too. Pollock's culture encouraged him to drink. Interestingly, his wife Lee was not an alcoholic. However, we do know that most of his friends drank, as did most of the Abstract Expressionists. Many of the latter were alcoholics, too, but no one

has been reported to be the radical drunk that Pollock was except for late de Kooning. There is no doubt then that Pollock had a primary, chronic disease with genetic, physiological and environmental factors influencing its development and manifestations.

Pollock's allegedly psychological alcoholism, however, can also be delimited by the realization that, according to Kadish and Lee Krasner, there is no evidence that he was inebriated while working.<sup>xi</sup> That is, he was "normal" when he painted. Alcoholism can prevent one from working, but it did not prevent Pollock. His artistic career was remarkably productive before the end with one one-man show after another. And not only was he productive, but he was responsible when not drinking. This is attested to by many people, e.g., Betty Parsons, his future dealer, who said he was never drunk in her gallery (in the 1950s!). Indeed, his friends, particularly his lifelong friends such as Kadish and Harold Lehman, describe an artist and a man with whom it was fun to go to galleries, see shows and talk about art. Pollock could talk when and with whom he wanted. For example, Holger Cahill, WPA director and husband of Dorothy Miller, would visit Springs, Long Island, Pollock's home, and they would talk for hours. Cahill had a demanding intellect and their long talks meant that Pollock could converse in depth. Pollock was articulate and did not drink all the time, despite the "romance of despair" lore. Kirk Varnedoe, late curator of The Museum of Modern Art, summed it writing that the person who emerged on his canvases was antithetical and more complex than the person who comes to us in fragmentary and clichéd sagas of binges at the Cedar Bar

and resulting wild and heedless spontaneous painting. Perhaps the relationship between painting and drinking can be summed up in remarks by his friend Kadish. Kadish said, "Every artist is carried away when the work takes over, and when that happens, it's pretty exhilarating I can tell you one that thing that he rarely, if ever, worked when he was drunk. When he drank, he drank, and when he worked, he worked. That was one of the things I can truthfully say. His drinking was a full-time job when it took place, that was his prime performance occupation."<sup>xii</sup>

All of these elements -- his radical response to alcohol, the possible physical source of it, and the normal behavior elsewhere suggest that his art is more than the personal ravings and fears of a disturbed man -- the "idiot savant" of lore. Rather it is the product of a man and artist harmed by his drug culture and experience but still capable of functioning normally, much if not most, of the time. How "normally" he functioned was described by his brother Charles, who said of Pollock in this period that "he knew all the issues." He knew all of them and he painted them. His art is a representation of the issues intensified and strengthened by a disability. This book concentrates on the issues and not on the romance of the disability.

Just as Pollock's alcoholism has been celebrated, so have his cultural responses to it and the issue of 1937-38 -- that is, to the depth psychology of Carl G. Jung. Let's look at his encounter with psychology and analysis at this time.



### Pollock's Psychotherapy

In 1939, Pollock entered the care of a Jungian analyst, Dr. Joseph Henderson, who treated the artist for more than a year before departing for San Francisco in 1940. A second Jungian, Dr. Violet Staub de Laszlo, then took over care of Pollock until 1941. Such care reflected Pollock's trouble with alcohol but it was also indicative of the emergence of psychotherapy and Jungian thought and its themes on the American scene. Indeed, it is also indicative of the emergence of the dominant figure in American culture in the last half of the twentieth century, "psychological man." Pollock's statements in 1944 and 1947 that the source of art was the unconscious declares his commitment to that man and that epochal belief.

Nevertheless, with this decision, Pollock seems to have devoted himself to depth psychology. Today, we can no longer be so sure about the usefulness of making that commitment. As alcoholism may be genetically and not simply personally induced, the assumption under which Pollock entered therapy no longer holds, either. Indeed, the solution for his drinking – psychotherapy – is equally uncertain today. Despite the fact that "the talking cure" was Pollock's choice and that of the era and culture that first discovered him -- the forties and fifties – and of the milieu that has long affirmed him, the art world, today psychotherapy is not the certain force it was once thought to be.

That Pollock saw psychotherapy as a way to understand, heal and transform his personal alcoholic tendency has largely been taken for granted for fifty years by scholars and critics because, in one sense, the art world is a very therapeutized one. Even though in the 1980s, the individual was “Theorized” out of existence for an emphasis on capitalist social forces – a recapitulation of the Marxist-Leninism view of the 1930s -- much of the art “class” still assumed that individual behavior can be explained by personal history. Furthermore, because Pollock also believed at the very beginning of his therapy that art comes from the unconscious, it has also been assumed that he thought his alcoholism and his art would be challenged by its investigation. But as we have seen, contemporary thought does not see these as so directly related.

Recent historical investigation supports the loss of confidence in the more unexamined assumptions of the decades, of Pollock’s life, and of his class, of an unconscious shaped by the simply personal and private. First, depth psychology, that is, Freudian and Jungian thought, the dominant conceptions of his time, is no longer considered the pure “science” its practitioners, or at least the Freudian art world, thought it to be. As with Marxism, confidence today in Freud is seen as a period piece of the twentieth century as its premises, processes and methods have been called into question and its conclusions have been shown to be false. In the 1990s, the popular *Time* magazine ran a cover story that asked in its leading manner – “Is Freud Dead?” and indeed Freud’s work has been challenged in the heart of

therapeutic New York on the very pages of *The New York Review of Books*.

Scholars republishing the complete collected works of Freud now treat Freudian thought as perceptive, insightful, and useful creative fiction and not much more.<sup>xiii</sup> From women's criticism of his grasp of their lives and motivations, to the sexual explanations of human behavior, to the flip-flopping of desire from adult to children in the specter of the Oedipal complex, to his emphasis on childhood at the expense of adulthood, Freudian psychology no longer holds sway as it did in Pollock's time. Even its general methods – the therapeutic technique of “suggestion” and the trust in memories or free association led by a guru, the therapist, are doubtful. Jung's fundamental conception, too, of shared archetypes or the collective unconscious, the centerpiece of his psychology, is held by few in contemporary society.

Furthermore, of course, it is now recognized that neither Jung nor Freud “discovered” the unconscious as the latter claimed. Instead, they gave a new look, structure and process to something very ancient – the tradition of inwardness that had persisted in the West for centuries.<sup>xiv</sup> In this cultural process, thinkers became aware of man's own faculty of consciousness and then balanced it by inferring a different realm for man's motivations. One can go back to the Greeks for awareness that rational consciousness does not cover all feelings and actions. One can also go to Galen, to St. Augustine, Meister Eckhardt, Paracelsus and Jakob Boeheme, as did Jung and the surrealists, to recognize that the psychic will was a source of human action that was natural and vitalistic and that was to be found, by Boeheme for example, “underneath”

rather than “above.” Shakespeare, too, wrote in *Troilus and Cressida*, “My mind is troubled, like a fountain stirr’d; And I myself see not the bottom of it.” He also wrote in *Midsummer’s Night Dream* that “lovers and madmen have such seething brains, such shaping fantasies, that apprehend more than cool reasons ever comprehend.” For all his restriction of science to the math of a stationary universe, Newton saw the realm of creation, formation, and history as the direct expression of what he considered to be the divine powers of the mind. Shaftsbury, too, saw a forming power pervading everything: matter, life and mind, and according to Leibniz: “our clear concepts are like islands which arise above the ocean of obscure ones.” The result of this longstanding Western tradition is that the idea of the unconscious as a mental process in many of its aspects was conceivable around 1700, topical around 1800 and effective around 1900. Indeed, As Von Hartmann’s powerful *Philosophy of the Unconscious* of 1868 indicates, the idea and very word of the “unconscious” was commonplace by Freud’s time. As a contemporary of Freud, W.M. Mundt held that our proper activity is the unconscious and he was keenly interested in an unconscious creative synthesis: “This unconscious mind is for us like an unknown being who creates and produces for us, and finally throws the ripe fruits in our lap.” Most of the aspects of modern psychological theory were thus in place by the twentieth century before Freud and Jung – the irrational, the greater power and potential of inner life, the independence of unconscious purpose, the possible “divineness” of inner, renewing force and the profound secrecy of it all. As Montaigne believed, each man was recognized as carrying

within himself the entire potentiality of the human condition. He simply had to realize it from within.

Ultimately, too, critics today understand psychotherapy as part of the intellectual, cultural and personal landscapes of its makers, that is, psychology is now understood as historically created and historically sited rather than the discovery of ahistorical, timeless principles always the same and always equally applied to everyone through therapy. Indeed, in its long march in the twentieth century, psychology has acquired principles strongly dependent on time and place. There are many psychologies now from Freud and Jung to William Reich to Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan and each has its period culture that posits beliefs as the true functioning of the unconscious.<sup>xv</sup> As one would expect, theoretical infighting was and is the nature of the world of psychology. Beginning ca. 1913 (and still today), Freudians and Jungians have frequently dismissed each other's psychologies. Today, the landscape and dismissals are wider and more numerous.

Additionally, the kinds of Freudian and Jungian psychologies have changed. In the 1950s and 1960s, Freudian psychoanalysts ruled. For many, it was fashionable to be psychoanalyzed several times a week. Today, such psychiatry has almost disappeared, replaced by widespread shorter and easier therapies of various kinds and combinations in America. Jungian theory mainly survives in popularity in forms of personal growth and self-help, even in New Age thinking.

There is thus a history to the nature, use and principles of psychology and it is this history that impacted on Pollock's art and on the expectations of its reception. Pollock's concept of psychotherapy was a product of his time and his understanding. Ironically, Pollock began his therapy in one age, the late 1930s and 1940s, when psychology had a role in cultural criticism; his work was interpreted in another, the 1950s, that is, when psychology had reverted mostly to personal analysis—with one significant exception to be discussed below. In the former period, Jungian therapy reached its height among the American creative elites and establishment and in the latter, in the 1950s Freudian therapy and interpretation became a “must” as the psychologically damaged individual became all the rage.

Partly because of the many distraught or “combat fatigued” veterans, psychologized damaged individuals became the heroes of the postwar period. Hollywood, for example, produced the first wounded heroes such as Montgomery Clift and James Dean. These leading men played mostly tormented figures throughout their work. In Dean's “Rebel without a Cause,” in good Freudian etiology, he shouts at his father that he is “tearing him apart.” Before the war, few Hollywood leading men had internal problems no matter how good or bad their behavior: neither James Cagney, James Stewart, Clark Gable nor Gary Cooper was ever so “torn apart.” After the war, things were different even for a hero such as Stewart. In the late 1930s and 1940s, the played innocents; later his roles become more troubled, querulous, torn between confidence and vulnerability, and in conflict with himself.<sup>xvi</sup> The

heroization of internal turmoil and the subsequent popularization of private and biographical etiologies thus came to dominate much of the late 1940s and 1950s.

Very significantly for America, this heroization even appeared and became a centerpiece of social causes before the Supreme Court such as the great decision to end school segregation (*Brown vs. the Board of Education*) because segregation was argued to be psychologically harmful to African-American children. Thus, in the postwar period, subjectivist, privatizing Freudian psychology became popularized throughout society and not just among the elite, initiating the emergence of the therapeutic state -- and “psychological man” -- that rules America today, the implication of which we will discuss later.

In Pollock’s lifetime, the fifties Freudianized a Jungian artist, as well as valorizing drink and sex as liberating forces.<sup>xvii</sup> In other words, as noted, the original, romanticized personal history explanation of Pollock as virtually *the* tormented individual is very fifties. Ironically, surrealism, a strong influence in American art in the early 1940s was also similarly Freudianized, that is, treated as largely about personal life, dreams, feelings and the unconscious. As with Pollock’s art, surrealism was much more – it was an assault on the value and valor of Western civilization – and it used Freudian psychology as one among many of its means. In other words, as with Abstract Expressionism as a whole, surrealism was cultural criticism. We will discuss the historical nature and social uses of psychology and surrealism below.

This book thus breaks with the standard Pollock narrative. With a view of Pollock as a symbolic artist with a meaningful repertoire, there are several important challenges to the traditional view of the spontaneous, irrational artist. *It is important to note that Pollock did not say that his art was a product of his unconscious but that art was. That is, his view of the unconscious is more detached and distant than has traditionally been interpreted. Conventionally, the art literature has been written as if Pollock were defining his art as his psychological autobiography. The art world has always assumed it was about himself and treated it that way. But his defining statement is that art in general, and not “my art,” comes from “my” unconscious. It is the fifties that made Pollock’s use subjective and personal not Pollock. We shall discuss this later. Further, he offered no working definition of the unconscious so that it was defined by critics not by him. As we shall see, “the source of art being the unconscious” opened up a Pandora’s Box of speculation that has never subsided.*

Another challenge is his titles. In this book, it will become evident that Pollock wanted his work to mean something and what that meaning was evident in his titles. In other words, he had subjects beyond the “unconscious.” In a classic example, the painting *Pasiphae* of 1943 was originally entitled “Moby Dick.” However, when the art critic, museum director and future friend of Pollock, James Johnson Sweeney, saw the painting in artist’s studio, he told Pollock that it brought to mind the legend of Pasiphae. In response, Pollock then changed the title. This change has been cited by critics who prefer the notion that Pollock worked from the unknowable unconscious so that his titles



were irrelevant and thus not indicative of a legible meaning. Meaning was not supposed to be specific also because Pollock would hold titling sessions after his paintings were finished in which titles for his work would be suggested by friends. Yet the fact that that many of Pollock's paintings were titled in sessions with friends does not say much about what went on. Did friends assert a title and Pollock passively accept it without a word, or was there give and take with the friend or friends? Or did Pollock suggest something on his own and his friends bat it back and forth? Did he mull over the suggestions and decide at a later date? The traditional understanding of Pollock's titling sessions implies almost total alcoholic passivity on his part and thus the irrelevance of the titles, but we do not know that to be true. Pollock was probably intimately involved with the titles, whether he initiated discussion or simply joined in a roundabout.

We can see this in the change of the title from *Moby Dick* to *Pasiphae*. The change indicated that Pollock did not initiate and make a complete painting with programmatic intent as his critics suggest but it does not indicate that the title was meaningless. *Indeed, the fact that he thought of his painting as first one subject – Moby Dick -- and then another – Pasiphae -- indicates that at least some point, he had a subject quickly arise in his mind of which he was aware and to which he held as a subject.* Indeed, he, nor anyone else, called the paintings "Mickey Mouse" or "Pepsi-Cola." The titles obviously had to relate to what was pictured. Most probably, Pollock simply appreciated the ability of others to verbalize more easily. Indeed, this fact was confirmed by

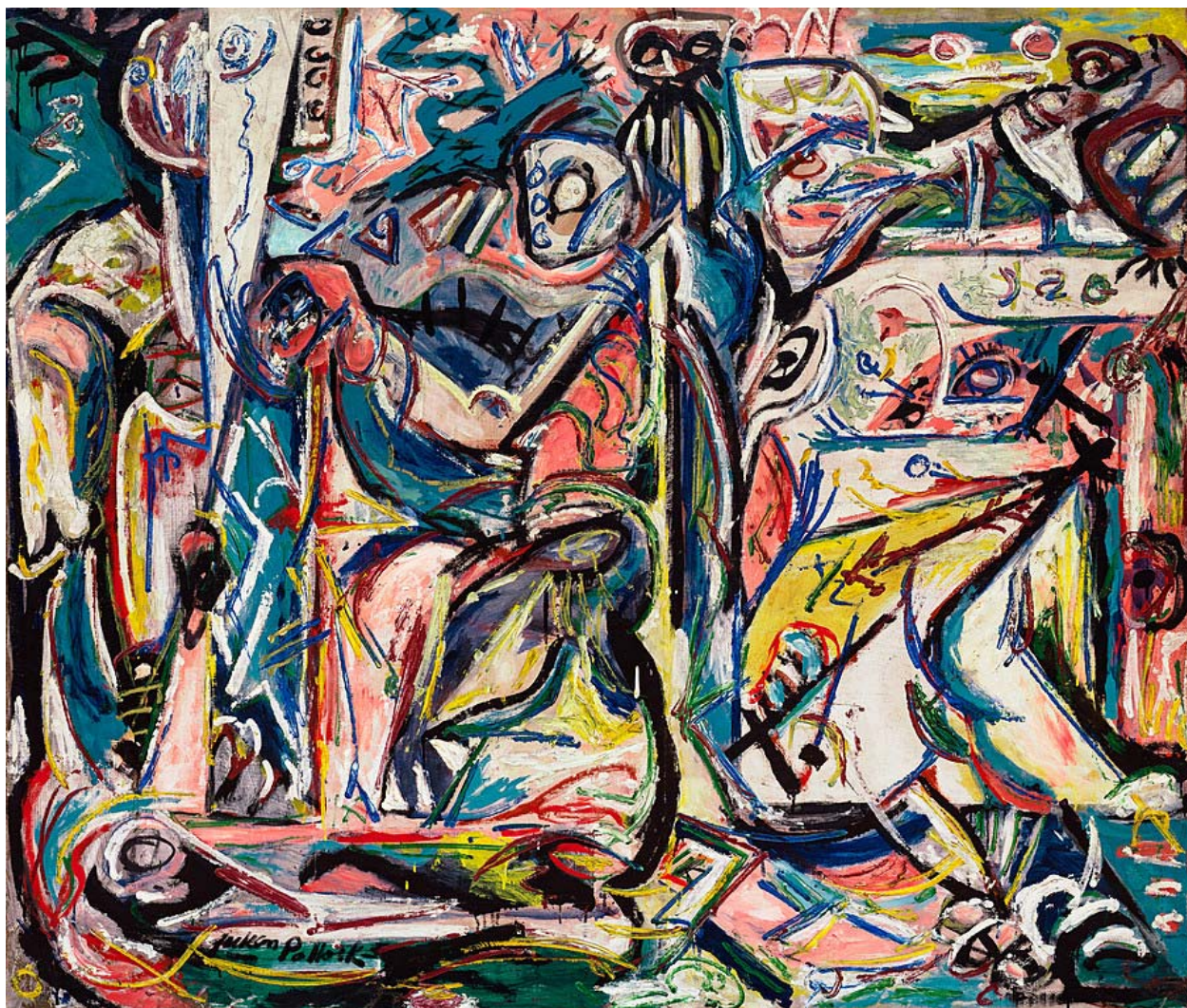
Lee Krasner in a telephone conversation with me in the summer of 1979. She noted that Pollock's titles "*had to agree with his thinking.*" That is common sense. Pollock would not accept a title that did not relate to his intentions and what he expressed and the subjects he addressed.

Rather than unrelated and thus to be ignored, the titles and subjects "Pasiphae" and "Moby Dick" actually address a theme that Pollock developed in his work – the struggle with one's "animal" nature. Melville's *Moby Dick* was rediscovered in the interwar period for many reasons, one of which was certainly the mad pursuit of Captain Ahab of the white whale that had injured him. Ahab's struggle with dangerous nature signified, in Pollock's parlance, his struggle to liberate a dangerous, but necessary, new force within. While different from "Moby Dick," "Pasiphae" obviously travels along the same path, for it alludes to the struggle of the Minoan Queen's mating with another powerful animal, the bull of the labyrinth, resulting in the birth of the Minotaur, half human and half animal. This is a myth that Pollock would readily embrace for it is about generation and the metamorphosis one of his most important subjects.

The incident of the renaming also tells us several other things. Titles come from the cultural complex that is Pollock's, and Abstract Expressionist, culture. Titles are verbal signs to and of that culture, leading the way to their thinking. In Pollock's case, there are a number of titles, such as "Birth" of 1941, that are his and they function as certain safe reference points to the Pollock's thought. No doubt some titles can be interchanged. Several titles are

possible for different works, but in the end, they always come from the matrix of his preoccupations, and the larger ideological structure of the era. As far as we know, Pollock normally began without programmatic intent, but at some point in his creative process he developed an idea of what he was about even if he asked for help in giving it a name. That someone like Sweeney could help with this tells us how widespread Pollock's and Abstract Expressionist culture was, and how Pollock wanted his painting to have a certain trajectory of meaning.

Perhaps whether the titles are relevant can be answered in Pollock's own words. In a discussion on March 6, 1981 of his painting entitled *Circumcision* of 1946 (fig. 1) with Lee Krasner related by Angelica Rudenstein, Pollock indicated the nature of his titles and thereby his titling process.



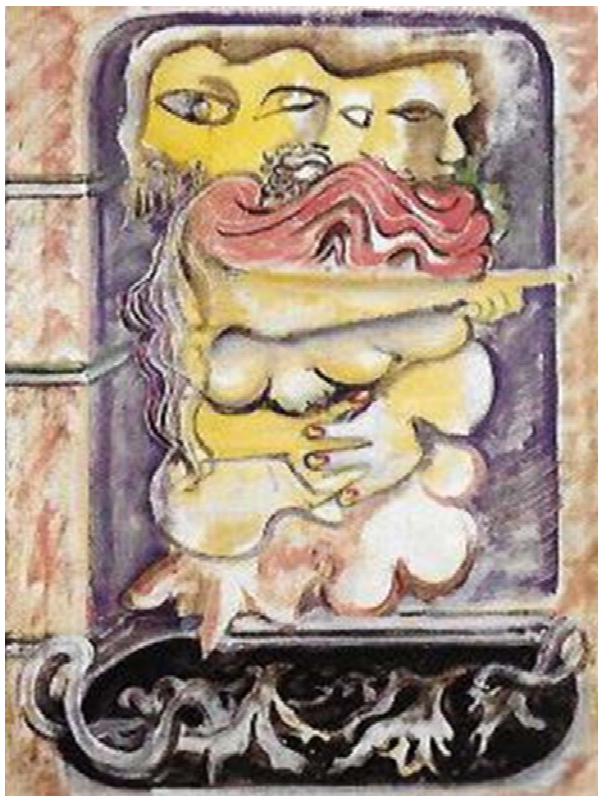
In response to a question as to how specific the title *Circumcision* was, Rudenstein cited Krasner's conversation about it with Pollock.

When he asked me to come and look at the painting with him, he said "What does it suggest to you? And I said "I honestly don't know, Jackson. The only thing that comes clearly to me is that's a ritual of some sort." It was following that, not instantly, but sometime later, that Pollock said: "What do you think of circumcision?" Gee, that's fine. That is how the painting got titled.

For Rudenstein, the conversation proves that Pollock's title was expofacto and very general. That is, her point is that Pollock's titles were not necessarily Jungian as his work was not either. That may or not be true. Examined closely, it is evident that *Circumcision* was inspired to a large degree by Orozco's lost *Man Struggling with Nature* of 1922 at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, in other words, it is a painting of ritual violence. "Circumcision" is a ritual ceremony, too -- of violent rebirth, that is, a ritual in keeping with Pollock's consistent work. And "circumcision" as an idea maybe even be Jungian but even more importantly, *the conversation indicates Pollock thinking about his titles, mulling them over and then choosing one that fits his sources and his orthodox subjects*. In other words, the titled painting *Circumcision* and the circumstances around its title indicate a rational, considered manner and the approach of someone thoughtful, deliberate and serious. Pollock's titles matter, they mattered to him and they are in accord with his thinking and they tell us what that is.

Further, despite the new visual language, Pollock and his colleagues were all unquestionably *symbolic* artists.<sup>xviii</sup> They all construct paintings of meaningful images and references. For example, if we look at a Rothko simply





titled *Untitled* of 1941-2 (fig. 2), we see, as in Pollock's painting, not irrational surrealist fantasy, but a carefully thought-through painting of an ancient Greek grave stele with multiple heads, sexes, and mortuary acanthus leaves, typical of Rothko's war-related "tragic" inventions. Similarly, surrealist work was once considered merely dream imagery. Recent study has indicated the opposite – well thought out and complex form and imagery. Pollock, Rothko, his colleagues and the surrealists all created symbolic paintings throughout the decade. This does not make them intense, literal iconographers, but rather mature adults who made deliberate, meaningful images whatever the depredations of the "unconscious."

Some critics portrayed Pollock painting as tight, piece-by-piece programmatic narrative. I see it as consisting of loosely federated, associate images that add up to *sense*, and not simply unconscious fantasies or “private myths,” as modernists have it. The critic has to look *hard* at the work.

When their work allegedly becomes “abstract,” it has been taken to suggest that there is not even irrational symbolism in it. This is also mistaken. Rothko put it well. In a key statement that puts into words this “change” that took place from the semi-figurative early work of all Abstract Expressionists to the more “abstract” later work, Rothko said of his new work in a letter in 1945 to fellow Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman, “I have assumed for myself the problem of further concretizing my symbols, which give me many headaches but make work rather exhilarating. Unfortunately, we can’t think these things out with finality, but must endure a series of stumblings toward a clearer issue.”<sup>xix</sup> For Rothko “concretizing his symbols” meant making them more pictorial, that is more painterly in form and color. And representative of all of the first generation Abstract Expressionists, Rothko went from fields of semi-figurative forms to those of color, plane and brushstroke in 1945-8. In other words, the artists were able to find new pictorial means for their ideas without simply dumping those earlier ideas, as the fifties generation and subsequent critics have fatally believed. Indeed, the ideographic or pictographic, a decisive concept in all Abstract Expressionists’ work, consists of the *pictorial* realization of an idea. In the end, one can rename the art, both

early and late, more accurately as “*Pictographic*” rather than “*Abstract*” *Expressionism*.

This book will put Pollock into words. I have no doubt that I use more words than he, that I who make a living verbalizing will verbalize his symbols and ideas from his culture. I am expounding and expanding on his suggestions, for example, the shamanic form of solarization in CRIII: 549 (fig. 3) \*



or the little noticed pictographic baby in the womb in the drawing CRIII: 402 of 1938-41 or the painting *She-Wolf* of 1943. But in these works, as in all his work, the bottom line is that there are images and forms heretofore unnoticed and unexplicated.

\*For Pollock's titles I am following the procedures laid down by Francis O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw in Jackson Pollock: *A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings*,



*Drawings and Other Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). For example, those titles that are documented to be Pollock's appear without brackets. Bracketed titles have not been given to the works by Pollock but by O'Connor and Thaw in their Catalogue. Works with titles enclosed in parentheses are also not Pollock's but have become standard in usage. For works other than paintings, I list them as CR, the volume, and the number.

Pollock may not have been a master of words in this way, he may not have been erudite but as we shall see, he, along with his entire generation, was informed and thoughtful with ideas. We will see this imminently in his so-called abstractions which concretize his concepts.

### *The Pictographic Expressionism of the Figured Webs*

Before we begin our study, let us see the conceptual, symbolic Pollock immediately. Let us leap forward to a discussion of his greatest and most difficult to interpret work – the drippings – and their alleged existential nothingness as the 1950s would have it.

Once Pollock famously said that his pictures were figurative some of the time including his abstractions. He also said he “veiled” the image, which was generally taken to refer the pre-1947 work.<sup>xx</sup> Recently some evidence has been advanced for the veiling of his images in his “abstractions.” Because of the new possibilities created by computers, the scholar Pepe Karmel has ingeniously analyzed the new information of Namuth's photographs and films. Through photo composites of several stages of Pollock's abstractions, he has suggested a much more complicated construction with *some of Pollock's earlier symbolic*,

*conceptual images and previous pictographic figures laced in and through, that is, integrated and fused with his seemingly abstract webs.*<sup>xxi</sup>

Originally, the photos and film released by the photographer, Hans Namuth, of Pollock painting in 1950 appeared to give evidence that his work was pure “abstraction.” No figures were thought to be visible and the photos seemed to show a mode of construction that moved directly from a blank canvas to a dense web. We now know that the process was not as simple as that. Namuth published only a selection of still photos on limited sections of the canvases, out of chronological order and often those from the finish rather than from the beginning of Pollock’s painting. Additionally, he widely released only his 1951 color and not his earlier 1950 black and white film to the public. It indicated that he worked with figures. Consequently, Pollock’s paintings were interpreted by scholars as a blank canvas with abstract lines dripped and poured on them, as “unconscious” fantasies created in a “ritual”-like dance. The result was that the *traditional understanding of Pollock’s work and, indeed, Abstract Expressionism as a whole, can be conceived as the distinctive “Namuth” era.*

However, Namuth’s photos and popularly available color film have only told part of the story. Through access to all the still photos and all Namuth’s contact sheets, Karmel deduced a different sequence of creation. Together with black and white film and the still shots, all enhanced by new computer techniques, we have a clearer and more informed idea of how Pollock built his classic paintings.

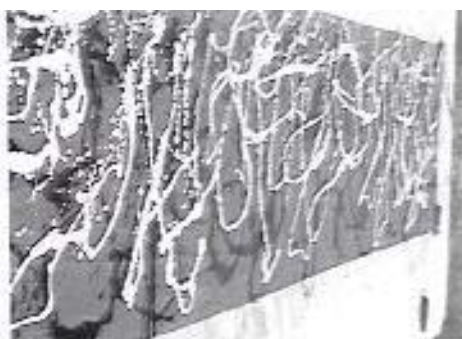
For example, Karmel discusses a sequence in the black and white film, Pollock's initiation of the painting that would be the abstraction *Number 27, 1950* at the Whitney Museum of American Art (fig. 4).



Pollock began the work with a round-headed figure (which I would identify as a bird, a frequent Pollock image), and a dog or, more likely, a she-wolf with teats, much like the painting of that name and some drawings of the same subject of 1943 (placed parallel to the bird figure). These are drawn in black; their lines reinforced with splotches and splats, and then reworked again, the whole process ultimately transforming *a collection of separate and independent symbolic, pictographic figures* (my italics) into a single allover composition. Occasionally, Pollock filled an empty space in the composition with a sideways stroke that seems to shoot outward from the existing figurative cluster as if it had been part of it. Then he covered it. It is only after this start that the painting became a composition unified by a consistent rhythm of dark and light, thick and thin lines and planes extending across its surface. So Pollock

began this work as a *figurative* composition that was subsequently veiled by additional colors, lines and splats applied in a regular rhythm throughout. To an extent, such new evidence undermines sixty years of thinking about Pollock's abstractions. It also contradicts a consensus that Pollock's veiling of the figure was limited to his pre-1947 work, as his approach was figurative throughout his life.

Other newly enhanced and perceptually corrected views in the color film reveal, on a now-lost red canvas, a step-by-step evolution from bare canvas to complex web in which we have a clear view of Pollock's combination of kinetic



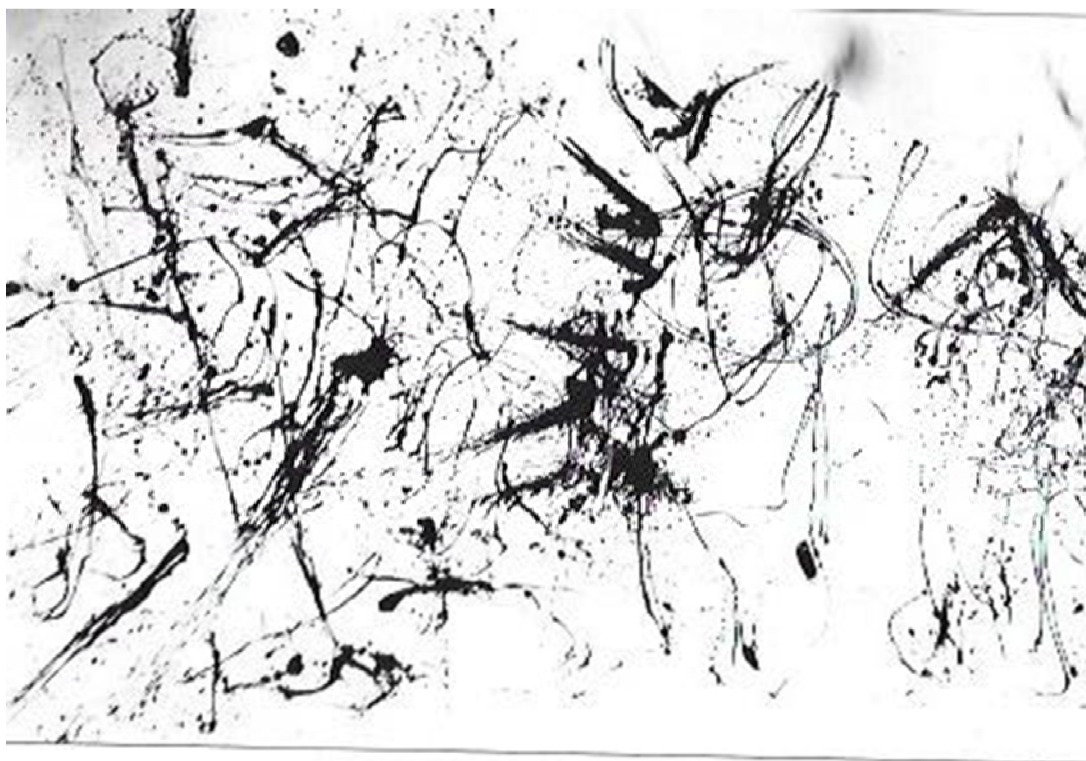
freedom and formal control (fig. 5).

In this

painting, a row of lambda-like shapes lie at the border between pictographic and abstract marks, a linear web enclosing the forms like Pollock's *White Cockatoo* or *Summertime: Number 9A: 1948*. Then the black web is covered with a series of silver forms, overlapping but distinct. There are several campaigns of painting with the direction being from figuration to abstract elaboration and then back again. So Karmel concludes that there is no straight evolution but an *alternation* between the two modes of image making. (There is also a stop- and-start form of working, not so much visible in the Namuth films

and photos but revealed in notes by Krasner to the former curator of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, E.A. Carmean, Jr. <sup>xxii</sup>)

Karmel further shows that Pollock began at the right edge (and not with the total surface) of *Autumn Rhythm*, with a complex configuration of lines made not by dripping but by a stick/brush held stiffly dripping above the canvas. Several other separate figures were also begun, as we see in a computer-enhanced, composite photo (fig. 6).



Pictographic figures are lined up in a row, with the spaces between them beginning to be filled in, sometimes with splats, or linearly elaborated into new forms such as a horse's head and neck. The composition ultimately resembles *Number 22A, 1948* and related horizontal, pictographic figural arrangements. (Through computer enhancement, Karmel points out a linear row in the great



*One: Number 31, 1950.*) Particularly in the later stages, the figures are hard to see because they merge into a semiabstract and semi-representational web. Not only did Pollock not create his so-called abstractions, then, as a simple, linear figure to abstraction mode, he originally did not knit together a multiplicity of near-identical abstract, pictorial elements repeating themselves, as Clement Greenberg suggested.<sup>xxiii</sup>

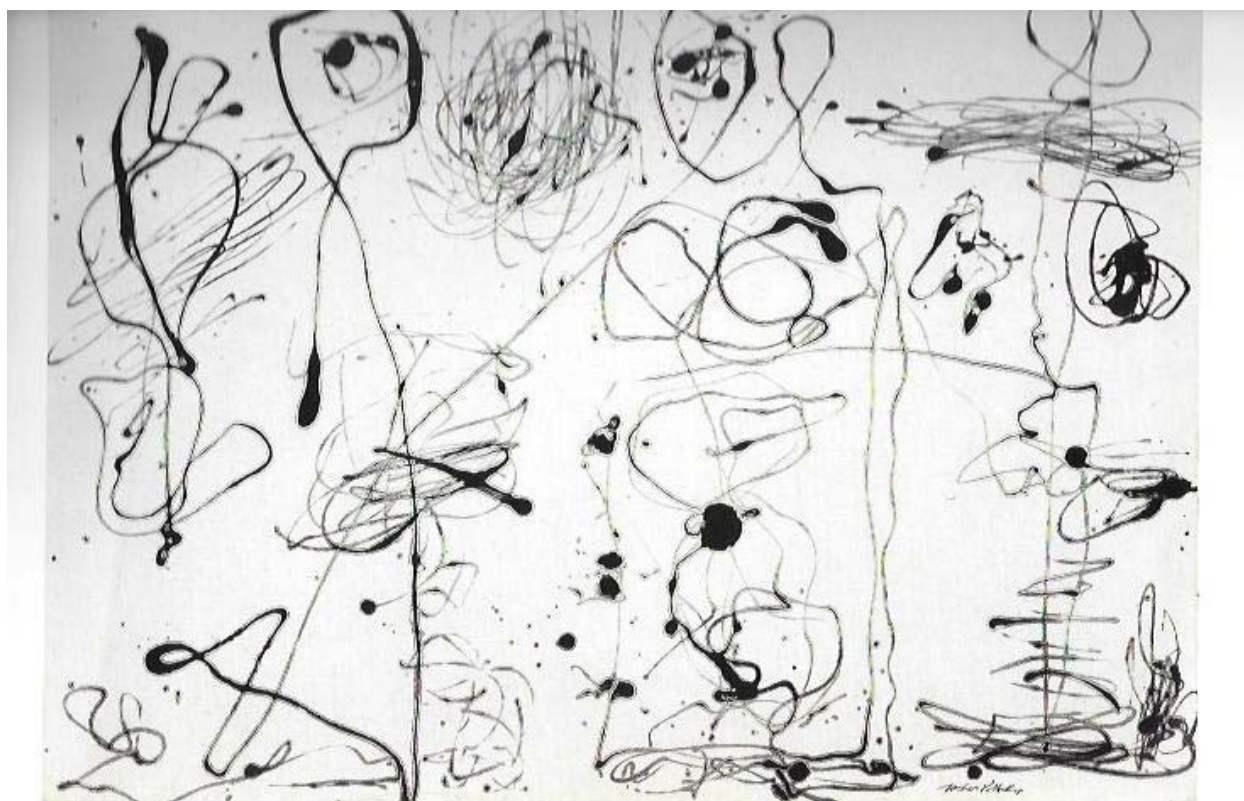
Rather, Pollock's "abstractions" – one can use quotation marks – are *figured* webs, not pure webs. They are figured either at the beginning, in the middle, and/or at the end. Karmel then asks: why? C.L. Wysuph wrote that he worked as he did to veil his inmost struggles,<sup>xxiv</sup> but Karmel points out that Pollock had painted struggling figures quite specifically. Karmel suggests a structural reason – the figures are inserted to add form and structure to an abstract web that would otherwise tend toward monotony and homogeneity. In this, Pollock's paintings echo the diagrammatic schemas of Thomas Hart Benton (figs. 7).



(Pollock's lambda is a concision of the "figures" in the Benton diagram. Pollock has thus not only drawn on Benton's compositional schema for dynamic

abstract composition, as I wrote in 1979, but on the dynamic structure of the figures, too.) Significantly, in *Autumn Rhythm*, a central lambda-like head and figure is composed of curves and counter curves derived from Benton's diagrams. Karmel believes that these figurative complexes are self-contained rhythmic configurations joined at their edge and overlaid.

Quickly, however, one further recognizes how familiar the figures in Pollock's abstractions such as *Autumn Rhythm* really are and for what *conceptual* reason they are there. It is for the subject they represent. In the clearest composite of *Autumn Rhythm*, we see at the left the pole figure that Karmel compared to that of *Number 22A, 1948* (fig. 8).



It faces, significantly, to the right. That figure was surrounded immediately

with a spray of black dots and a tracery of long interlacing lines filling empty spaces. This linear figure and the spray, however, are already known as the linear figure from *Burning Landscape* of 1943. In the latter painting, Pollock surrounded a long vertebrate or “pole” figure with splats. That he did so, too, in *Autumn Rhythm* confirmed his statement that *Burning Landscape* was a breakthrough painting for him.<sup>xxv</sup> This statement seems odd until we now see that he composes his abstractions with this figure and its ecstatic environment, suggesting that the figures are there for more than structural reasons. For the moment, let us call the figure a “celebrant” as it faces inward toward the center as many figures do in Pollock’s work. Why he is celebrant is the subject of this book and Pollock’s imagery.

To the second figure in *Autumn Rhythm*, Pollock added looping lines to what appears to be an upturned head or chest upturned. Next to that figure is another upturned loop arm figure, this one shorter. It is crowned by a triangular head. Later, in the finished painting a right-angled linear thickness that Karmel calls a boomerang a rose above it, but that is actually a form derived from the right-angle extensions of arms of the crowd that is drawn from Jose Clemente Orozco’s *Prometheus*. At its location at the top of the painting, it also functions as the guiding “wedge” derived from a form that Pollock first used in his sketchbooks, for example, at the top of drawing CR: 423r based on Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch*. The upturned figures at the center of *Autumn Rhythm* are also “celebrants.”



Lastly, next to a figure three above an indecipherable form where a body should be is a “u” or “v” -shaped head much larger than any other one in this record of an early state of *Autumn Rhythm*. The head is largely open. On the one hand, it seems to be a deliberate echo of the mask at the top line of *The Guardians of the Secret*. On the other, the “u” fuses the open, up-right “mask” figure with vertical, open- topped composition from his sketchbooks. Such open-topped forms are frequent in works from Pollock’s classic period, such as in *Number 17, 1949*, or *Untitled*, a color ink drawings on Japanese paper (OT 825) or the *Untitled* in the Barbaralee Diamonstein and Carl Spielvogel Collection.

Yet there are more possibilities The “u” shape can be a “v” shape and this form is Pollock’s head form that dots his work. It appears initially in his third, that is, the “Mexican” notebook as Liza Messinger mentions.<sup>xxvi</sup> Then it appears in different manifestations in other works. The “v” form is a vaginal form echoing the gynecological drawing of the CR III: 464. It reflects this form as it becomes a head in works such as CR III: 473. Ultimately the genital head was probably suggested by the well-known Picasso phallic head works of his mistress Marie-Therese Walter of the time.

This configuration is central to Pollock’s work and themes as we shall see. And it makes sense as the match for the “celebrants” that make up the structure of the canvas field. So one cannot say definitively who the figures are in Pollock’s so-called abstractions but they are there and they are taken from his once-thought to be distant earlier work.

Pollock's figures manifested in Karmel's ingenious work tell us several important things. First of all, the figures have more than structural purposes in his "abstractions." They extend the symbolic associations that they had in his earlier work. That is, ever since the work of the early 1940s was supplanted by the "abstractions," most critics dismissed or downplayed the early work as no more than a surrealist study period before the greater and very different abstractions usually described as "existential," "action," "chaos" or even more commonly "irrational."<sup>xxvii</sup> Now, it turns out, rather than the abstractions emerging without precedent, like Athena from the head of Zeus, it seems that they still incorporate Pollock's established forms and meanings, as we shall see. Pollock's "abstractions" are thus tied to and expressive of the dismissed figural "Surrealist" work along with its images and ideas, and carry forth their symbolic significations into another form. In other words, they have precedents and continuities, even to the late work.

A recognition of a figurative element in Pollock's webs also reveals that they not only give a Bentonian backbone to the composition of the abstractions, and a rhythmic basis to the whiplash rhythms and webs across the picture space and depth when finished, but they give legible meaning to the abstractions for which we have been able to retrieve figural forms. If we look at the figures in the early state of *Autumn Rhythm* in total, we see, for example, as discussed, a possible gesticulating "crowd as humanity" image that has been fundamental to Pollock throughout his work. It first emerged in the line of figures drawn from Signorelli at the bottom of the first page (CR: 402r) of

notebook one, but Pollock ultimately derived it from his favorite painting, Orozco's *Prometheus*. In other words, Pollock has integrated his dynamic curvilinearity in *Autumn Rhythm* with the "chorus" that, in Orozco's painting and Pollock's subsequent take-offs, welcomes, hails and fears a great transforming event of civilization. (In Pollock's early work, these figures are generally described as "dancers," a misrepresentation that nonetheless has some relation to the gesticulating crowd.) For Orozco, the transformation was the initiation of new human civilization through the gift of fire or knowledge. For Pollock in his early work, the "event" was to be new growth represented by different symbols – fire, babies, branches, stars and more. In his so-called abstractions, he has made an ultimately abstract equivalent -- a field of explosive, metaphoric splendor. A great new creation is probably what is being celebrated in *Autumn Rhythm*. The familiar cast of characters (we shall see) is welcoming this transformative event and that *event is rendered as the dynamic, flowing force-field known, initially, as Pollock's all-over gestures*.

The fields or splendidous powerful drips then continue the symbolic event is something that Pollock had sought throughout his life and rendered throughout his work. Thus, Pollock's fields are more than simply formal constructions, whether figurative or abstract, whether easel or mural or a combination. They are the relevant happening for which Pollock had been striving and suggesting others strive throughout his life and career. That his drips or "weavings" are knitted together by an embedded and integrated web manifests a fusion of the figure with the expressive field that symbolizes, if not

enacts, the world he hoped for. *Pollock has reenacted Orozco's Prometheus in modernist terms for as we shall see the figure of Prometheus is fused with the transformative agency of fire.*

That Pollock's pictograph figures may lie within his weavings recasts the way we look at his classic paintings. One recognizes familiar constructions of one, two, three or more figures in *most* of the work. Indeed, the "abstractions" lose that appellation with our recognition of figures and forms from Pollock's pre-1947 work. Besides the bird and she-wolf, the crowd and its celebrants gesticulating arms upturned, and the vaginal figure, there is also the horse at the top of *Autumn Rhythm*, as Karmel notes, and a figure with its extended leg that he compares to a print, but that resembles the celebrating or dancing principal figure of *Moon Woman* of 1942 even more. And there are more such figures as we shall see presently.

However, into what are these figures and forms integrated? What do they join and engender? An enlargement and development of a form and idea that Pollock had used before: the flowing shamanic power web. In his earlier work, Pollock had represented the web with an emblem of creative, spiritual forces in the form of wavy lines. This emblem abuts the figure as it did in *[Composition of Woman]* of 1940, expands to the explosive center in *Burning Landscape* of 1943 or grows in *Icarus* of 1946 to a large yellow flow from the main figure and red one from the smaller one (fig. 9).



By the so-called

abstractions, the wavy now flowing, webs engage and subsume the figures in the symbolic explosive process of magical transformation. Pollock's dripped canvases have assumed the role of representing dynamic, outward flow as a whole. While the same forces were represented earlier by the emblem of curves and lines, in his "abstractions" he does it again on a larger scale with his new technique. These later works may initially give the impression of "chaos" or "destruction," to some but, as we shall see, if that is the case, this effect is

merely a stage in the shamanic flux and flow of “death” and new life or “creation” -- Pollock’s version of “living” and “dying.” Pollock used the symbolic form of an exploding, vitally expansive hieroglyph of lines to represent *magic, fertility, force and their agency of transformation*. As with Surrealism, “transformation . . . asserts activity – the denunciation of passivity as will to change and [the] rejection of the status quo and confining limitations.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Pollock’s work is full of symbols which if actually studied become clear. The task of this book is to make them so.

Jackson Pollock: Mass Man *agonist*.

Much of the appeal of Pollock lay not in what he thought but what he suffered. The result has been to make his art his life story, his troubles, and his instability. The subject of a Hollywood film and four biographies including an eight hundred page Pulitzer-prize winner, for more than half a century, interpreters looked at his expression through the filter of biography. They did not simply use biography to affirm their exegeses; they offered biography as intellectual expression. Writing on Pollock offers psychological torment as his supposed *modus vivendi*. His art and its psyche was supposed to be the because of personal failing, not philosophic. The fascination with his instability and his alcoholism became the dominant feature of his coverage. Nary does a reference crops up that not invoke alcoholism. His art was mostly the direct and spontaneous expression of a disordered mind. Most art critics have played

the role of amateur psychologist. Taking interpretive liberties with his conceptions if they were even thought to be conceptions themselves rather than outbursts. He was portrayed as tragic figure and a damaged human being; his art the confession of a crippled mind. The only exception to that is the formalist criticism of Clement Greenberg and his followers. They rendered Pollock as a European Modernist genius.

This book rejects a more than light causal link between personality and his art. Instead it will begin to reconceive the issue by hard and close looking at the work, our most distinctive approach.

*Jackson Pollock: Mass Man Agonist* is divided into several roughly chronological chapters narrating a fundamental *conceptual* Pollock. In the first chapter, we will see him attach himself to the broad new historically relevant (in the wake of World War One and the industrialization of America) widespread desire to redo Western civilization. As a youth, Pollock devoted himself to theosophy as many modern figures had done since the late 1890s. Theosophy articulated an anti-materialism, an anti-science and an anti-reason critique of modernity. Instead, it laid the basis for a spiritual renovation of the West along more culturally and introspective guidelines. All of these attitudes become fundamental to Pollock and his beliefs.

In the 1930s, the critique took a new form: the desire to find the right culture for modern times and the modern individual, in other words, search for the appropriate personality for contemporary civilization. The thirties presented a cultural critique of modernity that offered resistance to its

dislocations with the reassertion of the successful prototypes and patterns could be found where you would expect – the American past. And it argued that past as the way to the future. The regionalists Grant Wood and especially Thomas Hart Benton, Pollock's lifelong mentor, teacher, and friend, detailed a quest for the individual to be indexed to American culture. In the thirties, individual behavior was defined as cultural behavior, and individual mind cultural mind. America's thirties formed a behaviorist understanding of the world. To redo the world, meant to redo the successful past social and psychological archetypes. Pollock's early work will be seen then as a commitment to cultural renewal.

By the end of the thirties, those fears were internalized. Socially and politically that meant the advent of Mass Society theory and fascism, the subject of the third chapter. Internally, that meant the widespread discussion of the accompanying dysfunctional modern individual which climaxed with popularity of the psychologist Carl G. Jung. Pollock underwent four years of Jungian therapy in 1939-1941. Jung exemplifies the widely conceived problems of modern man under the threats of mass man seen in Nuremberg rallies and the need for the renovation of the modern personality/ psyche.

The fourth chapter will consist of the new dominance of the work of the Mexican muralists as Pollock and the world moved toward the views of disintegration of civilization, psyche and culture and the struggle of world history. Pollock's response took the form of his third notebook, called the Mexican, and his early symbolic painting. His own turmoil in 1938 paralleled



the world's descent into conflict and a new lethality arose as cultural fears were intensified on a world scale. Pollock's work becomes "troubled" as he develops symbols and metaphors for history, psyche and their renovation.

In the fifth chapter, he decides on symbols and themes to use: those of so-called primitivism and one of its principal manifestations of his time – shamanism. Through several sources, Pollock searches and enhances Native American symbology found, defining his articulation of the struggle of the world and of the mind as that of the psyche/personality. His first Native American symbols appear although they are often confused as only outpourings of the unconscious. We can source these symbols and their meanings.

In the next chapter, "Growing Vision," in the 1940s Pollock worked toward that renovation with his proposal for a universal or world therapy and reconstitution of modern man's personality through a psychologized shamanism.

In the next chapter of the late 1940s, we will then turn to the so-called abstractions through Pollock's use of Oceanic art and shamanic concepts, that is, through magic and ritual. Then we shall see Pollock realize his cultural critique through the "concretization of his symbols" in new pictorial form in his "abstractions" of the new individual enveloped in the shamanic magic web. The critique of materialism, science and reason -- the mass man critique -- thus takes on the form of his so-called abstractions where we will see Pollock render the transformative event of new magical life.

In the last chapter, we expand our exploration of the so-called abstractions through their use of memory, metamorphosis, environmentalism and so many more concepts that he worked with and that dominated his era. The richness of the drip paintings will pass far beyond simplistic contemporary notions of gesture and automatism for their own sake. And we will finish with Pollock's attempts to revisualize his subjects once again in the fifties.

Ultimately, the effects of Pollock's approach will be analyzed and evaluated and the view that mass man is the nature of modernity that should be resisted – Pollock's central idea – will be critiqued. This study then will conclude Pollock's conceptual imagery and form as part of his response to the danger and fear of mass man that took shape on its own in his era.

*Illustrations (All Jackson Pollock throughout manuscript unless otherwise noted)*

Fig. 1. *Circumcision*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 56 x 66 in. Collection Peggy Guggenheim Foundation, Venice.

Fig. 2. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1941-42. Oil on canvas, 32 x 23 7/8. Collection Neuberger Museum of Art. Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.

Fig. 3. Eugene V. Thaw and Francis V. O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonne of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) III: 549.

Fig. 4. *Number 27, 1950*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 49 x 8 ft. 10 in. Whitney Museum of American Art.

Fig. 5. Pollock working on red painting longitudely (Karmel)

Fig. 6. Composite Photo of *Autumn Rhythm* (Karmel)

Fig. 7. Thomas Hart Benton diagram, illustration from "The Mechanics of Form Organization," *Arts Magazine*, November 1926-March 1927.

Fig. 8. *Number 22A, 1948*, 1948. Enamel on gesso on paper mounted on fiberboard, 22 1/8 x 30 5/8 in. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Purchase.

Fig. 9. *Icarus*, 1946. Gouache on cardboard, 23 3/8 x 17 7/8. Collection Ulla and Heiner Pietzsch, Berlin.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Jose Juan Tablada, cited in Linda Downs, *Diego Rivera A Retrospective* Cynthia Helms ed., (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1998), 23.

<sup>ii</sup> Peter Homans, *Jung in Context/ Modernity and the Making of Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, 1995), 207.

<sup>iii</sup> Andre Breton, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism* (New York: Marlowe and Co., 1993), 119.

<sup>iv</sup> Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 1942: 82-4, writes there is an ongoing “process of industrial mutation -- if I may use that biological term – that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.”

<sup>v</sup> See Lee Krasner, “Statement,” in her papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, reel 3048, cited in *Such Desperate Joy/ Imagining Jackson Pollock*, ed. Helen Harrison, (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2000), 63.

<sup>vi</sup> See Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989), 318.

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<sup>vii</sup> Personal communication, March, 2005.

<sup>viii</sup> See Florence Rubenfield, *Clement Greenberg/ A Life* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 195.

<sup>ix</sup> Krasner, “Statement,” 61.

<sup>x</sup> Pollock in Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave/ An Oral Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1985), 146.

<sup>xi</sup> Krasner, “Statement,” 61.

<sup>xii</sup> Quoted in Stephen Polcari, “Reuben Kadish Oral History, transcript, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, April 15, 1992, 15.

<sup>xiii</sup> See new collections of new Freud collected works and the writings of Frederick Crews and Adolph Grunbaum.

<sup>xiv</sup> See Lancelot Law Whyte, *The Unconscious before Freud / A History of the Evolution of Human Awareness* (Basic Books New York), 1960 for a discussion,

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to which I am indebted, of the evolution of the concept of the unconscious.

<sup>xv</sup> Indeed, for a recent critique of Jung with the recent psychological trend, see Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism/ Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>xvi</sup> See "James Stewart," obituary, *The New York Times*, July 3, 1997: 12.

<sup>xvii</sup> See Anatole Broyard, *Kafka Was the Rage/ A Greenwich Village Memoir* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

<sup>xviii</sup> *Sixteen Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology (1889-90) defined pictographs as symbolic.

<sup>xix</sup> Rothko, Letter to Barnett Newman, July 31, 1945, reproduced in Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 47.

<sup>xx</sup> See William Rubin, "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism," *Art in America* 67 # 7 part I (November 1979): 104-123 ; part II 67 # 8 (December 1979); 68 # 8 (October 1980): 57-67.

<sup>xxi</sup> See Pepe Karmel, "Pollock at Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth," in Kirk Varnedoe with Karmel, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998): 87-137.

<sup>xxii</sup> Interview with Lee Krasner, December 1, 1977, cited in "Jackson Pollock's Classic Paintings" in E.A. Carmean, *Subjects of the Artist* (Washington, D.C: National Gallery of Art, 1977), 133, note 135.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" *Partisan Review* (New York), April 1948; reprinted in *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-49 Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian vol. 2: 224.

<sup>xxiv</sup> C. L. Wysup, *Psychoanalytic Drawings* (New York: Horizon Press, 1970), lii.

<sup>xxv</sup> Reuben Kadish, personal communication, summer 1991.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Lisa Mintz Messinger, "Pollock Studies the Mexican Muralists and the Surrealists: Sketchbook III" in Katharine Baetjer, Nan Rosenthal, and Messinger, *The Jackson Pollock Sketchbooks in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997*, 79.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See, for example, Rubin, "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator."

<sup>xxviii</sup> Sidra Stich, "Anxious Visions," in Stich et al, in *Anxious Visions/Surrealist Art* (Berkeley, University Art Museum & New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), 33.

I'm going to school every morning and have learned what is worth learning in the realm of art. It is just a matter of time and work now for me to have that knowledge apart of me. A good seventy years more and I think I'll make a good artist -- being an artist is life its self -- living it I mean. And when I say artist I don't mean it in the narrow sense of the word -- but the man who is building things -- creating molding the earth -- whether it be plains of the west -- or the iron ore of Penn. It's all a big game of construction -- some with a brush -- some with a shovel -- some choose a pen.

Jackson Pollock, letter to his father LeRoy Pollock.

### **The Beginnings**

Modernity witnessed a century of crisis and transformation. Aside from the war, that century itself was a culmination of a primal dislocation -- the accelerated growth of the industrial age with its transformation marked by the mass movement of populations from farms to the city. In a short period of time, a transmogrification of the population undermined traditional structures and the dominance of Christianity and its value system known as the "religious" man, and also remade the Western world. To be sure, modernization, as this process was called, had begun with the triumph of reason with the Philosophes and the critiques of church and state in the eighteenth century. But by the twentieth century, the traditional, religious, rural, communal-bound life of society and the individual was undermined and broken, and a new social order was sought.

That disarray, however, was intensified, if not overcome, through a series of percussive events the consequences of which are still being felt. After the dislocations of the industrial age and urban modernity came the trenches of World War One. Up to ten million died in the "holocaust" of the trenches and the socio-political order that had held traditional society in place died with

them. The collapse of the centuries-old monarchies of Russia, Austria-Hungary and the principalities of Germany is known to have unleashed anarchic, transformative revolutions and dissolution. Even in victorious, seemingly stable England, the war produced a radical discontinuity and disillusionment, self-doubt and social fragmentation and the “Waste Land spirit.”<sup>i</sup>

The years following this punctuation of the arc of transformative modernity were those of social upheaval, conflict and strife, from the General Strike of 1926 in England to the economic inflation of Germany, and from the civil conflicts of Spain and France to the exaggerated instability of the life of the Boom of the 1920s, the Jazz Age and the Lost Generation of America, to mention only a few of the stereotypes of change and disorder of the era.

But this fumbling toward and reorganizing of a new order or configuration that would restore the West’s confidence in itself never had to a chance to succeed because dislocations and conflicts were then profoundly deepened in the Crash of 1929 and the resulting Great Depression in America. Millions were out of work, untold numbers of people lost their savings and security, and much of the traditional American rural population fled their farms. Between 1880 and 1930, America shifted from a mostly rural country to an industrial, urban one. Ways of being, behaving, patterns of social action and custom, organizations and structures of individual and collective life were rent asunder never to return in America and elsewhere. The immediate economic and social collapse of the thirties was intensified by the next crisis at hand -- the coming of fascism, the inevitability of the Second World War, and the emergence of the feared “Mass Man” and “Mass Society” which were demonstrated in the coliseums of Nuremberg and Red Square in the 1930s.

The Second World War brought this arc of destruction and transformation to its head. While the First World War was considered to be a singular fatal upheaval, twenty years later the Second World War seemed to suggest that fatal strife was not an exception but the rule -- a new pattern or “normal” that would shape the future of mankind. However, with the triumph of the Allies and the ascendancy of the United States, that arc could be

considered by most reasonable observers to have finally come to an end with a new peaceful order. But that did not transpire, and, as after the First World War, new fears emerged. One was the obvious fear of nuclear destruction and the emergence of the Cold War.

The outbreak of the Cold War and the emergence of weapons of mass destruction then completed the solidification of many of the changes and worst assumptions made in the first half of the twentieth century. Humankind was redefined in anthropology, sociology, psychology and other new fields. Humankind, culture and history were redefined in light of history and what was thought and understood and feared in the new social structure of “Totalitarian Man,” the “Organization Man” and the “Mass Consumer.” These continued and extended fear of Mass Society. And they continue today in the form of Mass Media and the need for the creative individual of “self-esteem” in America, even though life in America is relatively speaking one of the safest, most accomplished, richest, and most open societies in history.

In America, a new form took on lasting life in the twentieth century: “psychological man.” Psychological man is one in which values, behaviors and decisions are shaped by internal considerations as much as, if not more than, those that are external. The dispositions of “psychological man” formed the attendant social and cultural patterns that became the dominant paradigm for many.

That is the world in which Jackson Pollock grew up, lived and died. He became famous for his personal crises but he was not alone in that regard. Indeed, it is the premise of this study that the “myth” of the personally tormented Pollock that people wrote about and filmed for the next fifty years is only half the story, if even that. Jackson Pollock’s work, as well as that of Abstract Expressionism of which he is a principal figure, is steeped in this context of historical experiences and shifts in the beliefs of the day, and it was realized in an unprecedented formal language. His work attained a stabilizing emblematic form and a formal arrangement for the personal, historical and cultural issues of his day. That context of experience was both personal and



suprapersonal, that is, it was both part of Pollock's life and needs, and also that of his era. For him as well as for his Abstract Expressionist colleagues, the private was public and vice versa.

This study will thus examine the arc of Pollock's persona and psyche as they played to the drumbeat of modernity and its difficulties -- as well as its successes. The effects of each of the arcs of crises of modernity can be found in his work. (On that note, I should point out that modernity is a temporal and moral stance and hence not the same as modernization.) They were formative and his art was one result of those developments. Jackson Pollock's art and life are as much, if not more so, about his interaction with the issues of his time as about his singularity.

*The beginnings: rootlessness and the search for "place"*

Jackson Pollock's early years were characterized by experiences that would shape his life and art as he personally lived through some of the difficulties that modernity created. Pollock was born in Cody, Wyoming on January 28, 1912 into a farm family. He had four brothers and probably a roundhouse, rural, roughhouse youth.<sup>ii</sup> In a pattern that would typify his life, he left Cody when his family began a series of relocations. Pollock's family spent the teens and twenties of the twentieth century in constant motion and turmoil as they searched for a stable and successful environment. In his early years, Pollock moved from Cody to San Diego and from there to Phoenix, whereupon they moved again to Orland, California. From there they moved to Arizona and then to Chico, California before possibly settling in Riverside, California in 1925.

All of this moving undoubtedly left Pollock feeling a lack of place and a lack of a sense of belonging and community. That lack plagued Pollock throughout his life -- never quite feeling settled, never feeling at "home" physically or psychologically. For Pollock, a sense of "place" in the world would have to be earned and not taken for granted. Yet the restlessness of his family life foretold more than Pollock's eventual uncertainty -- it foretold the

instability and chaos of America in the next decade, which was also on the move in a similar way. If one were to look down at America from an Olympian perspective, in one sense one would see constant movement across the land. In the 1930s, America was on the move for a better life even though that America did it under much more bitter conditions. Just as Pollock, however, that decade turned rootlessness into an advantage.

Pollock's family finally settled in southern California in 1925, and Pollock attended Riverside High School. However, yet again, probably after his expulsion from school, Jackson and his family moved to Los Angeles in 1928 where he attended the Manual Arts High School from which he expelled twice more. Pollock's time in high school was somewhat tumultuous because he first fought with an ROTC officer at Riverside, and then at Manual, together with Philip Guston, in a leaflet he publicly criticized the school for favoring athletics, both favorite gripes of those more committed to the ideology of artistic life and competitive education than to military preparedness and athletics. He asked the student body to "awaken," a theme that he would go on to use throughout his career; however, that was translated into a mythic awakening just as James Joyce, a favorite author of his, did in his book *Finnegan's Wake*. Pollock did have a stable family, however, until his father left when he was in high school. His father LeRoy, who was more of a farmer than Pollock's mother, became disgusted and disheartened by his forced abandonment of farm after farm in his mother's quest for a better life. For Pollock, the conflicts of his father and his loss seem to have created a personal need in addition to that of "place," and that was of authority.

To combat the absence of the power of place and a secure authority, in his brief life Pollock developed a striking number of surrogate father figures. His first mentor soon emerged during Jackson's high school years with Frederick John de St. Vrain Schwankovsky. "Schwany" as he called himself was Pollock's art teacher at Manual High School.<sup>iii</sup> He was also the teacher and mentor of Harold Lehman, Pollock's lifelong friend. As a young student, Pollock showed interest in becoming a sculptor and he produced clay figures with the

aim of firing them. No doubt Schwankovsky took him under his wing and introduced him to the arts; Lehman asserts that he knew the cubists and other “specialists” although we do not know what other arts he was familiar with aside from drawing and sculptural modeling. “Schwany” himself was principally a watercolorist (fig. 1) as we see in this Symbolist image.



But it was not simply art but Schwankovsky’s interest in a guru who lived just up the coast in Ojai, a man by the name of Krishnamurti. Krishnamurti focused Pollock’s energies and helped him articulate what would become his life-long desire for a spiritual rootedness, in other words, an inner “place” and authority.

The “theology” of Krishnamurti that Pollock encountered as a young man set him on the path he took for the rest of his life: the search for a theory of an inward-directed and antimaterialist life that was satisfying. When Pollock

encountered him in May, 1929, Krishnamurti was already a famous figure who seemed to represent to many an antiestablishment philosophy. He became representative of a counterculture and social criticism that had its roots in the nineteenth century but grew to overtake many of the Western intelligentsia in the twentieth. Pollock seems to have been deeply affected, as we can see the long-standing effects of Krishnamurti's views in Pollock's mature works such as *The Key* of 1946 and *Lucifer* of 1947, as I will discuss below.

Originally, Krishnamurti was a theosophist, and theosophy was one of the first subversions of the Western Enlightenment appreciation of science and materialism that particularly dominated the nineteenth century in the West. Theosophy was part of the powerful transition from a rural to an urban and industrial civilization. As noted before, beginning in the nineteenth century the industrial revolution brought about massive social change and the destruction of the stability and order of centuries-old agrarian social orders as well as the organization and definition of the individual. The loss of real and imagined social and cultural structures and myths led to greatly increased dislocation and disorganization as well as an attendant loss of community and creed. It also gave rise to a growing secularization of a formerly religious culture and its moral values and behaviors. The result was a decline in spiritual placement and satisfaction. The decline of the Christian church and dogma in the nineteenth century thus led to the growing rootlessness -- and openness -- of modern life. It seems inevitable that the experience of transience -- the 'betwixt and between' -- of the transition from one order of becoming to another would become a basis of modern life.

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, established churches and religion and their world views were under attack; atheists and materialists attacked from without and conflicts between liberals, radicals, and conservatives undermined them from within. Their antiquity and power were now the cause of internal revolt, and public disaffection was seen in the art world, from the work of William Blake and Casper David Friedrich to the Barbizon school and beyond. Independent religious sects proliferated

throughout this period. Indeed, for many people biblical exegesis succeeded in reducing the Christian theology to one set of preaching and one preacher -- Jesus Christ -- among many. Growing doubts about traditional Christian doctrine were further exacerbated by the increasing power and prestige of natural science. By the end of the nineteenth century, Christianity's divine authority was faltering and into that void stepped many Christian reformists such as Mary Baker Eddy, the Transcendentalists, and the Unitarians, in addition to new thinkers such as Swedenborg. All argued that "true" spirituality -- which was never in doubt in terms of its desirability, only its source and shape were viewed with suspicion -- lay outside common expressive forms.

The quest for spiritual life was further entwined with another nineteenth century preoccupation: the search for a single key that would solve the mysteries of the universe.<sup>iv</sup> Many argued that the world could be explained by a single idea and thus actual unity lay under the cacophony of increased diversity. In the nineteenth century, it was proposed that all human tongues are based on one common language, all races came from one mother-race, and all philosophies and religions drew upon one original doctrine.<sup>v</sup> Perhaps one of the most well-known representatives of this way of thought was George Eliot's scholar Casaubon who sought out the "Key to all Mythologies" in her famous novel *Middlemarch*.

Notwithstanding skeptics and critics such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the need for belief in primal unity and ultimate authority ran deep and many sought new faiths to replace the old. In social commentary, for some Marxism became the new faith with its heroes, creeds and doctrines. Other new developments such as spiritualism, vegetarianism, feminism, dress reforms, and homeopathy dominated the search of the middle class. Other figures such as Tennyson, Hugo, and Ruskin as well as Faraday and Alfred Russel Wallace tried varying spiritualisms combining science, deism, and socialism.<sup>vi</sup> Clairvoyance and phrenology, among many other doctrines, led the way for modern psychoanalysis. And new leaders such as Swedenborg and Franz

Anton Mesmer, who played the role as guru, sensitive individual and visionary, were especially in touch with it all. Respect for new psychoanalysts grew, but at the same time old shaman priests, magicians and healers became new gurus who were, like Pollock, restless and unstable wanderers, looking for new faiths to replace the old. Interest in Eastern cosmologies and the occult rapidly increased too, particularly for those who longed for radical political and social change.

Thus, toward the end of the nineteenth century, a new and widespread public appetite grew in the West for new and exotic forms of religious belief. Alternative new religious traditions were advocated with four important features that seemed to address the conflicts of the age: belief in the accessibility of the spirit world, a possible rapprochement between science, religion, imagination and reason, a theory of correspondences between spiritual and the material, and trust in the reality of an imminent political and religious dispensation. To satiate this need, additional new leaders appeared.

Madame Helena Blavatsky, a Russian-German, and Henry Olcott, an American, became major “prophets” of one such new religion, theosophy. At the end of the nineteenth century, Blavatsky and Olcott started and developed an occult set of beliefs that continuously expanded. After a failed marriage and an alleged but unlikely trip to Tibet, Blavatsky set out to found a new spirituality involving hierarchy, a doctrine, a set of initiates, a Brotherhood of Masters, and the spreading of members who spent years -- and their fortunes -- in apprenticeships. For fifteen years, until her death in 1891 Blavatsky elaborated a cosmology combining the multiple divinities of Eastern religions and the mythologies of Western esotericism. The Brothers were put forward as the masters of previous religions and doctrines, and they included such figures as Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Francis Bacon, Lao Tzu, and Jacob Boehme. They imparted wisdom and thaumaturgic and clairvoyant skills which special figures such as Blavatsky interpreted for all. Particularly original as regards Blavatsky was an emphasis on Eastern esotericism, which was probably based on the ideas of English novelist Edward Bulwer Lytton whose characteristic remarks

set the tone of theosophy: "...in dreams commences all human knowledge; in dreams hovers over measureless space the first faint bridge between spirit and spirit -- this world and the worlds beyond."<sup>vii</sup> In typical style, Bulwer combined alchemy and neo-Platonism in his occult stories working through Boehme, Swedenborg and Mesmer to found a knowledge of science and magic. Bulwer and Blavatsky proposed a hidden group of masters with secret doctrines. Eventually the Rosicrucians, studying Paracelsus (later a favorite of the surrealists and Abstract Expressionist Adolph Gottlieb), and the Masons and the Templars became nineteenth century products of this craze to unlock the mysteries of the universe and communicate its message to the world. Blavatsky's theosophy thus proposed doctrines to oppose the growing power of materialism, reason and science in the nineteenth century with principles and doctrines from the world's religions -- in other words, a new spiritual ecumenism.

In keeping with the growing criticism of modern society for its lack of a spiritual component that is, as we shall see, partly "Mass Society Theory" before the fact, Blavatsky loftily dismissed materialist science and Darwin in general, considering anyone who thought like Darwin to be not just wrong but "crude and crafty, foolish, vulgar, greedy, gross and deceitful."<sup>viii</sup> Such a person was an early prototype of the ignorant, vulgar and stupid person known as "Mass Man" who is crucial to Pollock's art and much of the modern era. With Blavatsky, the Brotherhood of Masters worked in secret, their wisdom known only to a few human agents. They thus discerned the destiny of the cosmos from hidden forms, and they took up a struggle with what they considered to be evil influences and forces: science, reason and traditional Christian dogma. Spiritualism was a spiritual science for Blavatsky. According to her biography, she received instructions from the Masters directly through the "precipitation" of their thoughts onto paper. Others suddenly appeared on her desk or fell from the heavens without the help of human agency. Such precipitations or letters convinced Olcott and others who joined up with Blavatsky. These letters were the direct display of occult power and her ability to commune *with hidden*

*powers superior to reason* and ordinary thought. Such beliefs foretell psychoanalysis and Pollock's beliefs in the hidden powers of the unconscious and elsewhere.

To further secure her religion, Blavatsky produced a book in 1875. She did not just write it, but, as she said, *Isis Unveiled* simply appeared. She claimed that it may have been "precipitated" or perhaps a Master took over her body and wrote it for her. The founding book critiques science for being "too narrow" as it only demonstrated the laws of the material universe. The book also contained an essay on comparative religion, ancient civilizations such as Egypt, and an exposition of Buddhism as the proper joining of science and religion. For her, these were the sources of a new occult wisdom. Her religion was a form of spiritual triumphalism and in the nineteenth century ultimately became part of the idea of self-improvement that was popular with public libraries, workers' education institutes and the like.<sup>ix</sup>

To support her ideas, Blavatsky and Olcott founded the Theosophical Society on September 13, 1875. The Society provided the organizational means to attract members, funding, and status and it was through the Society that theosophy's doctrines were disseminated. Starting with the premise that fundamental truths and values are universal and that all religions are essentially the same, the Society proclaimed humanitarian social ideals. Thus by studying spiritual science the brotherhood of Man, Religion, Science and Politics were bound together, which ultimately proved to be problematic.

Blavatsky, Olcott and others then went east to India (which had replaced Egypt as the "exotic civilization") and there they established themselves among the colonials. Through hustling, guile, and the traditional deception of religious proselytizers from Savarona to Tartuffe, Blavatsky established a following. When she combined her doctrines with anti-British colonialism, her success was guaranteed as her fame among the Indians spread. Olcott in particular promoted equality between Buddhism and Christianity and both ended up as prominent figures in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. Indeed, Theosophy still has many schools there.



Theosophy aimed at the spiritual transformation of modern life. From its earliest days, it had three basic goals, defined in 1896 as:

1. The formation of a universal human brotherhood without distinctions based on race, creed, sex, caste or color.
2. The study of comparative religions, philosophy and science.
3. The investigation of unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.<sup>x</sup>

Theosophy could be seen as a declaration of Universal Tolerance, a study of occult phenomena and “wisdom” and a philosophy, science and religion of a new social harmony and equality which prefigured the Divine Harmony to come.<sup>xi</sup> It sold itself as a spiritual science in direct competition with Darwinism which while undermining established churches also seemed to undermine all established religious sentiment. Indeed, Blavatsky suggested that evolutionary theory really explained only one stage in human evolution, from the animal to the human and that evolutionism should realize that evolution actually continued on to arrive at religious wisdom.

Theosophy spread far and wide with many variants, related doctrines, and the conflicting ambitions of many gurus such as Annie Besant in Britain, Charles Webster Leadbeater in Australia, and Guedjeff in Russia and the Balkans. Leadbeater was particularly skilled in combining spiritualism with psychology in the technique of psychometry -- divining the properties of a thing by contact with intangibles such as dreams. Psychometry arrived in California at Point Loma in 1899 through the work of Katherine Tingley, who emphasized rituals, drama, music, yoga and dance. At her School of Antiquity, Tingley sought briefly to make pre-contact civilization the possible center of new world civilization in her aim to realize theosophy’s ecumenical religious and social goals. The most important event for Pollock was the arrival of the guru Krishnamurti, who dominated Southern California and beyond. To further gain religious knowledge through psychic means and to resolve spiritual techniques to promote enlightenment such as prayer and meditation, leaders

were needed and invented, and Krishnamurti became one of the most prominent of those.

Leadbeater discovered Jiddu Krishnamurti as a boy in India in 1909 and honed him to be a “World Teacher” or spiritual leader. He received occult training together with a standard English public school education and studies at Oxford which was notable given his humble origins. Despite his father’s objections, Krishnamurti was removed from his milieu and would never find another home again. He had lost his mother when he was young, and now he lost his remaining family and country. He would belong to no one and to nowhere. Like Pollock, this condition was to be the site of a struggle for enormous moral and spiritual authority, and no less a measure of anguish.<sup>xii</sup> Traversing the politics and minefields of Theosophy’s patrons such as Emily Lutyens (wife of the architect Sir Edward Lutyens) and the American arts patron Mabel Dodge, Krishnamurti arrived in California in the 1920s, which he visited often before settling there.

By 1929 Krishnamurti’s prestige as a new World Teacher was already having an effect as membership in Theosophy’s societies rose to forty-five thousand. Krishnamurti’s rising prestige was part of the post-war enthusiasm for youth as new interest in youth reform became a standard hope of the period. This interest in youth was also an interest in beginnings that was seen in the early twentieth-century discovery of the “primitive,” misunderstood as the youthful period of Western civilization. It was believed that shaping the minds of young people would prevent another war. Much investigation into educational pedagogy took place (c.f. Pollock’s *Totem Lesson I & II* of 1944) as many debated how to produce the ancient desire of wholeness in a period of fragmentation as “... the community of complete beings, the world of rounded individuals whose creativity, openness of mind and spiritual evolution would defeat the selfishness that had undoubtedly promoted the last war.”<sup>xiii</sup> Since theosophy emphasized the balanced person, it had a place at the table between the wars. Furthermore, it was thought that it could help direct and profit from the energies of individuals and whole societies formerly linked in a

life or death struggle that now had nowhere to go. In the post-World War I period, everyone agreed that there was a need for the reconstruction of society - human and personal, physical and financial, social and political. But how to build a better world? Fascism, Nazism, communism and the like proposed new schemes for Western man and civilization. A new world was a leap into the unknown because there was no secure pattern from which to build it.<sup>xiv</sup> The spiritual millenarians of theosophy were further supported by the new spiritualism of grieving millions hoping to find a way to survive the war's losses through another form. Theosophy thus aided and was reinforced by anti-rationalism and the search for spiritual succor that had been ongoing both before and after the war.

These new teachers touched a raw nerve in Western Europe. It was thought that the war's violence could not simply be turned off in 1918 but that it would continue on and expand in social and personal life. Freud and then Jung routed that violence through psychic life and it was argued that millions were unable to cope with the demands of traditional moral and social codes. With theosophy, the religious implications of unconscious wishes were to be made clear. Theosophy represented the idealistic tendencies of the early twentieth century -- the internationalism of the League of Nations, pacifism, progressive social democracy and youth movements (compare to the Obamaism of 2008) although other branches such as those promoted by Gurdjieff sought to bring up productive strife with Diaghilev primitivism, fantasy and color. New spiritualism offered continuity with cultural traditions that preserved ancient wisdom in contemporary formulas and rituals whose meaning had been discarded or forgotten.<sup>xv</sup> (In contrast, Freud argued that ideals of world peace had actually played a role in precipitating the war because it widened the gap between ideals and real behavior.)

For theosophists, mental and psychical capacities were not developed at the expense of spiritual ideas and thus they devised teaching methods and indeed institutions that embodied their ideals. Like many, they sought to blend modern teaching methods with ancient spiritual truths. Theosophical schools

expanded in number, often holding yearly international gatherings at camps for adolescents such as Pollock. Krishnamurti led one such spiritual academy in the open air at Ojai, a town not far from the Pacific Coast, where Pollock spent a week with his friends Philip Guston (nee Goldstein), Manuel Tolegian and probably Harold Lehman. Often ill, Krishnamurti held forth as a World Teacher in Ojai practically as a junior member of the League of Nations for many years in the 1920s as he was attracted to California's fresh air and warm weather. An effective speaker, he did not rehearse or use notes. Instead, he would elaborate on the same themes: compassion for all living things, self-knowledge and the need for everyone to find their own "Path" to enlightenment. All these efforts added up to what sometimes was called the "Process" or "spiritual unfoldment" as Blavatsky follower Mabel Collins wrote in the *Light on the Path* of 1885, a tract that Pollock and Lehman read.<sup>xvi</sup> In theosophy, one set out for esoteric, hidden knowledge that was articulated by occult and ritualistic paraphernalia leading to a spiritual "Evolution" of the self and civilization. In contrast, Krishnamurti taught that it was all up to the individual; in other words, there was no doctrine, thus making his spiritualism more accessible, less occult and personal and less elitist. Krishnamurti took all serious illnesses and personal and cultural crises as signs of the spiritual evolution or Process.

Although in the literature on Pollock Krishnamurti is often described as primarily being a theosophist, by 1929 he had decisively broken with it (although he returned to it later in his life). And it was thus in the process of this break that Pollock heard him speak in Ojai. Krishnamurti rebelled against theosophy's organizational hierarchy and structure, its ceremonialism, and its belief in a central message. He also rejected the role for which he had long been groomed – theosophy's World Teacher. His more true Hindu humility led him to reject such esoterica and the theosophy's world organization exclusivism for a more general guruism. As a result, he prospered in California where sun and surf led to easy pleasures and easy ideas. Krishnamurti maintained an image as a solitary outsider in the purist of spiritual enlightenment as he taught of the world's "unreality." Pursued by many celebrities, he eventually became a

famous high priest of his age and contributed to the New Age beliefs that would emerge in later years. For Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell, the Manns, the Chaplins, the Stravinskys, Anita Loos and Greta Garbo, Krishnamurti became the center of an elite social circle that was really the flowering that Madame Blavatsky had always sought.<sup>xvii</sup> He was also a way station in the development of the counterculture of the sixties.

Through theosophy, Pollock began a spiritual voyage, a quest for religious understanding and new civilization that went beyond established religion and would dominate his life and work despite the many changes of form it underwent. After his time in Ojai, he imitated Krishnamurti in dress by wearing an open, pointed-collar white shirt and wore his hair long like a disciple.<sup>xviii</sup> But Pollock did not stay “there,” neither in Ojai nor in the presence of Krishnamurti’s aura. As he said in a letter to his brothers Charles and Frank on October 22, 1929, “I have dropped religion for the present. Should I follow the Occult Mysticism it wouldn’t be for commercial purposes.”<sup>xix</sup>

An adult now, he took on his own movement -- to new places, new ideas and new faiths -- that would characterize him for the rest of his life. Pollock would continue his early quest for an apprehension of inner unity and harmony, a godhead of spiritual illumination, if you will (significantly Krishnamurti was called the “divine spirit”) from within himself and that would become his tragicomic psychodrama. He then joined up with Lehman, Guston and others in a reading group that met every week to give reports on the books they were interested in including works on psychology and literature, including fiction and the work of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Sir James Frazer, Mumford, Boas, Cheney, the gestalt psychologists and others.<sup>xx</sup>

In that way, theosophy set Pollock on his path. Theosophy itself, of course, is a fiction among the many fictions of modernity but it should not be indifferently dismissed. It did participate in and advance not just the quest for an alternative to materialism but also an internationalist, pacifist and mostly socially challenging agenda. It influenced and continues to influence occult and utopian thought and encourages interest in comparative religion and its

relationship to science. There is a place for occultism and for its genial pantheism as well as its anti-bourgeois pretensions. Hollow and corrupt that it may be, like all faiths and all beliefs, not just those that are religious, as Aldous Huxley noted after calling theosophy “bunkum,” it had some truths and thus should be recognized, if not respected, for them.

It would take a while before Pollock found the “place” that he needed. Immediately after finishing high school he wanted to be an artist. In a family of artists, he had access to much advice but his next mentor, his brother Charles, had moved to New York to pursue his own artistic career. Charles was the oldest and Jackson the youngest of the five brothers and it was to Charles that Jackson wrote as he matured as a teenager. Even from New York, he continued to advise Jackson. Together with Schwankovsky, he inspired in Jackson a desire to be an artist. Their brothers Sandy McCoy and Frank were also artists and Jackson was close to them, particularly Sande, but it was Charles who instructed Jackson. Charles would not only relate the New York art scene to him but also advise him about what to read and send him articles and references. In one letter in 1929, Jackson thanks Charles for recommending an article on Diego Rivera, one of the Mexican muralists who would be an influence on his work.<sup>xxi</sup> Later Pollock inherited Charles’s library when he took over his apartment in New York and he read through it. (Lehman relates that one day in the early 1940s he visited him and Pollock brought out a book left to him by Charles that he was reading, Adolph Hildebrand’s *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*. In between his discussions with Charles as we shall see, he read with Lehman, Guston and others while in Los Angeles although he did not talk about his reading with his acquaintances and people he didn’t know well, leading to the incorrect impression that he did not read.)

Pollock then proceeded to New York in 1930 to follow Charles. There he would study with Charles’s teacher, his next mentor, the American Regionalist Benton. Regionalism, the American cultural critique of modernity, would become Pollock’s new “time to come.” Pollock’s journey ultimately led him to occult psychology, which would later take the form of the ideas of Jung and

shamanism. That journey was one of cultural critique as well as a quest for the interior. Parts of that journey are well known. The fact that Pollock remained a theosophist throughout his life is less well known but can be seen, as noted earlier, in two late paintings, *The Key* of 1946 (fig. 2) and *Lucifer* of 1947 which I will later examine.



*Illustrations*

Fig. 1. Frederick John Schwankosvsky, *Lotus, Key of F*, watercolor on Whatman paper, c. 1925. 23 1/8 x 17 in. Laguna Art Museum, Gift of Ada R and John E. Offerdahl.

Fig. 2. *The Key*, 1946, oil on canvas, 59 x 84 in. The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Morris through exchange.



## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> See Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991).

<sup>ii</sup> For the best discussion of Pollock's youth, see Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989).

<sup>iii</sup> See Stephen Polcari, interview with Harold Lehman, the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, Summer 1996-1997, transcript pages 6-12.

<sup>iv</sup> See Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America* (New York: Schoken Books, 1993) for a discussion to which I am indebted about the development and expansion of theosophy and related spiritualisms.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid. 10-27.

<sup>vi</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 55.

<sup>vii</sup> Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*, 37.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid. 45.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid. 52-53

<sup>x</sup> Ibid. 69.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid. 133-134

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid. 226.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid. 168.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid. 169-173.

<sup>xvi</sup> Mabel Collins, *Light on the Path* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, first edition 1885; fourth edition, Quest Miniature, 1989), n.p. Pollock read *Light on the Path* in 1930 and recommended it to Charles. See Document 7 in Francis O'Connor and Eugene Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue*

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*Raisonne of Paintings, Drawings and Other Works IV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 209. Lehman read it along with the *Bhagavad-Gita* when he was in high school. Polcari, interview with Lehman, transcript, page 12.

<sup>xvii</sup> See Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*, 317.

<sup>xviii</sup> See comparison of photographs of Pollock and Krishnamurti in Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, 140.

<sup>xix</sup> Document 6, O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonne*, IV: 208.

<sup>xx</sup> For a larger list of the readings, see Polcari, interview with Lehman, transcript, page 12-16.

<sup>xxi</sup> Document 6, O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonne*, IV: 208.

## **Chapter 2 *Hart Benton and Regionalism: A Cultural Critique of Modernity***

Thomas Hart Benton is more than a painter; he is a social historian, anthropologist, cultural irritant, and vivid exponent of the American civilization.

— Thomas Craven, 1937

As the international debacle increased, it rapidly became “Save America First.” This new “America Firstism” was no mere jingoist yap. It involved a deadly serious attempt to rebuild our society along democratic lines and to provide a wider and more stable distribution of the wealth.”

Thomas Hart Benton, *An American in Art*, 1969

Wherever people talk, idiocy thrives.

*A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 78

### ***Searching for a Cultural Personality and Place:***

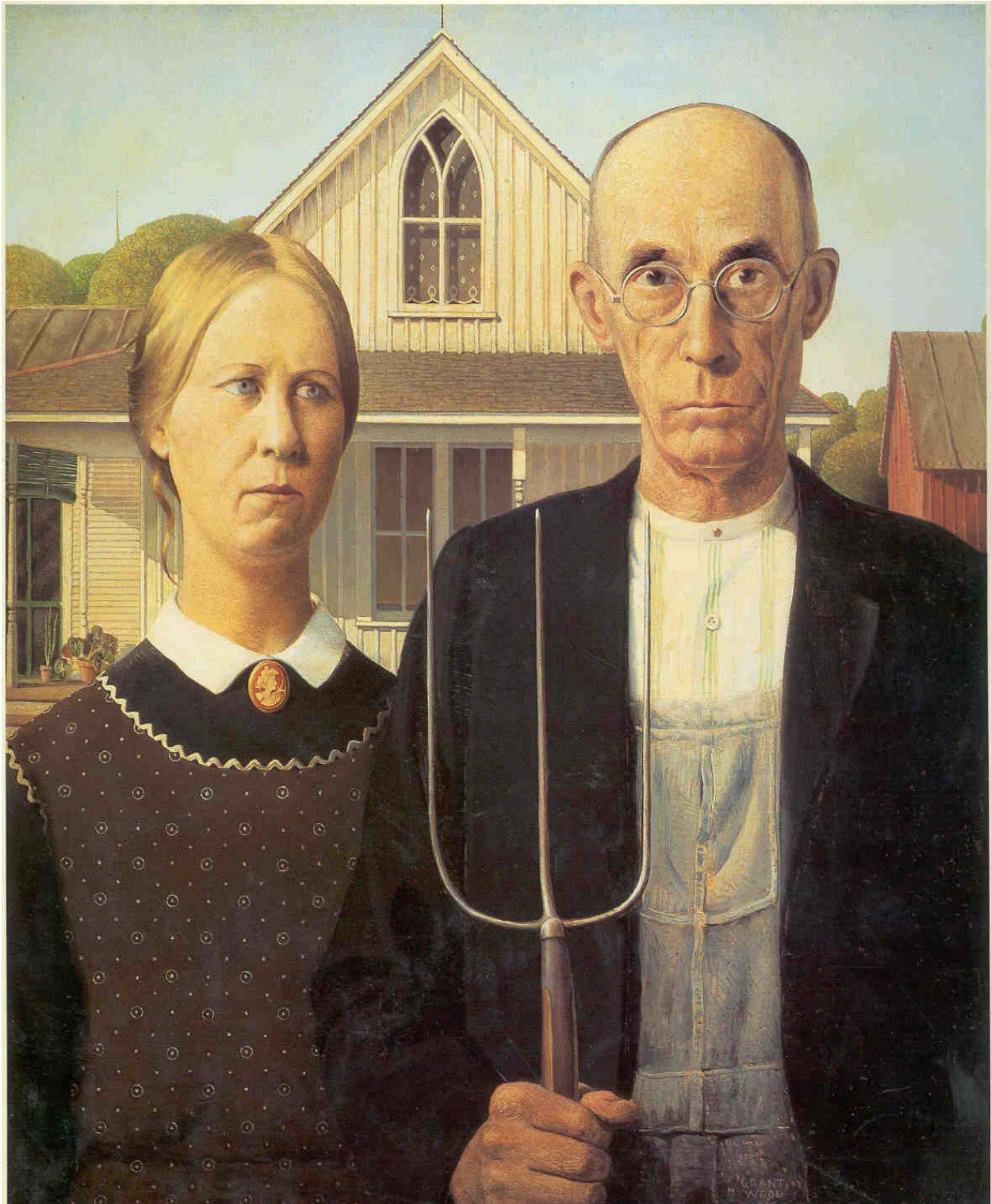
#### ***The American Scene’s Critique of Modernity***

In the antimaterialism that Pollock absorbed through Krishnamurti, Jackson Pollock seemed to accede to the theory, if not the experience, of the dislocation of modern life and civilization. With his own, Schwankovsky and Krishnamurti’s critique of the modern public order of science, military preparedness, reason, and high school athletics, Pollock indicated a

discomfort, a lack of fit between himself and the official culture of success and achievement in America. From this origin in the antiestablishment, he expanded his positions in the 1930s during which reigned the collapse of the economic order and the maturation of modernity in the face of the decline of the rural certitude of behavior, values, and patterns. On the one hand, he toyed with leftist rhetoric, which we will discuss below. On the other, he adopted more forcefully the prevailing conception of his teacher, Thomas Hart Benton, and of America outside New York City. Even while living in New York, Pollock made trips to the West Coast, probably to visit his mother, he was never divorced from the rest of America as frequently happens to many who settle in New York City.

Benton, his trips, and the 1930s shaped a new form of critique of the establishment. That critique was Regionalism and the American Scene. Despite the political rhetoric of New York, Pollock identified with the West and was regarded by fellow students at the Arts Student League as a Westerner. Wearing Western boots, he dressed the part. Such identification thus introduces Pollock's second formative matrix — the search for an anti-modern (and thus antiestablishment) *culture* and its attendant *personality*. For much of the 1930s, as with his future colleague Clyfford Still, Pollock was a committed Regionalist. He must have, then, been well versed in its issues. Regionalism itself was part of developing larger battle against the loss of place, of tradition, of community, of self — of culture, or in today's spin, of "identity" in the modern world.

As cultural archetype, take, for example, Grant Wood's *American Gothic* of 1930 (fig. 1), one of the most important paintings of the decade.



Allegedly recording quintessential Americans, it instantly became a national icon with its exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1930 and has remained so. Wood's painting purportedly documents Wood's sister Nan and his dentist Dr. B.H. McKeeby as American types or identities. They represent a rural couple before a small, local house with a Gothic window. The "Gothic" cottage, as straight and narrow as the couple, begins the theme of architectural elements that enclose central characters within a symbolic cultural environment. Implied in this work are the couple's customs, habits, behaviors, and psychology. The use of architectural symbolism dominates the thirties and beyond from Diego Rivera to Ben Shahn to Mark Rothko.

While the couple was instantly recognizable to those who "knew" them, it is what they literally stood for that was important. As Wood once said, "The model is only the bones, . . . I really paint what I see in my head."<sup>i</sup> It is thus a thirties-style documentary form succinctly summarizing American physical types, culturally familiar figures, traditions and civilization in a single image. Even though not intended to move audiences—Wood was too witty for that it articulated American experience through recognizable or stereotypical people. It is through such an image and such thinking that Pollock grew his critique of modernity. That is, it is through Regionalist art and thought of the 1930s that he developed a repertoire of issues that, however they underwent makeovers, remained central to him as they did to many of his generation.

A brief look at Regionalism identifies those issues. In *American Gothic*, Wood tells us several things about Regionalist ideas and ideals and defines the



new critique of civilization (aside from theosophy). His people are not individuals but cultural types. The individual is missing under the impact of archetypal culture. Culture is social type and social type the reconstruction of lived experiences and behaviors of the past. *American Gothic* is a construction of people of the land and small town and their behaviors, that is, what made them. In the 1930s and after (e.g. see particularly the Abstract Expressionist William Baziotes for a version in the 1940s),<sup>ii</sup> it was thought that culture and experience shaped personality to the point of shaping anatomy. The most famous painting of the period is a paean to their impact on cultural identity and pattern. *American Gothic* clearly reminds one of contemporary novelist Thomas Wolfe's conception of this idea in a character in his renown novel of the 1930s, *You Can't Go Home Again*: "old stock American . . . his physical structure the result, partly of weather and geography, partly of tempo, speech, and local custom -- a special pattern of the nerves and vital energies wrought out upon the whole framework of flesh and bone . . . recognized instantly and unmistakably as 'American.'"<sup>iii</sup> For both Wood and Wolfe, periods, history, humanity, and life were organisms. In *American Gothic*, flesh and bone is thin, unindulged, and the product of hard fundamental work. These are lean figures, given to lean living, lean expression and lean civilization. They stand tall, straightforward, and dominate the space. There is no other world for them. Their life has literally formed them. Indeed, while painting the couple, Wood had examined a man's hand and recognized that "that's the hand of a man who can do things."<sup>iv</sup>

To these archetypal cultural figures are added the “environment,” a key concept in the 1930s. Here the “environment” is both culture and soil. The Gothic cottage has always been noted in discussions of *American Gothic*. Large enough to embrace the two figures, its stern Midwestern frontier religiosity enfolds these figures and American behaviors. Less noticed is a landscape of treetops. Here nature is as manicured and controlled as the two protagonists. The couple are thus presented as the product of their environment and their efforts on it — of the land, of the good earth, and of the cultural past. Wood wittily adds another church steeple that barely peeps through the trees at the left. The landscape of cultural stringency, of civilization’s integration within its natural environment, extends continuously beyond sight.

Sometimes compared to a photograph, *American Gothic* “documents” the rural Midwest as the national consciousness, a national *psychology*. As a painting, it says much with less, performing in one form: a geographical area, American identity, implicit behaviors, time and history. In its way, it is a paradigm, shorthand, and a hieroglyph of the much known, loved, hated, and endured. It is a work that vivifies an integrated, living world of thought and action.

Art of the 1930s manifested the culture of the ideas that we have begun to look at. Yet the decade’s art, in conventional histories, has been reduced to the cliché of a contest between Regionalism and Social Realism, with a few small modern art groups such The Ten and the American Abstract Artist group thrown in. In most art historical writing of the decade, it concentrates on the



artists' stylistic and political divisions. Such an approach downplays what is most innovative about the time -- the conflicted views of culture, of roots, of behavior, of change, of personality, and of modernity that dominates the decade and ultimately Pollock's own work.

Take the Regionalist artists. In the former modernist analyses, they are portrayed as the rubes and chauvinists of the American Scene with Grant Wood's famous bemused remark that "I suddenly realized that all the good ideas I ever had came to me while I was milking a cow" proving it. But in reality they were educated, traveled, knew modern art first hand and the history of painting. And while also portrayed as conservatives, they were actually largely liberals or one stripe or another. However, what differentiated the Regionalist triumvirate of Wood from Iowa, John Steuart Curry from Kansas, and Thomas Hart Benton from Missouri from others was the desire to break away from Europe and form a distinctive American and regional expression, a holistic identity. Although Regionalist thought is seen as simple and malignant ignorance by New York modernists, given the track record of the ideologies of New York modernism and anti-modernism, Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis, it is no better or worse than many others.

In his ghostwritten manifesto of 1935, "Revolt Against the City," Wood argued for a new American post-colonial art, one that stood away not only from Europe but also from Eastern cities where European and elitist ideas dominated.<sup>v</sup> The Regionalists largely opposed eastern hegemony and hierarchy not only in finance and politics but also in aesthetics and culture. Yet with

schools, an art colony, writing and polemics, as well as their art, like much of the work of the 1930s, these artists simply sought an art of living experience. In this, they reflected the typical quests of the time — the quest for a living culture and personality, the quest for meaning and value and the quest for the most spiritually satisfying beliefs and fructifying patterns of behavior. Much like the Southern Agrarians, they contrasted the urban and industrial culture of the East with the folk culture of the more native, rural and traditional mid-West and found it more satisfying. They found the folk culture much the same way early modernists of the twentieth century did --Gauguin, for example, or the German Expressionists, or Kandinsky -- in their moves to Brittany, the North Sea, and country communes. Ultimately, the Regionalists mostly wanted to redefine American culture not with “nostalgia,” the term with which many modernists vilified them, but in their own way -- with a community free of the dominance of urban and industrial civilization, in other words, a way of life with roots, tradition and an integrated community and environment. Through this culture and continuity, they disinterred an American paradigm or narrative from the past and projected it as a way to the future, the personality of their place.

The important questions of art and culture, of the nature of culture, community, continuity and change impacted Pollock not only through the Depression, not only through his work on the government’s Works Progress Administration, but, even more so through the art and beliefs of his teacher, friend, mentor and father figure, Thomas Hart Benton. Benton's

representationalism has prevented the perception of his originality and his deep impact on Pollock. It is through Benton that Pollock first encountered overall design comprising diverse elements, including organic form and activity. It is through Benton that Pollock absorbed the dynamic structure of experience which he learned encompassed rhythm, continuity, equilibrium and change. It is through Benton that he developed an artistic form of continuous, vital flow. It was through Benton that Pollock was introduced to the idea of an individual directly and dynamically interacting with its environment to produce, direct, “living” experience. And it was through Benton that Pollock extended his quest for the constituents of a satisfying, oppositional culture and personality in the wake of industrial modernity and history. Thus, through the WPA, through Benton, and through his own experiences as a boy on the road with his family in constant search for a better life, reiterated in the 1930s as the direct experience of riding the rails and traveling across America observing and searching for “real” American experiences, that Pollock absorbed much of American thought and culture of the period as they were being formed.

Pollock praised Benton for his directness in a 1933 letter to his father, “After a life-time struggle with the elements of every day experience, he is beginning to be recognized as the foremost American painter today. He has lifted art from the stuffy studio into the world and happenings about him, which has a common meaning to the masses.”<sup>vi</sup> To be sure, Pollock reacted against later Benton later, declaring in 1944, that he “drove his kind of realism at me so hard I bounced right into nonobjective painting;”<sup>vii</sup> and in 1950, “My

work with Benton was important as something against which to react very strongly, later on; in this, it was better to have worked with him than with a less resistant personality who would have provided a much less strong opposition."<sup>viii</sup> Nevertheless, Pollock was to realize Benton's belief in an art and culture of "living experience," first in figurative forms and compositions of the culture of the 1930s, and then in the 1940s through a conjunction with modernist means and concepts. By making this culture and conception of movement physical, Pollock transformed the intellectual into the material and concrete in his poured painting, enacting and recording direct, fluid movement and all that that meant in his formative culture. As much if not more so than Picasso, Pollock's modernist, beloved mentor, Thomas Hart Benton was equally Pollock's teacher and "father" figure, and Pollock would not have been Pollock without him. As Reuben Kadish said, Benton was a big "personality" with "tremendous charisma" interested and sharing "big ideas."<sup>ix</sup>

More than other Regionalist, Benton was an intellectual playing hayseed. Particularly after a *Time* article where he was characterized as an "Ozark hillbilly," he proudly performed himself as a living American primitive, the direct embodiment of archetypal American culture, character, psychology and behavior as we have defined it.<sup>x</sup> Such performances of a living archaic was characteristic of the interwar period. Artists had reached back to antiquated symbols to interpret the stress of the modern world not only in modern art but also in all the arts. As we will discuss below, the twentieth century is the century that trumpeted the archaic. As the cultural critic Guy Davenport

wrote, "we are just seeing, amidst the fads and distractions, the strange fact that what has been most modern in our time was what was most archaic, and that the impulse to recover beginnings and primal energies grew out of a feeling that man in his alienation [in our newly industrial world] was drifting tragically away from what he had first made as poetry and design and as an understanding of the world." <sup>xi</sup>

Benton affected the archaizing "American," as did other Regionalists. Wood, for example, who portrayed himself as a farmer in overalls smoking a corncob pipe to signify the archaic of Iowa. Similarly, to align themselves with the "lower orders," WPA, Social Realists and other artists played themselves as workers or men of the people. From formerly playing the French dandy in his early years in Paris, by the 1930s Benton came to enact historian Frederick Jackson Turner's famous definition of the American mind and personality in his behavior: rough and crude, yet adventurous and boisterous. The internationally traveled and Alfred Stieglitz artist, Benton in the 1930s also played hillbilly music, arranged musicales (with Pollock as participant playing the harmonica he learned from Harold Lehman), traveled through, documented, and eventually settled down, as did all the Regionalists, in the culture they portrayed, their "Pont-Avon" in the heartland. Ironically, under Benton's example, during the 1930s, Pollock, too, played the regional type. For him, it was Western cowboy, boots and all. That Pollock spent more time in Los Angeles rather than the West did not affect this pose. And it was successful. One New York acquaintance of the 1930s, Fred Adler, noted that Pollock was

initially thought to be an American Western "primitive" rather than a New York political radical or bohemian.<sup>xii</sup>

As a thoughtful, educated, and experienced artist, Benton provided Pollock with an art and theory as well as a cultural pose and personality. That art was the search for Holger Cahill's "usable" culture that dominated the 1930s. Much like the government art projects, his art was devoted to communicating directly with the public in its environment, to disinterring and reassessing a common culture and identity, and to reconstructing the present and future. In his rejection of modern, Europeanized art but not its structural underpinnings, in his popularization of the mural as textual format for large, visionary statements about history and experience, and in his construction of a dynamic historical, mythic, cultural, and psychological pattern to American culture, Benton compressed and summarized into one site many themes and possibilities. Yet he has been vilified continuously by the New York art world and modernist camp. From the cultural politics of the 1930s where this socialist but anti-Marxist painter was thrown to the right of the spectrum with the full weight of political attack, to the 1940s where the future grand man of art history, H. W. Janson character assassinated him and his colleagues particularly Grant Wood by likening Regionalism to fascism, a standard liberal trope, to the 1950s where Pollock himself got on the band wagon of contempt, to the 1960s where the critic Barbara Rose (*American Art Since 1900: A Critical History*) characterizes him as "vulgar," to recent times in the two millennium shows of 2000 at the Whitney Museum of American Art where the only critical

word about any American artist of the twentieth century in wall text was a sneer at the Regionalists for “propaganda,” for years Benton was difficult for modernists to see. Indeed, he gave as good as he got. Today he and the Regionalists would be dismissed by the expedient terms “right-wing” and conceived as “complicit” with the “religious right” for being tolerant of mid-West and southern agrarian cultural complexes for much that are not urban, Marxified, and Europeanized. In short, criticism of Benton and the other Regionalists then largely parallels the criticism of mid America now. It is red state versus blue state. Little has changed. Nevertheless, today he is more permeable to our vision.<sup>xiii</sup>

Benton is an American original on par with other creative figures in the first half of the twentieth century. Coming from a long family lineage of influential politicians, including Maecenas Benton, a U.S. Congressman and a great uncle, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, Benton was an intellectual as well as an artist. He belongs to the generation of John Dewey, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, Charles Beard, and Lewis Mumford, some of whom were friends and supporters from Martha’s Vineyard where Benton summered from the early 1920s. That is, he belongs to the progressive American generation between the wars that was not strictly beholden to Europe. His modernism and theirs has never been given its due in art history as a distinctive cultural voice that bridged the gap between the first generation of modernists (the Stieglitz group) and the Abstract Expressionists. Benton was an articulate reader, writer and thinker as well as artist. And despite his claims and those of his fierce and

often unsavory supporter, Thomas Craven, in the 1930s, Benton was and remained a closet modernist. He went to Paris in 1907, studied at the Academie Julien and experimented with modern styles. Further, he thought them through and as Edward Fry has said, he thoroughly understood and practiced a most original form of cubism.<sup>xiv</sup> Benton may have played the hillbilly, he may have been pugnacious, he may have been placed too firmly in a hysterical anti-modernist Regionalism by Craven and the feverish anti-Regionalism of the New York modernists, he nevertheless formed an original art combining modernism and American thought. So would his student, Jackson Pollock.

Benton is a central artist from which Pollock arose. Not only did Pollock study with him from 1930 to 1932 at the Art Students League in New York City, but also Benton was the “strong man” for Pollock, one of his father figures who formed him so completely that he had to separate later. After his three years of study with Benton, Pollock remained close to him until the late 1930s, visiting him in Missouri after Benton left New York in 1934. Benton also visited and talked with Pollock for the remainder of Pollock’s life. Further, Pollock babysat for Benton and spent summers with him at Martha’s Vineyard where Pollock lived in a special “shack” nicknamed “Jack’s Shack.” They played music together with Pollock playing the harmonica. Pollock also posed for Benton’s 1930 *America Today* murals at the New School for Social Research where Benton introduced him to Jose Clemente Orozco, another crucial figure in Pollock's art.<sup>xv</sup> Pollock was also close to Benton’s wife Rita, hinting at and



perhaps adolescently hoping for a relationship. Benton was thus not only a father figure, not only a teacher, but also a friend, and Rita an Oedipal “lover” in his imagination. The Bentons formed a second family for Pollock from which he continually drew and from which he only partially separated, for all of his later comments and needs.

Benton’s art and thought helped Pollock form himself. That was felicitous, for Benton had thought long and hard about the nature and purposes of art and he conveyed that to Pollock. For example, as he phrased it (in telling thirties conceptual terminology): “To make an original form, it seemed necessary to me to have references beyond art. I had to find something which would be a soil for growth.”<sup>xvi</sup> Benton believed that art could only vitalize itself only “through turning to and reflecting the world of experience, which it cannot do when subservient to doctrine . . . . Aesthetic forms in painting or sculpture are . . . changed by those aspects of the living world which the artist experiences and which he tries to express,”<sup>xvii</sup> in other words, its culture. In his own definitions, for Benton, art comes from the inside: “Only knowledge which is deeply and profoundly a part of one can be communicated through the logical conventions of a form. Such knowledge is found, not on the intellectual fringe of life, or in the illusions of cloistered sensibilities, but in life itself where the drive of a people is felt and shared.”<sup>xviii</sup> But the “inside” is local, real experience, and the vitalism of a people’s “drive.” The result can be what Benton is partially responsible for in the 1930s: the renewal of mural painting. Benton painted murals “because I can include more stuff in them. I’m

interested in American life. I would like to enclose it all. The mural can carry mores aspects within itself than any small painting. It can therefore be more expressive of society, of . . . [its] panorama"<sup>xix</sup> and its inward life.

John Dewey, too, proved to be another instrument for the Benton's turn toward common life. Benton had been introduced to his writing around 1914-15, along with James, Freud, and Marx when he became a member of the circle of John Weischel, who preferred a social purpose to art and led the People's Art Guild.<sup>xx</sup> (Benton's later good friends Carolyn Pratt, Max Eastman, and Sidney Hook were all Dewey proteges.)<sup>xxi</sup> Even though he illustrated Marxist books such as Leo Huberman's *We the People* of 1931, Benton eventually criticized the prevailing theories of the time that he felt were too New York – Marxism and modernism: "The Marxism of the artistic crowd of New York, and largely of the intellectual crowd also, was more an emotional allegiance than one of reason. It was a sort of passionate devotion to a salvation complex . . . impossible to question."<sup>xxii</sup> Although he was pro-labor, anti-big capitalist, and ready for large-scale social change,<sup>xxiii</sup> for the remainder of his career, Benton became a Dewey advocate in cultural questions.

Paralleling Dewey, for Benton, painting was a direct "expression of life" because it depends on direct experience that constantly brings new units to painting: "Life is always changing. These units, logically adjusted to one another, set up their own dynamic . . . painting is built *on* the expression of . . . [life] activity. Line, mass, and color – the materials of painting—function instrumentally in the interests of unity."<sup>xxiv</sup> Consequently, an American

cultural and psychological art was thus community experience and not pure painting. Dewey's book *Art as Experience* was not just an influence on the WPA but on Benton's theorizing.

After his modernist beginnings, Benton turned to American life in 1918-19. This was a general turn in Western life because World War I that had seriously damaged the high jinks and confidence of bohemian avant-garde activity. Benton had been in the Navy in Norfolk, Virginia in 1918 where he assigned the task of drawing his fellow sailors. Like many at that time, that had faced conflict and upheaval, Benton came to deeply appreciate his fellow Americans and American history thrown together under much pressure. In its own way, it was a "Return to Order" and American culture and history similar to that of France of the time.

In his early work and beyond, Benton searched out an art, then, that was modern and "real" to him, not just formally but thematically -- the forms of life as lived. Indeed, modern art for him was, again in keeping with the growing concepts of his time in America, *a psychological art of culture and personality attuned by real experiences to real places*. He had learned that "a living art, or rather living arts, are generated by the direct life experiences of their makers *within milieus and locales, to the human psychological content of which they are, by conditioning, psychologically attuned*. Their forms are the results of the integration of these experiences, of the effort to order and relate sequentially what they know, not what they are acquainted with but what they *know*."<sup>xxv</sup> Further, in his turning to traditional narrative styles to express a "real" milieu

and psychology, such as in his murals and government projects, Benton was self-consciously matching style to content. He wrote that we all held that what was painted should determine, as far as possible, the how of its painting and the ultimate form that ensued. In this view, ways and means were secondary to content in the building of significant forms. Much as the thirties sought to find and make an appropriate culture for a modern way of life, as we shall see, Benton sought to find and make a similarly appropriate style for a modern art.

One place he looked was toward the Mexican muralists whose recognition was growing in the United States. "I had looked with much interest on the rise of the Mexican school during the mid-twenties. In spite of the Marxist dogmas, . . . I saw in the Mexican effort a profound and much-needed redirection of art towards its ancient humanistic functions. The Mexican concern with publicly significant meanings and with the pageant of Mexican national life corresponded perfectly with what I had in mind for art in the United States."<sup>xxvi</sup> For Benton, as for so many later in the 1930s, including Pollock, the Mexicans then articulated the nature of art as public, humanistic, and epic. In the American unconscious, he rediscovered or remade himself into his American cultural emblem, a living personality of this culture that was alive to him in his boisterousness, crudeness etc. In other words, he underwent "a change in . . . character" becoming psychologically more of what he wanted. He and his art were living Regionalist psychology in terms of the 1930s, for they were occasioned by local culture. Benton was thus an advocate of the aesthetic

of direct and vicarious experience; “When I represent a farmer I get a farmer, when I represent a night club girl I get one of them too.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

What Benton and others in the time advocated then, was a cultural and environmental, an almost psychologically behaviorist theory of art. A society generates states of mind, attitudes, values, beliefs, aspirations, and needs which are dynamic, constantly “changing, affecting and being affected by the play of instrumental and environmental factors.”<sup>xxviii</sup> As Benton put it, a collective American social psyche would generate new artistic form: “If subject matter determined *form* and the subject matter was distinctly American, then we believed an American form would eventually ensue . . . Let your American environment . . . be your source of inspiration, American public meaning your purpose, and an art will come which will represent America.”<sup>xxix</sup> As a result of this condition, the artist’s subject matter reveals the national *mind and personalities*—the “scenes, behaviors, and mythologies”<sup>xxx</sup> or “psychologies” and “cultures” of American life that are organized in a pattern.<sup>xxxi</sup> His mural, *The Social History of the State of Missouri* of 1936, for example, depicts the life behaviors of a living people, and heroes and mythologies of Missouri from Jesse James, Frankie and Johnnie to Huck Finn and Benton's own father. And, others, too. To relate the part to the whole, Benton became a student of cultures, assaying them, as distinct conceptual entities. Not only did he investigate Missouri and the Midwest but the south, the northeast, and the Yankee. For example, of the latter he wrote that when he began staying on Martha’s Vineyard, he newly became interested in the contrasting “Yankee . . .

ways and doings.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> In the 1930s, he even had early on something pithy to say to summarize California’s identity: “the nut state.”

Once again, then, for Benton, culture is defined as a “living thing . . . a sum of the behavior patterns and the attached thought complexes of a living and going society.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> “A civilization . . . is a thought and behavior complex” as is his painting.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Human behavior is and personality not singular and individualistic alone but to Benton part of interrelated patterns: “patterns of American life;” “belief” and “cultural patterns”; and “thought patterns.”<sup>xxxv</sup> Thus, like their 1930s counterparts in the city, the Social Regionalists outlined class and economic change; Benton emphasized the growth of heartland patterns of total life and culture. As with Frederick Jackson Turner, Benton saw complex, interrelated forces shaping and reshaping America and its behaviors. America was a complex of threads of frontier section, economics, politics, and culture all intricately entwined as motivating forces from city to farm, from folk to sophisticate, from industry to agriculture, from mountains to countryside, from religious behavior to city entertainment. Each thread laboriously traced its interrelationship with all other threads.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In this complex of elements, Benton sought a view of social evolution, adaptation, and metamorphosis, a totality of America, the Americans, and American history and culture as his theme in his figures and their behaviors.

Benton then seeks to express American patterns as regionalist and many others on the American Scene saw them in the 1930s. (This Scene included African-Americans and women in family or worker roles. Benton

might have wanted to paint behaviors and pioneer psychologies/personalities and “inherited ways of doing” but he struggled to find the culturally correct way of painting these. What was the inherited way of painting for a Missourian? How did one paint America's social psychologies, its social patterns, its patterns of history? How could he realistically depict the psychology of place and people -- their nostalgias, restless yearnings, and unexplainable dissatisfactions<sup>xxxvii</sup> -- in a “grounded” aesthetic form? Benton arrived at a style that was representational and hopefully indicative of his underlying understandings that artistic form must visualize America’s historical character. If the American social psychological personality, felt in his bones, rough, boisterous, crude and vital, then that is what his figures and overall style should be. They should match “frontier behaviors and folk images” and their tumultuous vicissitudes. If the patterns of America culture, and experience and personality consisted of a totality of the continuous energy, John Dewey’s “doings and undergoings,” the rhythms of everyday experience, then his compositions should explicate this totality -- from past to present, from foreground to background, from individuals to communities to objects -- in metaphoric continuous flow and movement with few barriers between them. If there were unities, participations, and integrations between the individual and culture, then Benton's art should somehow show it in an all-over design. If modern French art was irrelevant to the experiences of the heartland, Benton would have to search elsewhere. He found what he wanted, however, as many did in the 1930s, in the Western tradition that he felt belonged to all times, old

master art, but adapted and adjusted to modern realities. The result would be an all-over, integrated history and representation of dynamics of American life, mind, and history. As with many of the 1930s, Benton founded a style that implicitly expressed the inner workings and doings of the American experience on his terms. The result was a conceptual, psychological realism, in other words, real allegories much like much other painting, photography, dance, and so many artistic productions of the 1930s.

### **Benton's style**

Benton had begun to found his vision in his youthful work with Japanese prints, which he studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1907-8. From them he learned to composed in “definite patterns . . . , from such artists as Hokusai, ... [in] flowing lines which lasted all my life.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> After his immersion in European modernism in his travels in the early years of the twentieth century, as we have seen, he further added the concept of the American environment of the living reality of folk patterns and American life itself. To this was added the modernist figural twisting and turning of Stanton MacDonald Wright’s Synchronism in which bodies express through torsion and curve and counter of muscle the vitalist forces directing society. Although Synchronism was in the end rooted in Michelangelo, El Greco and Mannerist torsion before being given Cubist patterning, Benton saw in it, the Marxist theory of “operations and processes.” That is, his work was beginning to conceive of human history as consisting of productive and thus generative action. He wrote:



The concept of our society as an evolution from primitivism to technology through a succession of peoples' frontiers which sparked my first attempts at painting American history pre-dated my knowledge of [Frederick Jackson] Turner. . . . My original purpose was to present a peoples' history in contrast to the conventional histories which generally spotlighted great men, political and military events, and succession of ideas. I wanted to show that the peoples' behaviors, their *action* on the opening land, were the primary reality of American life. Of course this was a form of Turnerism, but it was first suggested to me by Marxist-Socialist theory which . . . was very much in my mind when I turned from a French-inspired studio art to one of the American environment. This socialist theory treated "operations" and "processes" as more fundamental than "ideas." It also maintained the theoretical supremacy of the "people." I had in mind, following this theory, to show that America had been made by the "operations of people" who as civilization and technology advanced became increasingly separated from the benefits thereof. xxxix

Thus to Benton, and probably to many others, Marxism meant more than social realist class warfare, anti-imperialism and anti-bourgeois parading. It meant treating alleged everyday social mechanics.

Further, Benton made an art of "operations" and "processes" that, when combined with his interest in Dewey's "doing and undergoings," emphasized concrete personal action as the representative of complex historical and

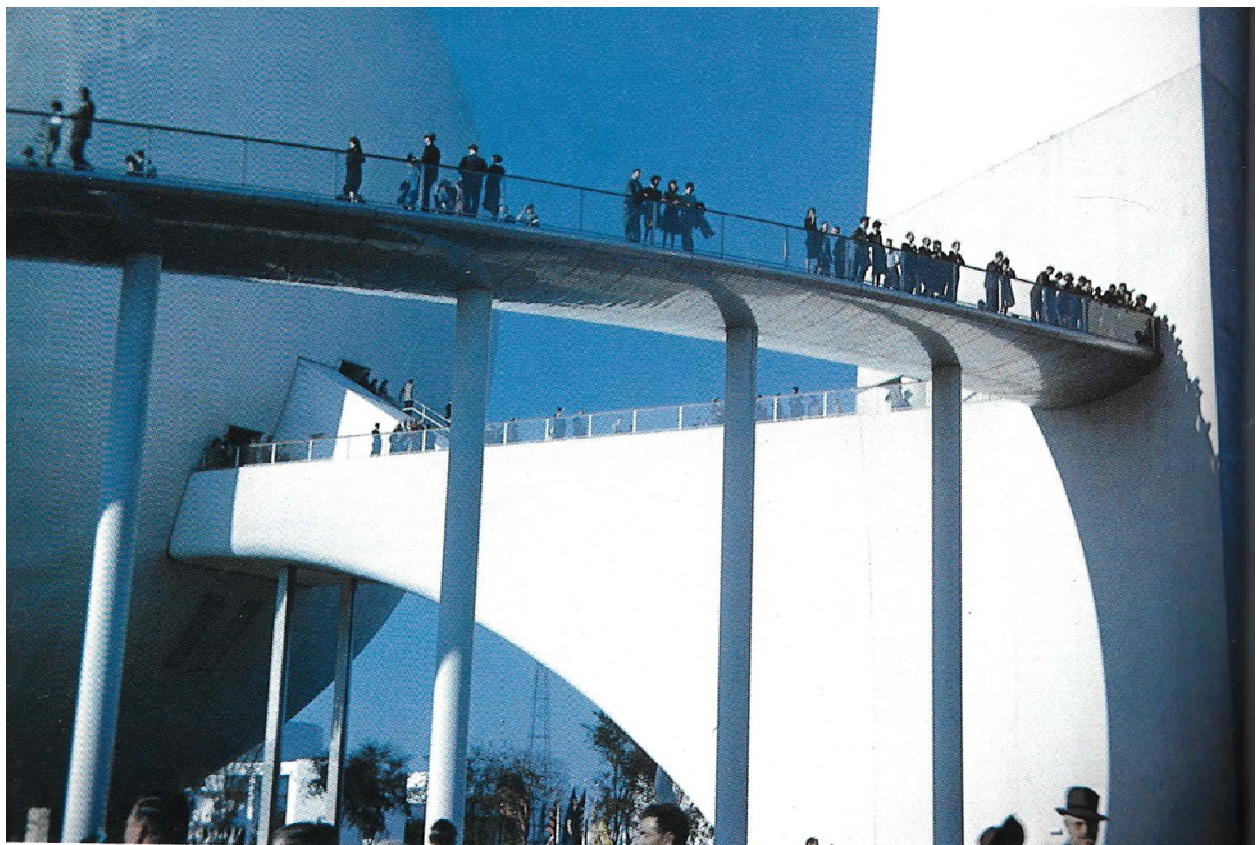
cultural dynamic currents. These doings and undergoings, that is, productive activity and operation are not part of a recurring economic cycle of stasis and dynamic change, however, but in line with Marxist thought, manifestations of a dynamism of structural relationships that itself constantly change through time. In other words, Benton's all over form and anatomy manifest constant change through dynamic interrelationships over space and time.

This is Benton's expression of the thirties conception of the continuum or the hieroglyph of motion. The hieroglyph originated in the most troubled time of American and Western history. Partly because of the Great Depression, images, forms, and ideas of progressive movement dominated. The economic catastrophe created a deep devotion to initiating something new in American life, to revitalizing and to recommencing, "starting all over again" and getting America moving.<sup>xi</sup> In the 1930s, however, starting all over was easier said than done in the face of stagnation. We are familiar with the indelible images of the new photojournalism of that time: images of idleness, inertia and despair. As *Life Magazine* noted, "depressions are hard to see . . . they consist of things not happenings, of business not being done."<sup>xli</sup> Starting over" and getting America moving again were apt words, for they suggested the idea and image of motion as a felicitous symbol in for overcoming the disaster and stagnancy of American life. Thus, motion itself became a fertile metaphor for change, for the reigniting of progress and for a bustling future. It also became the hieroglyph for human striving and purposeful activity.<sup>xlii</sup>

In answering the challenge of the rebirth of the American economy, if not life itself in the thirties, America clothed itself in the needed imagery of progressive movement. American visionary intellectuals such as Henry Dreyfus, Norman Bel Geddes, Raymond Loewy, Walter Dorwin Teague and others created a machine aesthetic of stripped-down, organic forms suggesting the uncluttered optimism of progress and promise. Those most closely associated with machine production were thus among the first to create the manifestation of this hope, originating the streamlined form that replaced the more rigid cubist Art Deco style of the 1920s. Indeed, the Streamline Moderne, as it was called, transformed American popular design, consumer goods, and such visions of the future as the 1939 New York World's Fair. From the Ford Motor Company's "Road of Tomorrow" to General Motor's "Highway and

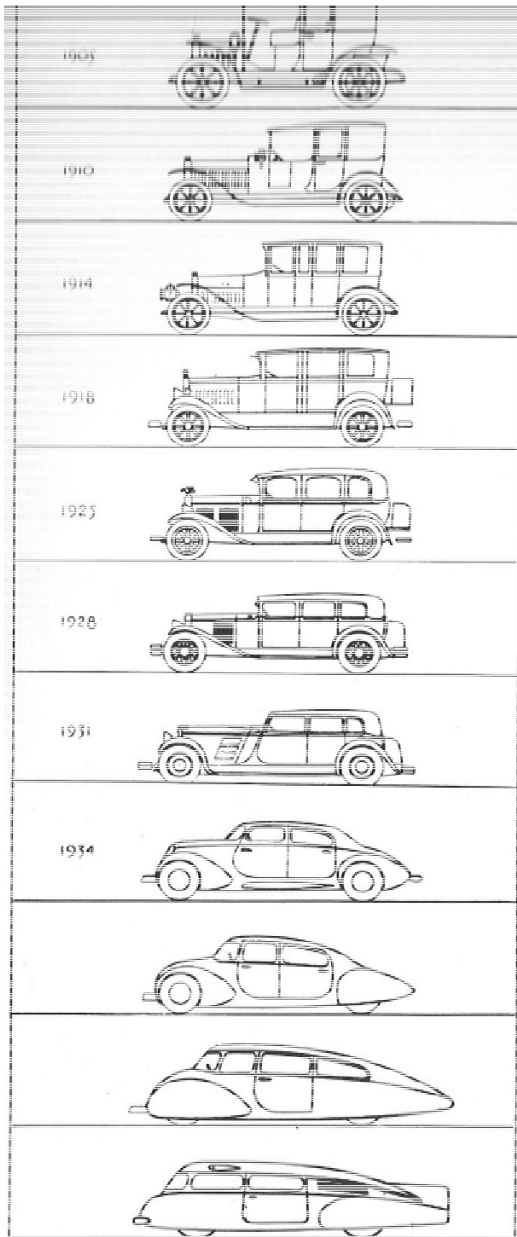


to the sweeping pathways of the Helicline (fig. 3)



and Dreyfuss's "Democracity" in the Perisphere, curvilinear movement was the order of the day. The idea and image was so widespread that the thirties are sometimes called the "streamlined decade." The need for new life and efficient activity combined principles from biology, physics, mathematics, and philosophy to give a hope for change. The shapes of aircraft, aeroplanes, and automobiles, for instance, gradually metamorphosed from square to organic forms. The popular DC-3, the Zephyr, the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Limited and cars were refashioned to suggest dynamic movement with structures composed of compound curves replacing the right-angled box shapes of the 1920s (fig. 4)



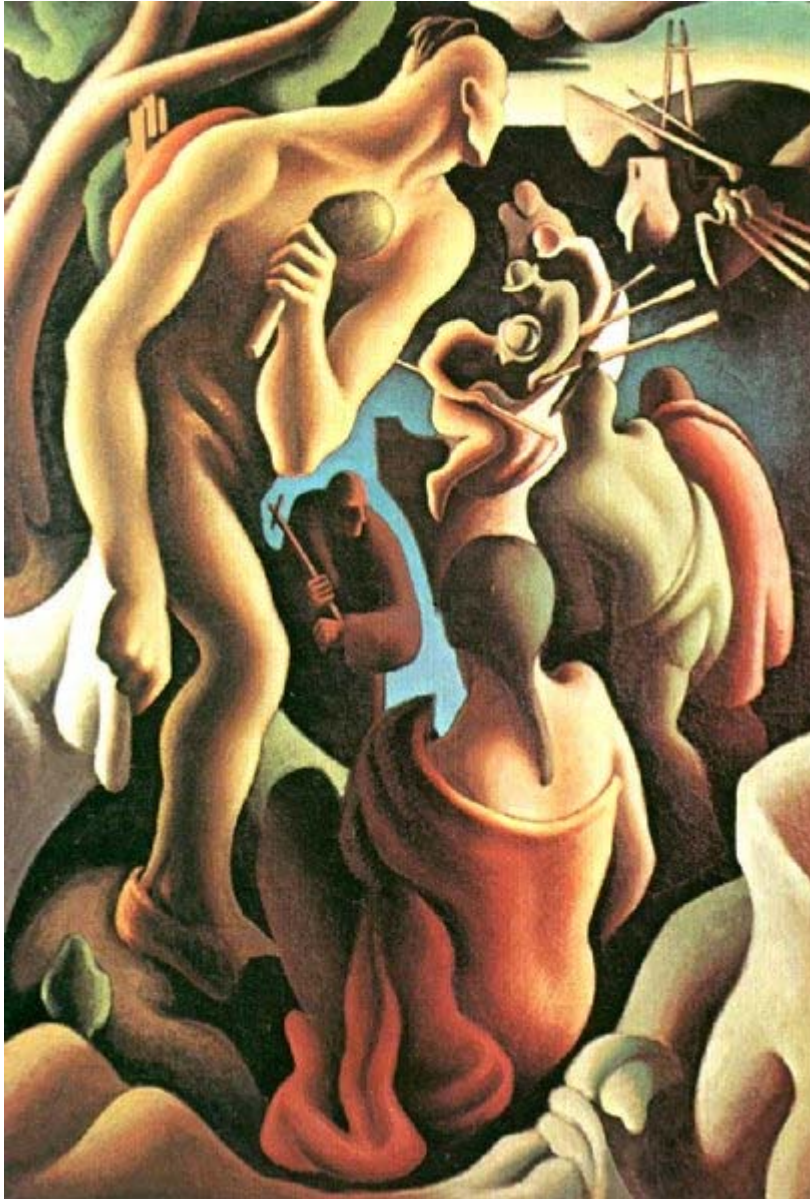


Particularly striking was the “torpedo” design, which featured a thrusting flow of low, integrated curves.<sup>xliii</sup> (Alfred Barr used the design to diagram the history and future of modern art.) An image of the fluid movement of the new, or the “living,” in the terms of the day, could signify symbolical and expressive change, process, and the evolution in space and time of modern civilization. The image enacted what it represented -- moving

from one place to another, from the past to the future in one continuous motion, easily overcoming resistance.

The idea of “getting America moving again” thus had found its expressive symbol in fluid, organic, and often compound curvilinear form and flux. As the designer Egmond Arens declared “streamlining is a world of great liberation . . . . It expresses the wishes and hope of all people in all walks of life, whose will and energy have been closed down by the circumstances of the Depression.”<sup>xliv</sup> Fluid, organic form was thus a hieroglyph or pictograph, part design and part reenactment, fusing matter a manner, idea and form, embodying a holistic myth and visionary life symbol for its time. Benton “gets America moving again” with the similar vitalist interaction of productive, transformative work or “doings and undergoings.” His art thus reveals those Marxist ideas behind the idea of vitalist force, process and integration that dominate the 1930s and its utopia. It is also lies behind the dystopia of 1940s and comes to rest in Abstract Expressionism.

We can see the beginnings of Benton’s form of vitalist interaction in his very first consequential work, the *American Historical Epic* of 1919-26. In *Discovery*, a panel from this first mural series (fig. 5),



a large oval rhythm from

the watching Native American in the foreground to the *arriviste* boat and colonialists in the distance organizes the entire design in two and three dimensions. Inside the oval forms curve, echo, and parallel one another, and light and dark areas alternate. The edges of one form glide into those of others or simply share a common contour. Every animate and inanimate object interacts to create space a unifying sinuous rhythm and relationship.



Foreground figures and deep space are thus united, creating an integrated surface pattern. Thus, despite obvious traditional figural forms and space, the intellectualized abstract rhythmic interaction of curving shapes, the all-over fluctuating light and dark pattern, and the fused spatial arrangement which pulls all forms in depth back to the surface are modern elements. *Discovery*, then, is a representation of the pioneer beginnings of America and its effects. It articulates a rhythmic integration of people, place, and event as dynamic shape and force. Benton's art would be an art of structured, dynamic modern forms and interrelations fronted by a vernacular, cultural pattern and “realism.”

With Benton's mural commission (in 1930) at the New School for Social Research in New York established by Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, Alvin Johnson and Charles Beard and joined later by European refugee scholars, the *America Today* series (fig. 6), inspired by the murals of his friend Jose Clemente Orozco a floor above, *The Brotherhood of Man*, he further integrated form with more “realities” of American life.



These realities were the arrival of the culture of the American Machine Age and the boom years of the twenties together with its urban consequences -- the customs, gestures, and activities of big city New York. To Benton this series was a breakthrough.

Characteristic of *America Today* and all subsequent murals and painting of Benton was the depiction of human agency at work. Like many muralists, Benton depicted a diversity of common men and women *acting, doing, and undergoing*, that is, their social mechanics which he thought were allegedly unchecked by theory or imposed “meaning and purpose.”<sup>xlv</sup> (Of course, the preference for unmediated “experience” is a theory, too.) Rather than the usual heroic few in traditional mural and history painting, rather than just things

and people, however, he represented or performed cultural relationships of operations and actions. Indeed, his figures are represented in the standard means of the thirties --“stop action” in which figures are suddenly frozen in motion, while swinging their arms in a boxing image, for example, or shaking their behinds in a burlesque show. Benton sought to represent and make tangible the process of the activities and action of the American common man and personality. What we have been describing, then, is Benton's developing objective correlative, of the familiar contemporary idea of *integration*. To be sure, in his early work such as *America Today*, Benton did not yet quite know how to fully integrate his various depicted activities and he had to resort to internal moldings of silver Art Deco color and nineteenth-century, that is, archaizing designs that reinforced, but still opened and contrasted with the curving and straight contours of other figures and scenes. Nevertheless, in his *America Today* murals, he found modernist or cubist imagistic *passage* to be the perfect tool for articulating the concept of the connectedness or all-over unity, continuity, and ultimately community of things -- the thought, form, behavior and images of a cultural environment and its personality. With his modern background, Benton was able to fuse modern art with emerging thirties concepts of an all-over design to life.

Occasionally others did too. To be sure, most WPA artists created the neighborly relationship or the implicit flow of one experience or time or group of experiences into another through the form of an emblem grouping of figures or events, or by parallels among multiple panels, or by simple frieze-like

continuity to create a formal equivalent to the social and cultural order of America. This was the method of Benton's Regionalist colleague John Steuart Curry in his Topeka allegorical murals of struggle and fulfillment. Some, however, like the city "Regionalist" (better known as American Scene painter) Reginald Marsh, created compositions of the active, moving, and nervous energies that were not unified and integrated at all but simply episodic.<sup>xlvi</sup> But only those with strong cubist training like Benton could fuse European modern and the American Scene. The very modern, American (yet formatively French) Stuart Davis, for example, confronted and solved the problem of connectedness and continuity in a similar way. He used cubism. But with Davis, it was not so much Analytic Cubist's passage as Synthetic Cubist's planarity. And it was not so much the epic historical and social progressions as the contemporary, everyday mental and material environment of modern America. Like Benton, but, differently, Davis, too, created a holistic, even design of multiple but unified visual experiences of a cultural environment of memories, experiences, time and places. In his mature work, Davis fused image and form, near and far, past, present, and implicit future, and different points of view simultaneously on the same plane, creating a visual field of dynamic parts of the everyday American experience held in equilibrium.

After *America Today*, Benton soon was soon able to combine figures and scenes in later murals and discard the Art Deco frame props. His 1936 murals for the state capitol of Missouri, *A Social History of the State of Missouri* (fig. 7), the commission for which he left New York and Pollock, contains various yet

fully interrelated groups of images and scenes both within one panel and among several panels around a room.



Benton represented Missouri's social life, activities, history and life in a socio-cultural continuum or, in his words, "epical progression."<sup>xlvi</sup> In two and three dimensions, in linear forms and proportions, in subject sequences, Benton correlated longitudinal and panoramic patterns of development in original form. He represented the Missourian experience of America as a series of individual and collective "doings and undergoings" such as farming, cooking, hunting raising children, or changing diapers, and his pictures as portrayed the significant and trivial, serious and crude behavior patterns of the people of the state in flowing sequences, analogies, and unities over space and time,<sup>xlvi</sup> that, he states, took from the earth its abundant fruitfulness: "The history of our state will move on down the long parade of centuries full of that same fruitfulness of man and earth that makes the story of our past so rich."<sup>xli</sup>

Benton referred to his correlating of things and forms in a painting as *process*. He had felt that "organizing ability" (process) and knowledge of things (with their meanings) were harmonized during the Renaissance but lost in the modern age.<sup>1</sup> We integrate what we can of the world, he writes, and that integration in art is one of line, color and mass. The visible world provides "realities," his art processes, integrates them and all of this is analogous to our

own mental processes where things are made to fit in or bound together.<sup>li</sup> The interior logic of a work lies in its representational and conceptual unity. For Benton, the problem with modern painting is that it relied on solely abstract processing and while the modern should set up sequences of line, color, and mass, in order that the eye may go from part to part, there must be particular and overall meanings.<sup>lii</sup> Correlating process meant unifying through "rhythm and balance."

In this regard, Benton wrote that the prime objective of his later Harry Truman murals of 1959-62 in Independence, Missouri was to create "a 'flow' from one area of the mural to another so that the 'unity of the whole' [and of the American experience is] . . . *emphatically* apprehended."<sup>liii</sup> His "correlating process" had no pretensions to absolute truth, but was frankly emotional: he wanted to create emotional sequences, human action balanced with meaning, artistic logic with experience. He wrote: "Successful work is a measure of both [form and subject]. The various logical devices of painting — the division of things into planes, the counterpoint of line and plane, the playing of color against color, light against dark, projection against recession, et cetera — are instrumental factors set to the service of unifying experienced things."<sup>liv</sup> Benton rejected the idea of a perfect sequence for the assertion of things and their significance strained it. In contrast, for the interest of truth-to-life inclusiveness, Benton broke, twisted or turned back on itself the flow of line. As a consequence, some lines seem violent and need to be countered by offset by another although, Benton recognized, that complete integration is only

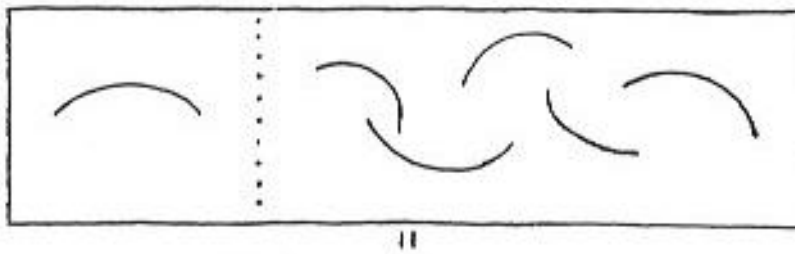


striven for, never fully achieved.<sup>lv</sup> The result was an integrated yet dynamic and tumultuous composition.

The emphasis on flow, correlating, countering and integrating process and epical progression bring us to a second area of Benton's artistic theory and articulation of his understandings of the American experience -- its rhythmic sequences or concentrated fluidity. Despite the many traditional elements of his work, his emphasis on surface and design; on all-over movement without barriers or edges; on relationships of shape, lights and darks; and on archetypal forms define a mode of contrapuntal mode of composition that foretells Pollock's work and indeed, reveals the very nature of his composition. To the extent that Pollock would absorb these elements from Benton, however, it was not merely through the example of Benton's finished paintings. In the early 1920s, commissioned by Albert Barnes, the collector and student of formal relations, Benton had devised an instructional system for his teaching at the Art Students League incorporating his theoretical principles of pictorial structure and composition. During his years of study with Benton at the Art Students League and beyond, Pollock must have been exposed to them. These principles and their accompanying illustrations are even more evocative of aspects of Pollock's than Benton's paintings.

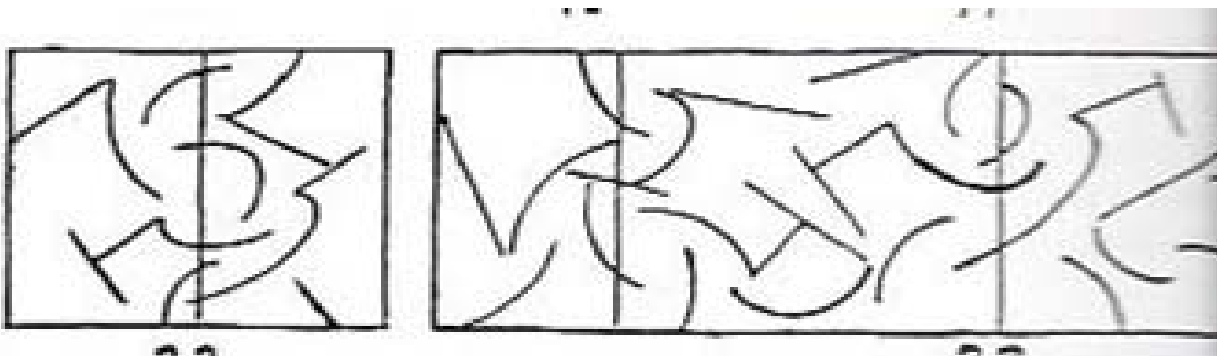
Benton published an illustrated account of his instructional methods in a series of articles in *The Arts* in 1926-27.<sup>lvi</sup> These articles demonstrated in "stripped down" form, that is, in abstract and geometric shapes and not in representational forms, what he considered to be the fundamental factors that

underlie what he thought the viewer responds to in aesthetic values. In his teaching he showed that the organization of pictorial elements involved the creation of a simple, yet complex unified pattern. While the method of geometric diagrams was not necessarily original with Benton, such analysis was rare as a teaching tool. The emphasis on rhythmic movement and the diagrams themselves point to the direction his work and that of Pollock's was to take. We will examine Benton's teachings in greater detail when they are more fully realized in Pollock's abstractions. Suffice to say at this point that Benton wrote of, defined and illustrated rhythmic flow (fig. 8) as consisting of equilibrium, connection and sequence.



In the articles of *The Arts*,

Benton illustrated and sketched out abstract rhythms and relationships that were to be followed to create expressive compositions (fig. 9).



For Benton, the principles were mechanical, however, and cannot function alone. "Non-mechanical" factors such as "human interest" had to be added to



make a true work of art. Benton's diagrams were nevertheless highly suggestive of Pollock's eventual development and were, moreover, though written in 1926-27, surprisingly anticipatory of the "organic" thirties and forties. Throughout our study, we will see examples of the impact of these diagrams on Pollock's work and development.

Benton's theoretical principles, which he utilized in the visualization of his subject, the dynamism of the American experience and culture, add up to a form of conceptual realism or realist allegory. It is a realism that is by no means a simple imitation of nature but a synthesis of original ideas and modern and traditional elements. Benton fused ideas of culture and experience, art and anatomy, vitality and consciousness, and shape and composition into a conceptual art and a conceptual personality.

#### Pollock's Study and Regionalist Creativity

Benton's influence on his student, Jackson Pollock, is course, evident from the very beginning of Pollock's work after his 1930 arrival in New York. In his first surviving paintings, Pollock followed Benton's lead as to the old masters he should study but he imbued those student works with Benton's principles of dynamism in an original way. Pollock's *Abandoned Factory* of 1934-38 (fig. 10) is one of his first complete paintings.



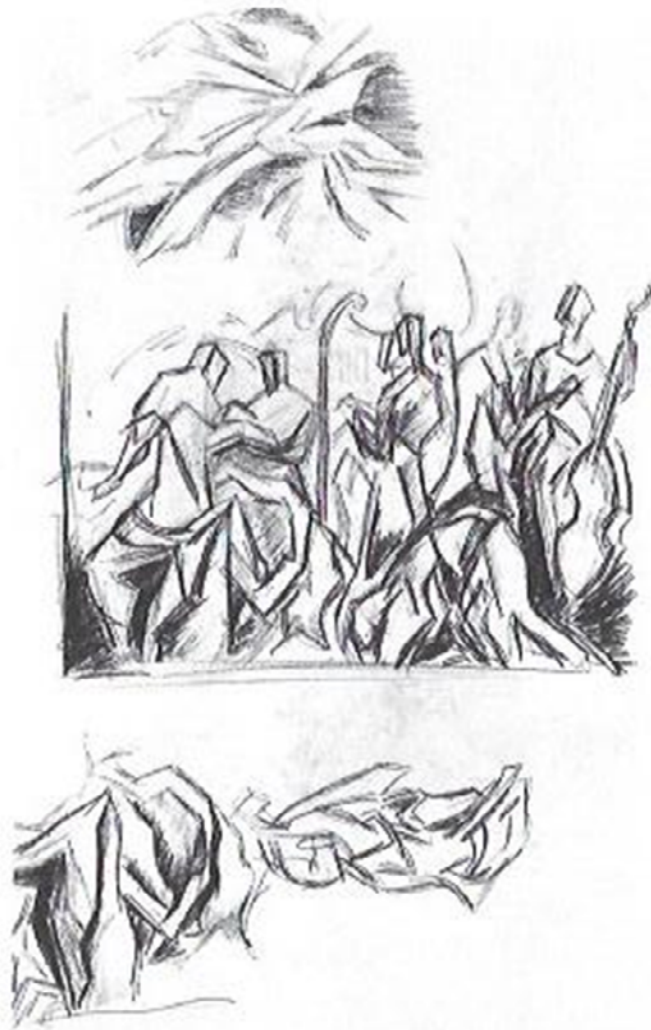
13 It consists of a crossed

sharply receding pathway to two buildings in the middle distance. All is bathed in a light and dark ground and sky. Pollock based the work on El Greco's *View of Toledo* that had been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1929. (El Greco was a Benton favorite.) *Abandoned Factory* echoes the *View of Toledo* in its determined linear recessions and diminutions in space, although the crossed lines seem more didactic, school textish in their reflection of Benton's dynamism.

Like the new popularity of Ingres in the 1930s that inspired artists John Graham and Willem de Kooning, Pollock drew from the newly minted twentieth century recognition of El Greco. The Metropolitan added several other El Greco's canvases including the *Adoration of the Shepherds* and *Fifth Seal of the Apocalypse (Vision of Saint John, 1956)* to its *View of Toledo*.

That Pollock drew from El Greco suggests that as he was creating his first works he was defining his identity. To be sure he was repeating the choices of his teacher, Benton, and Rubens and Michelangelo were added later, but the choice involved more than that. El Greco was a Mannerist painter more interested in the abstract than the natural, and the abstract for him was of religious sentiment. With his dramatic juxtapositions, telescoping space, undulating lines, interlacing sinuous forms, and sharp contrasts between light and dark, El Greco was a spiritualized painter in which the human religious drama was matched by style. In this, Pollock was intensifying yet transforming his lessons from Benton. (Pollock's later inspiration, the dramatic Orozco, was equally an El Greco man.) Pollock was also advancing his early theosophical quests into the history of art, both modern and old master. El Greco's exaggerated gestures and willful distortions of figures evoke the first example of Pollock's bioexpressionism in which figural form takes on conceptual theme. In Pollock's early paintings until the mid 1930s, he alternates both relatively smooth surfaces of Benton with the spectral of El Greco.

In his first study notebook of 1938, he absorbed Benton's lessons and applied them to Old Master painting that he copied under Benton's inspiration



(fig. 11) lvii

but with *Cotton*

*Pickers* of 1934-38 (fig. 12), Pollock dove into Regionalist subjects of his teacher.



And he has moved on to greater realization of Benton's stylistic lessons. Two rows of cotton pickers --perhaps Pollock saw them in his journeys back and forth to California from New York -- are forced into two serpentine crisscrossing axes that further recede to the horizon. With their bags, the figures sinuously create the recession into depth. While the surface of the figures and landscape are modulated and whitened as in El Greco, the conception and composition are pure Benton. In *T.P.'s Boat in Menemsha Pond* (1934) and *Going West* (1934-38) (fig. 13), Pollock extends his devotion to Benton both in place and subject. Menemsha's Pond lies in Martha's Vineyard where he would summer with Benton. In *Going West*,





Pollock draws on a Benton drawing of the same subject with perhaps echoes of a photo of Pollock's birthplace in Cody, Wyoming. In *Going West*, an all-over curve unites the foreground of rocks and earth with the background of the clouds "behind" the mountains to form Pollock's characteristic emblem shape. The straight lines of the wagons both counter and reinforce the ground curve from right to left while the high bumpy hills and straight edges of the house provide a diagonal counterpoint to the single curve of the clouds and, as in the hills of T.P.'s *Boat in Menemsha Pond*, suddenly flattening the painting. Light and dark areas flicker across the surface. Thus, while there is a firm three-dimensional spatial construction, the all-over design is as apparent in two dimensions as in three. In addition, an influence of Albert Ryder's, the only

American master Pollock said ever interested him,<sup>lviii</sup> is also present in both paintings in the intense darkness, the thick painterly treatment, the rugged simple shapes, the piercing moon and the dramatic sky. These pictures then are infused with a moody introspection, rare in Regionalist subjects. The major Regionalists lacked the search for an expressive style to match the subject. Instead in works such as John Steuart Curry's *Baptism in Kansas*, representational style was not much different from the descriptive realism of nineteenth century painting of the peasantry such as that of Fritz Mackensen's 1895 *Prayers in the Moor*. Benton himself recognized Pollock's unique emotional expressiveness. For Pollock, emotion and idea unite figure and environment, and, indeed, personality.

It was Benton -- again -- who was responsible for Pollock's interest in Ryder for it was he who introduced Pollock to Ryder, who, like Pollock, and other Regionalists at this time, exhibited at Ferargil Gallery in New York. Ryder had been a source for Benton throughout his own work, particularly the flowing and piercing skies that Benton eventually made more three than two dimensional. Later in the early 1940s, if not perhaps earlier, the work of the Surrealist Salvador Dali reinforced Benton's big skies and three-dimensional form.

Benton's cubic figures manifest in his Synchronist pictures, in his diagrams, and in his studies for paintings such as the *Palisades* panel of *The American Historical Epic* also appear, in Pollock's work (see, for example, *Deposition* of ca. 1930-33). Pollock's figures consist of sharply contrasting light

or dark planes without value transitions. They are so densely packed that there is a surface pattern of crisscrossing blocks and planes. *Composition with Figures and Banners* of 1934-38 (fig. 14) utilizes the curvilinear shapes of Benton's diagrams and painting (and perhaps also of David Alfaro Siqueiros's banners) in an all-over two-and three-dimensional swirling rhythm.



And it also echoes vertical "poles" that Benton had used in his teaching and work. Thus, Pollock's early work of the 1930s follows Benton's stylistic principles, though Pollock's individuality is evident in the more painterly flatness and more introspective mood. When, in 1938-1939, he rejects Benton's subject matter and his traditional formal elements, his work may at first appear to be free of



Benton's influence. However, his rhythmic counterpoint, rooted in Bentonian theory and practice, remains characteristic of the remainder of his work. Moreover, specific Bentonian design ideas reappear throughout Pollock's oeuvre including the figure as conceptual and behaviorist actor. As we shall see, as Pollock moves into other areas of expression, there will remain a Benton element in the make-up of nearly all of his work, climaxing in the great "abstractions" or weavings of the late 1940s.

The early paintings of Pollock indicate his imitation and absorption of Benton's concepts. But, as noted, it is also through Benton that Pollock principally learns the lessons of the 1930s that we have been examining. Both Benton and his era's portrayal of integrated environmental and cultural-psychological conditions appear in these Pollocks. He portrays the contemporary concept of experience in which he and others directly participated and emotionally shared: moving as a vehicle for a better life, creative production and work, "living" dynamic cosmos of sky, land and man, and the fecundity of the world, and figural personality as conceptual force.

(In Pollock's early Regionalist work, it is not just a question of working the land but of humanist reference. It should be noted that here at the beginning of his work, Pollock employs what will be his lifelong symbol of the inherent capacity for growth in the world. In another work, [*Two Landscapes with Figures*] of 1934-38 (fig. 15),



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he bifurcates a canvas with a man on a boat at the right but, very significantly, a woman nursing a child at the left. She lies against a broken tree but in front of some flowers. The woman gives life in a troubled environment. This would seem, at first, to be insignificant, perhaps just something he saw in his travels or it may be inspired by a Rembrandt painting, *The Rest during the Flight into Egypt*, plate 34 in a book Pollock was known to have. The Rembrandt shares the Mary with the suckling child by a broken tree in a landscape.)

In *Composition with Figures and Banners*, a man and woman embrace in the center of the swirling composition. Most significantly, they are taken from Pollock's leading source, as we shall see, Jose Clemente Orozco's fresco

*Prometheus* (1930). Sitting on the right is another figure whose stomach may be deliberately distended and at the left, a seated figure facing inward and parallel to the picture plane. This figure is the first of just such a form and placement that continues throughout Pollock's work to *Echo: Number 25* of 1951. It may be derived from a detail of a Signorelli painting that he copied from a book, *The Last Will of Moses*. Thus, a sexually involved couple is surrounded by reinforcing and supportive figures. And all of motifs -- images of the nursing woman, the pregnant "woman" and the embracing couple -- are the first statement of Pollock's commitment to gestating imagery and its constituents. These are his figural vehicles, later he will use natural and stylistic form. However, let us put this discussion aside until later, when we will further see the beginnings of Pollock's own painting personality.

Before we look at Pollock's growing work in depth, we shall bring the early 1930s to an end. The outbreak of European war in 1936 climaxing with the beginnings of World War II undermined the Regionalist world. Regionalism was originally an aesthetic response to questions, problems and solutions of culture and personality (including the democratic culture of the New Deal) of the 1930s, which had for Pollock replaced the world civilization of theosophy. When the international situation turned menacing and intruded on American life, Benton wrote, "American particularisms were pushed into the background and subordinated to the international problem. In this re-orientation of our national life and thought, Regionalism was as much out of place as New Dealism itself. It declined in popular interest and lost its grip on the minds of

young artists.”<sup>lix</sup> The war expanded and monumentalized modernization, terminating Benton’s world. After the war, even the back roads where Benton traveled were no longer the same. In these years, Benton, for example, no longer filled his notebooks with people but rather landscapes. This he said was not caused by a shift in interest but in the “old patterns of American life” after the war. Before, in the woods he would meet people as they meandered down unpaved roads. Now roads were mostly paved and people no longer stopped to chat with you but whizzed by in fast cars. The country was being turned into the city and his cultural landscape and individuality was disappearing.<sup>lx</sup> For Benton, the sweep of industrial and urban modernity was bearing down on him even in mid-America and it was personally felt.

The rise of Nazism also contributed to the end of Regionalism for it proved that the people or the masses could not be trusted to guard basic liberties. Tradition and the ascendancy of the "nation" were no guarantee of human decency. The rise of communism at the same time put an end to belief in cultural elites for it proved that leftist intellectuals could also not be trusted to guard basic liberties. Change and the ascendancy of the "oppressed" were no guarantee of human decency either.

While this was the beginning of the end for Regionalism, for Pollock and the emergent Abstract Expressionist generation, much of it remained. While the emphasis on the region, American culture and personality, and the American experience disappeared, the underlying structure of concepts formed the foundation of the new. The constituents of integrated, holistic environment,

of flowing time and space, and of conceptual behavior and personality traits would form a fundamental layer to Jackson Pollock's work throughout his career.

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### *Illustrations*

Fig. 1. Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930. Oil on beaver board, 30  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 25  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. Friends of the American Art Collection, 1930.

Fig. 2. General Motor's Building "Highway and Horizons," 1939-40. World's Fair.

Fig. 3. *Helicline*, 1939-40. World Fair.

Fig. 4. Raymond Loewy, *Evolution chart*, 1933. Raymond Loewy/ William Snaith, Inc.

Fig. 5. Thomas Hart Benton, *Discovery, The American Historical Epic*, 1920. Oil on canvas mounted on aluminum honeycomb board, 5 ft. 1/16 in. x 42 1/8 in. Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City. Bequest of the artist.

Fig. 6. Thomas Hart Benton, *City Activities with Dance Hall, America Today*. Egg tempera and oil on linen on wood, 1930. 91 x 96 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 7. Thomas Hart Benton, *A Social History of Missouri*, 1936. Egg tempera and oil on linen. State Capitol of Missouri, Jefferson City.

Fig. 8. Thomas Hart Benton diagram, illustration from "The Mechanics of Form Organization," *Arts Magazine*, November 1926-March 1927.

Fig. 9. Thomas Hart Benton diagram, illustration from "The Mechanics of Form Organization," *Arts Magazine*, November 1926- March 1927.

Fig. 10. *Abandoned Factory*, 1934-38. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 in. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Benevy.

Fig. 11. Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: Catalogue Raisonne of Paintings, Drawings*, 1978 (New Haven: Yale University Press III: 410v.

Fig. 12. *Cotton Pickers*, 1934-38. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in. Albright-Knox Gallery, Martha Jackson Collection, 1974.

Fig. 13. *Going West*, 1934-5. Oil on fiberboard, 15 1/8 x 20 3/4 in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Thomas Hart Benton.

Fig. 14. [*Composition with Figures and Banners*], 1934-38. Oil on canvas, 10 5/8 x 11 3/4 in. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Museum purchase with funds by Brown Foundation

Fig. 15. [*Two Landscapes with Figures*], 1934-38. Oil on linoleum, 8 7/8 x 25 1/4 in. Collection Sande McCoy.

## Endnotes

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i Darrell Garwood, *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood* (New York: Norton, 1944; Reprint -- Westport, Connecticut; Greenwood, 1971), 104.

ii Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 224.

iii Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1934/1973), 159.

iv Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, 120.

v See James M. Denis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York: Viking, 1975), Appendix.

vi Document 16 in Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonne of Paintings, Drawings and Other Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978) IV: 214.

vii Pollock, quoted in "Unframed Space," *The New Yorker* 26 # 4 (August 5, 1950): 16.

viii Pollock, in "Jackson Pollock: A Questionnaire," *Arts & Architecture* 61 # 2 (February 1944): 14.

ix Quoted in Stephen Polcari, Reuben Kadish Oral History, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, April 15, 1992, transcript 1-2.

x The Regionalist three were "discovered" and made prominent by a *Time/Life* publication, the December of 1934 issue *Time* magazine. Ironically, Pollock, too, was made famous through an article in *Life* magazine in 1949.

xi Guy Davenport, "The Symbol of the Archaic," in *The Geography of the Imagination* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1997), 28.

xii Personal communication, 1985, New York.

xiii Document 13 in O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonne*, 4: 213. I might add that another thirties figure, the art critic Thomas



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Craven, was and is given the same treatment although, in many ways deservedly so. While Craven was a supporter of Benton, both Pollock and colleague Clyfford Still liked what he had to say even if it contradicted other things they believed. Pollock wrote in a letter to his mother in 1932 that “Sande didn’t say in his letter if he heard Thomas Craven lecture or not – he should have. I meant to write him about it, he is one critic who has intelligence and a thorough knowledge of the history of art.” For Still, see Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge, 1991), 91.

xiv Edward Fry, letter to Fred McCraw, April 22, 1987 cited in Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton An American Original* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1989), 114.

xv The murals, recently owned by the Equitable Corporation in New York, were given to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2012.

xvi Quoted in “Excerpt from ‘Thomas Hart Benton on His Way Back to Missouri,’” in Ruth Pickering, *Arts and Decoration* XLII (February 1935): 19-20, reprinted in *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany/ Selections from His Published Opinions 1916-1960*, Matthew Baigell, ed., (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1971), 76.

xvii Benton, “Art and Social Struggle: Reply to Rivera,” *The University Review* (University of Kansas City) II (Winter 1935): 71-78, reprinted in Baigell, *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 47.

xviii *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 76.

xix Ibid.

xx Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 4<sup>th</sup> rev., 1983), 41- 42.

xxi Emily Braun, “Thomas Hart Benton & Progressive Liberalism: An Interpretation of the New School Murals,” in Braun and Thomas Branchick, *Thomas Hart Benton The America Today Murals* (Williamstown: Williams College Museum of Art, 1985), 25.

xxii *Thomas Hart Benton, An American in Art* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1969): 169.

xxiii Ibid., 169.

xxiv Benton, “The Arts of Life in America,” statement accompanying murals, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1932, reprinted in Baigell, *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 32.

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xxv Benton, "Art and Nationalism," in *The Modern Monthly* 8 (May 1934): 232-6,

reprinted in *ibid.*, 54.

xxvi Benton, *An American in Art*, 61.

xxvii Benton *An Artist in America*, 255

xxviii Benton, "Art and Nationalism," in Baigell, *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 51.

xxix Benton, *An American in Art*, 155-56.

xxx *Ibid.*, 66.

xxxi Benton, "Art and Nationalism," *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 55; see also Benton, *An Artist in America*, 328; interview *New York Sun*, April 12, 1935, reprinted in *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 78; and "Painting and Propaganda Don't Mix," *The Saturday Review* XLIII (December 24, 1960): 16-17, reprinted in *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 114.

xxxii Benton, *An Artist in America*, 74.

xxxiii Benton, interview in *Democrat* 8 (February 1943): 3-5, 20-24, reprinted in Baigell, *A Thomas Hart Miscellany*, 101.

xxxiv Benton, "Interview in Art Front," reprinted in *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 59.

xxxv Benton, interview *New York Sun* (April 12, 1935), reprinted in Baigell, *A Thomas Hart Miscellany*, 78; "Painting and Propaganda Don't Mix," Baigell, *A Thomas Hart Miscellany*, 114.

xxxvi See R.A. Billingham, Introduction in *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner*, R.A. Billingham, ed., (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1961.)

xxxvii Benton, *An Artist in America*, 68.

xxxviii *Ibid.*, 12.

xxxix Benton, *An American in Art*, 149.

xl Donald J. Bush, *The Streamlined Decade* (New York: George Braziller, 1975). Perhaps a politician, Mario Cuomo, "Mario's Deep 'Depression,'" *New York Post*,

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February 16, 1998, 9, best described the experience of the 1930s when he noted: "In a way, the Great Depression made us all poor immigrants again—starting all over again in a strange land, with little more than our dreams of a better life."

xli Cited in Morris Dickstein, "Depression Culture: The Dream of Mobility," *Partisan Review*, Winter 1996, 68.

xlii See Stephen Polcari, "Pollock and America, Too," in Joan Marter, Ed., *Abstract Expressionism/ The International Context* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 184-190

xliii See Bush, *The Streamlined Decade*, 114.

xliv Quoted in Thomas Ott, *Streamliners: America's Lost Trains*, Pegasi Pictures, Inc. for "The American Experience," WGBH Educational Foundation, distributed by PBS, 20001.

xlvi Benton, "Interview in *Art Front*," in Baigell, *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 64.

xlvi Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene American Painting of the 1930s* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 147.

xlvii See Benton's characterization of large-scale painting in "My American Epic in Paint," in Baigell, *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 19.

xlviii For a discussion of Benton's stylistic sources and development, see Matthew Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton*, (New York: Abrams, 1973), and Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*.

xlix Thomas Hibben, who wrote the introductory caption, cited in Erica Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism/ From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 102.

1 Thomas Hart Benton/Frank Lloyd Wright, A Transcript of the Addresses and Exchanges, Providence, Rhode Island, November 11, 1932 in *Studies in the History of Art III* (Williamstown: Williams College Museum of Art, 1985), 3.

li Ibid., 2.

lii Ibid., 5.

liii Benton, *An American in Art*, 75.

liv Benton, "The Arts of Life in America," in Baigell, *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany*, 28.

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lv Ibid., 29-31.

lvi Thomas Hart Benton, "The Mechanics of Form Organization," *The Arts* I (November 1926): 285-89; II (December 1926): 340-42; III (January 1927): 43-44; IV (February 1927): 95-96; V (March 1927): 145-48. It is not known whether Pollock owned the articles but his close friend, Reuben Kadish, kept them throughout his life. See Stephen Polcari, "Reuben Kadish Oral History Interview," transcript, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, April 15, 1992, 15.

lvii Here it might be helpful to look at Benton's own self-imposed learning process. After reading of Tintoretto, for example, Benton produced elaborate models first in wire and then in clay or plastilene that worked out in full and then bas-relief the composition, general color schemes, and spatial and rhythmic dispositions of masses and contours — and social behaviors — or as he called them "human action in three-dimensions extensions" Benton, *An American in Art*, 73.

lviii Jackson Pollock, Answer to a Questionnaire in *Arts and Architecture* 61 (February 1944): 14.

lix Benton, *An American in Art*, 192.

lx Benton, *An Artist in America*, 328.

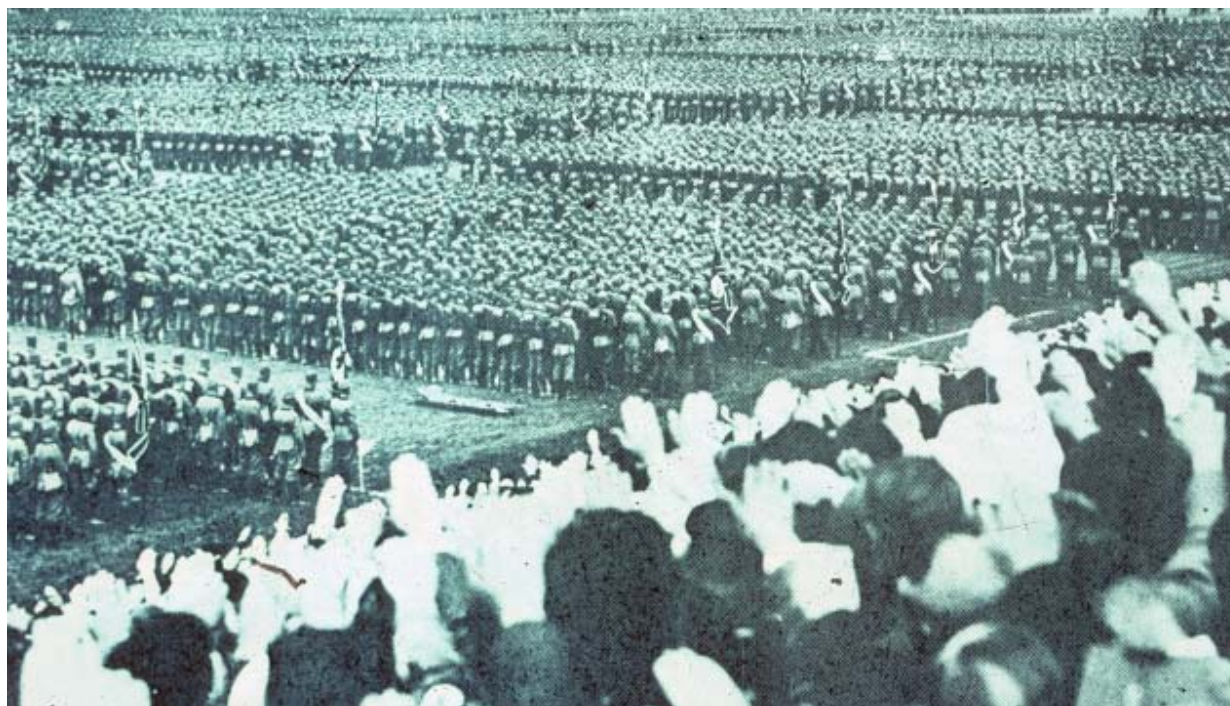
## **Mass Man Takes the Stage**

The Pervasiveness of the Fears of Mass Society and Culture, the New Lethal

In Jackson Pollock's early years, we have seen his quest for a renewed spiritual life and civilization. We have seen that followed by a quest for new cultural strength in the 1930s. A renewal of culture would provide the "ground to stand on" in Alfred Kazin's famous words. Inner life would be that of the traits of the theosophic man and American personality and the long-standing behaviors of its civilization. By the end of the 1930s, a new crisis appeared that dwarfed all others. Civilization embarked on its second self-destructive course in twenty years. For the second time in two decades, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared in the summer of 1940, personal life would be dominated by public life. And the personality, now psyche, would undergo a revolution as it always does in times of great stress.

The thirties had begun with the valorization of the masses. It ended with their vilification. The ideology of the World's Fair of 1939, the climax to the social utopianism of the 1930s in America, seems to be deliberately crafted to meet the new world, not just American history, and the increased worry about "mass man," especially with the events in Europe which could only confirm the diagnosis of the ills of modern society. The conception of the World's Fair

addresses the new fears of the mass man newly evident in the regimented rationalized crowds at Nuremberg, in modern, urban, industrial and violent Germany (fig. 1).



By the late 1930s, authoritarian man – rootless, tradition less, secularized, regimented, massified -- was not an abstraction but a reality to many and he replaced the quest for the American man or personality and its traits. A new mass society theory was applied to the fear of fascism and social chaos and the resolution of one became a form of the resolution of the other. If you will, the internal conflicts of a mass man and a mass society became a site to find ways to comprehend and to transcend the psycho cultural, political and social conflicts of the time. In other words, in America the cultural elites of which Pollock was a part engaged and fought the world on their terms – through their cultural theory. (This is typical of elites.)

The World's Fair of 1939 already indicates this new concern. It required a new conception of social wholeness for the newly dominating industrial and urban life of America rife with its version of the dangers. The Fair sought to find a form and a conception that would interrelate and integrate the increasingly worrisome modern autonomous individual. Seemingly fearing him as the mass society conception did, theorists of the Fair felt that urban individual must be integrated into society embracing men and their social environment in a complex but differentiated whole.

Man's freedom yet interdependence was constantly stressed at the Fair because the "alienation of the individual from his community" in mass society was its deep concern. In the 1930s, this was a key element of mass society theory: modernity suffered from anonymity and it needed to be resolved by the creation of new community ties. One would be in the planned future of man in harmony with and not opposed to the machine. Another would be through a new connection to the "soil" and physical environment, particularly "the American place" of the late 1930s, the timeless repository of human life and enduring creative action. Another still would be emulation of successful social communities that were, not accidentally, outside urban life. The head of the federal government's Works Progress Administration, Holger Cahill, and others admired folk societies and the Native American peoples that exemplified ideal communities of integrated life of art, social mores, culture, and physical space. Cahill said that these participatory social bonds were the "most moving and impressive example of community expression and . . . sharing which our



contemporary world affords.” And Eleanor Roosevelt felt the same way. In the introduction to the “Indian Arts of America” show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941, she noted that the art formed a rich heritage of expression, that is, a wealth of relations in art and culture not only for the Indian communities but as an example for whites, too.<sup>i</sup>

The thirties also sought to resolve the crisis of alienation and the need for renovated social groupings with a new emphasis on the family that dominated much mural painting, thus beginning the fight that continues to today to counter an erosion of family and “family values.” And new social grouping could be further achieved by greater connection to the “usable past” when other Americans had trod the very paths that Americans confronted in the 1930s. Much as the psychologist Carl G. Jung considered the collective unconscious as the site of the past and the archetypes tradition to be revamped but not eliminated for the modern individual, Americans sought a way could be found to renovate the present so that a future could be brought about. Jung’s popularity in the late 1930s and impact for Pollock was for this very reason.

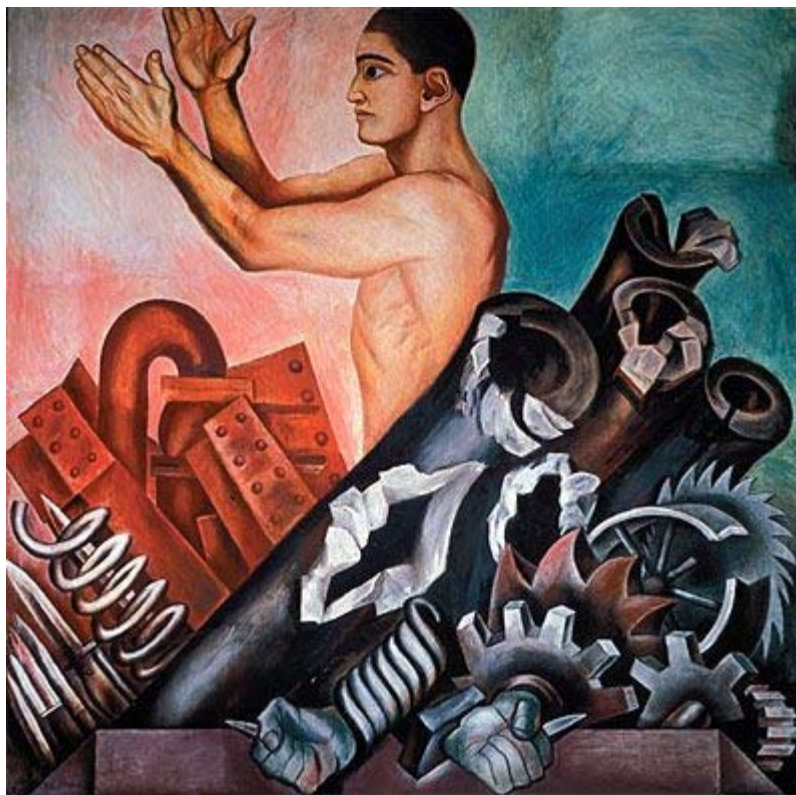
The need for the right integration, pattern, or configuration called culture for modern life had its reverberations on the individual as well and his personality or the psyche as personality was increasingly known. As anthropology defined for the age, culture was the individual, and the individual culture writ large. Personality was culture and culture personality (and psyche). We have already seen this with Thomas Hart Benton but a new and



popular discipline emerged and the anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead became household names for it. *For them, the distinct, internally coherent, repertoire of custom, habits and psychological traits formed the individual self. If the culture was in conflict, so was the psychological organization and contents of the self. There would be need for a new psychological life that allowed for greater satisfaction, creative life, and psychological balance and harmony.* Mass society theory saw this as the problem too. They too called for the creative life of the individual as the solution to mass alienation and ignorance. The new man – like Jung’s favorite archaic man -- would be imbued with his history, with a memory of his past and in control of his destiny, and like Nietzsche’s creative man -- strong, independent, directed by his own inner self that cannot be revoked and contemptuous of the herd. (Nietzsche’s *ubermensch* was the ideal of Pollock’s contemporaneous colleague Clyfford Still.) He or she would not be an exclusively rationalistic but more spiritual person. Rather than the depersonalized mass man subdued by authoritarian, rationalistic, and bureaucratic society, for the thirties, a creative individual integrated a dynamic whole evolving new values and a satisfactory way of living. The psychology of the creative individual would be the microsocial of the macrosocial -- society itself. According to the thirties’ hopes, both would act together to form the new and resolve the spiritual and psychological as well as the social crisis of the modern age and what it had wrought. *America thus needed to forge a more integrated, balanced, varied but complete cultural whole and cultural personality*

*and psyche for the future.* Change was the basis of this and the attraction of all cultural paradigms of the forms of the dynamic we have discussed – theosophy, Benton cultural vitality, the thirties “hieroglyph of motion,” the Fair’s organic streamlined wholeness, and marxism’s operations and processes, among them. These were all variants of the need, form and image of the hope of dynamic, self-engendering transformative change. One did not move forward to stay in place. *In the 1930s, the hieroglyph of hope is dynamic, integrative movement and flow to the future man and culture.* It would defeat the fear of the mass and its potentialities for fascistic personality.<sup>ii</sup>

Let us conclude our look at the trajectory of the 1930s with a brief examination of a few figures that reveal how widespread elements of the mass society analysis were. It was long standing among elites to fear industrial mechanization. Now it took on a more sinister shadow. For example, in 1932 Jose Clemente Orozco, Pollock’s most loved and influential North American painter, depicted it at Dartmouth College as a preliminary to his extremely important *Epic of American Civilization. Man Released from the Mechanistic to*



*the Creative Life* (fig. 2)

consists of industrial imagery and man. The industrial imagery turns into aggression indicated by a hand with a knife, a standard symbol of Pollock derived from Orozco. Further the industrial and mechanistic climax as guns, a key idea of what will be mass society theory. The guns are shot up indicating that they lead to war. Orozco's work from then on contains imagery of the mechanistic as war and death. In his larger mural *Epic of Civilization*, it led to piles of bodies and was a totem of the modern world replacing the totems of primitive gods. Orozco's mechanistic man and society crucially reappear in the *Dive Bomber* of 1940 that Pollock watched him paint at the Museum of Modern Art. Machines, heavy chains and militarized mass crush man. By the end of the 1930s, mass man was added to Orozco's concept at the Gabino Ortiz Library at Jiquilpan with paintings and prints of that name (*The Carnival of the*

*Ideologies*) and *The Masses* (fig .3).



The revolutionary masses have become hideous, dispirited, repugnant and dangerous -- a murderous force. Even David Alfaro Siqueiros, another influence on Pollock, in his *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* of 1939-40 depicts his masses and their legions run amuck. By 1939, it was new world of dangerous inner man.

And a conclusion to what had been increasingly feared and written about by many in the 1930s. It is evident that this search for a balanced individual and society had already been underway for many years. Affirming these fears was the English-language art critic Herbert Read, the most influential and

formative art critic before Clement Greenberg, read by all Abstract Expressionists, including Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Herbert Ferber, and Still.<sup>iii</sup> Ferber, in fact, has stated that everyone read Read.<sup>iv</sup>

This evaluation of Read's popularity is not surprising since, in a number of books from the 1920s until his death in 1968, he affirmed and elaborated the value, importance, and achievements of the style and content of modern art to address modern psychic and social needs. Interestingly, his writings first appeared at a time when there was little serious study of modern art so that he was among the first to write about it in relation to modern thought. Read incorporated to his criticism, which he called "philosophic" in order to distinguish it from the formalist criticism of Clive Bell and of Roger Fry (and ultimately of Greenberg), many of the contemporary anthropological, psychological, philosophic and aesthetic theories of his time. He employed the diverse and at times contradictory thought of Tylor, Frazer, Levy-Bruhl, Benedict, Freud, Jung, Dewey, and Thompson as well as Ruskin, Morris, Whitehead, Semper, Fiedler, Grosse, Vico, Lipps, Bergson, Cassirer, Heidigger, Worringer, Nietzsche and countless others. One can say that Read's writings were a crucible of the ideas and concerns of the modern era, and that he, not Clement Greenberg, was probably the closest thing we have to contemporary spokesman for many of the values and attitudes from which Abstract Expressionism arose.<sup>v</sup> It is also probable that Read's writings provided their introduction to the artists. Indeed, Read was most likely a formative force rather than an after-the-fact chronicler of style as Greenberg largely was.<sup>vi</sup>

Read's criticism assayed the very nature of art and its place in society, history, and the universal scheme of things. From his analysis he drew enormous inferences about the development of modern art for the state of society and human consciousness. Hence he was less interested in art as the evolution of style than in art as the "ever changing symbolic incarnations of consciousness," as a symbolic mode of cognitive reality.<sup>vii</sup> Read sought to explain art by explaining its social, cultural, and intellectual sources and thus his writing concentrated on the psychology of aesthetic creativity and the social genesis of art.<sup>viii</sup>

His analysis is familiar to us already for he, too, damned modern society. Yet like many "intellectuals" by 1939, he felt that there was little to choose between the Marxism he advocated earlier in the decade and Nazi Socialism and Western capitalist democracy on the other. Like many, he felt that the future structure of the West was up for grabs. He wrote that "the economic and military antagonisms inherent in modern civilization involved both fascism and democracy alike and constitute irrecoverable encroachments on the physical and spiritual liberty of the person."<sup>ix</sup> What the artist and man needed what he has had since prehistoric times – the freedom for the individual act of creation, reacting freely to their environment?<sup>x</sup> Read's solution for culture, politics, and art was an organic society of anarchist communism – "a spontaneous association of individuals for mutual aid" that he considered a natural society. He sought an organic connection between the individual and his society, between economic and social conditions and justice and between individual

consciousness and the transformation of the group. These new creative communities would be in harmony with natural environment, balancing sense, intuition, and reason.<sup>xi</sup> Indeed, they would terminate modern (mass) society's overemphasis on reason and intellect and cleave twentieth century man from his limitations.<sup>xii</sup> In 1943, Read, extraordinarily for an art critic, became the editor of the *Collective Works* of Carl G. Jung.<sup>xiii</sup>

To these Read and others must be added, once again, T.S. Eliot, the other most powerful English-language critic and cultural essayist as well as poet of modern times, who further clarified the issue with his famous dictum of the "disassociation of sensibility." In 1921 Eliot had suggested that from at least the seventeenth century, English poetry had suffered from a "dissociation of sensibility." Thought and feeling, intellect and reflection had separated into two camps that need to be reconciled. The late Paul Fussell attributes this separation to the "binary oppositionalism" or adversary proceeding typical of World War I in which the world is divided into two conflicting parts. Fussell also suggests that such "divisionism" inspired Hugh Selwyn Mauberley's well known belief in "consciousness disjunct" and perhaps the most famous phrase in English literature in the postwar period, the injunction on the title page of Forster's *Howard's End* – "only connect."<sup>xiv</sup>

As with the mass society outlook, Eliot portrayed this disassociation as rife in modern times, in social class, and in culture because of mass society. In "The Idea of a Christian Society" of 1940, an essay in which, much like Jung, he advised that the necessary rooting and organizing was mostly possible in

the maligned Christian tradition. He wrote “unlimited industrialism . . . [created] bodies of men and women . . . detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion; in other words, a mob.” For Eliot, a revived spiritual life – Christianity but a ritualized, that is, archaized medievalist, ecumenical Christianity-- for the traditionalist was necessary to terminate, much like Jung, the disassociation of thinking from feeling for this deep modern change was a social catastrophe in the West.

Eliot’s admirer and pupil, Clement Greenberg, inserted fears of mass society directly into the world of modern American painting and culture in his famous essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” of 1939 that Irving Howe, the Marxist, himself connected to mass society discussion. Howe later noted that “in the era before the war, there was a great interest in the criticism of mass culture. No one talks about this today, possibly because no one quite knows what to say about it. At that time, we had a pretty simple but effective kind of critical view on the subject, and Clem’s piece was a major initiating point for that work.”<sup>xv</sup> “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” established Greenberg’s reputation. It is not accidental that the critic who literally defined terms of discussion about mass culture in America became a principal critic, observer and supporter of Pollock and Abstract Expressionism.

In his essay, typically of the 1930s and of mass society critics, Greenberg defines modern life as a distinctive period with a distinctive culture. In the sweeping generalizations of social critics, Greenberg declared, familiarly, that



the culture of the modern period was brought on by collapse of the “verities” of religion, authority, tradition, and style, that is, traditional forms of symbolic order, as a result of industrialism, urbanity, and universal literacy. The result was a split in its culture between something unique – an avant-garde culture – and a popular culture he called “kitsch.” A “superior consciousness of history” constituted and engendered avant-garde culture whose main purpose in the temporary split between the elites and the people was “to keep culture *moving* in the midst of [present-day] confusion and violence.” Thus, once again, the metaphor of motion is used to suggest the best solution to cultural problems. According to Greenberg, the modern artist “retires” from the public and concentrates on advancing his own medium. He contrasts the surrealist Salvador Dali who attempts to restore not the process of his medium, but the processes and concepts of his own consciousness. Such ideas, of course, form the basis of Greenberg’s belief in the preferred independence of style from subject and significance. Ironically, they would prove to be dead wrong in regard to the Pollock and Abstract Expressionism, despite years of power.

Greenberg considered the masses, of course, as indifferent to the avant-garde, in his words, the only “living” culture. Instead, they had their own culture, also unique in history, kitsch, that had replaced folk culture. Writing much like others of his period in broad strokes as if culture were large wholes one controlled and maneuvered, Greenberg argued that this popular culture was a false culture, devoid of real feeling, experience, and life. It was a “mass” commodity suggesting a false originality and a superficial “vicarious

experience.” For Greenberg, kitsch was ultimately rationalized technique most prominent in capitalist, fascist and communist countries. Its prominence put the lie to the possibility of a genuinely new proletariat culture that was a goal of the left throughout the thirties. Thus, to do advanced culture is to do the future, which was still socialist for Greenberg at this time. Although not the preferred new culture that speaks to all and reconciles all that will come about later, it is the best solution for the moment where our alleged socialism will be able to preserve what is best. For Greenberg, then, chooses the imperfect avant-garde culture to represent and lead the way out of, as he and the thirties see it, the cultural confusion of the day. It is the consciousness that will allay and defeat the authoritarianism and repressiveness of mass culture and mass man home and abroad.

The consciousness of the socially fatal dangers, this time of the disjunction of psyche and sensibility, was evident also in other forms of discourse of the time. It could be found in the slowly emergent modern movement in architecture where the famous architectural critic and advocate, Sigfried Giedion, lectured at Harvard in 1939 (after Jung lectured a Yale in 1937) and published his remarks in his classic, constantly reprinted and translated into many languages, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* in 1941 which was known in American art circles in the 1940s.<sup>xvi</sup> (For example, Arshile Gorky was known to have read it.<sup>xvii</sup>) After describing the need in the face of contemporary chaos and destructiveness for an organic, modern architecture that constantly evolved, that is, a continuum in

architectural form, ever changing in space and time, he characterized his subject as “concerned with contemporary man’s separation between thinking and feeling – with his split personality.” Following Spengler, then, and Mumford, Giedion use architecture as a symbol for cultural expressive symbolization, as the aesthetic representative of distinct cultural styles.

In *Space, Time, and Architecture*, Giedion writes that “this schism produced individuals whose inner development was uneven, who lacked inner equilibrium.”<sup>xviii</sup> Giedion hoped to reconcile this split because art and science had an unconscious parallelism of methods and America has many new potentialities at its disposal that it can master and coordinate. Giedion cites Dewey’s *Art as Experience* in declaring that in the contemporary era modes of activity have reinforced this separation of practice from insight, imagination from “executive doing,” and emotion from “thought and doing.” Those who write the “anatomy of experience” have mistakenly supposed that these divisions “inhere in the very constitution of human nature,” but they are wrong.<sup>xix</sup> Typically, Giedion believed that “social order was delivered to us as an inheritance from the Industrial Revolution,” and that reality forms the organization of the external world,<sup>xx</sup> and the following that menace to “our culture just as it has begun to be conscious of itself” can be found from political systems to architectural form. Giedion argues that “to restore order in this unbalanced world, we must alter its social conditions. But history shows us that this is not sufficient. It would be a fundamental mistake to later generations to believe that socio-political change would itself cause today’s

maladjusted man, the product of a century-long rupture between thinking and feeling, to disappear. “Unintegrated people are today multiplying everywhere. . . . Their acts reflect their inner division.”<sup>xxi</sup> Recently, Giedion notes, a political thinker suggested the solution to our industrial age was the integration of labor. “To integrate means . . . to make whole out of different parts” but Giedion thinks this is insufficient, that is politics, labor, and the favorite topics of the left are once again deemed insufficient for most of the American intelligentsia by 1940. Instead, Giedion suggests that such the social and economic split is merely a symptom. Rather

at the base of everything is the individual man. It is he who must be integrated – integrated in his inner nature, without being brutalized, so that his emotional and intellectual outlets will no longer be kept apart by an insuperable difference of level. To bring this fact into consciousness and to try to overcome it is closely connected with the outstanding task of our period: to humanize – that is, to reabsorb emotionally – what has been created by the spirit. All talk about organization and planning is vain unless we first create again the whole man, unfractured in his methods of thinking and feeling.<sup>xxii</sup>

Giedion believed that in most spheres America was unconsciously in the process of moving toward its solution of therapeutic coalescence in inner assuredness. The contemporary era of the first half of the twentieth century must resolve the divisions of thought and feeling, of the overemphasis on the rational at the expense of the irrational, of the attendant mechanization and

the artificial cutting off of the whole of “our past” which “continues to live on in us.” For the era in architecture and obviously everything else, Giedion believed the organic, feeling, and the memory of the past that must become dominant and rationality reduced to a “menial position.”<sup>xxiii</sup> The exterior world of the new architecture must express a newfound inner equilibrium of mankind’s deep socially immutable needs tracked in a time of turmoil and stress.

Arnold Toynbee, too, a seminal historian of the period, confronted those longings. He too stressed that there “schism in the soul” in modern life which required a palingenesis (see Lee Krasner’s *Palingenesis* of 1971) Toynbee was not much interested in economic explanations to history and as he grew older his analysis stressed more mythic and religious crises. Drawing on Bergson, Frazer, Jung, Marx, Spengler and others who came into prominence especially in the 1920s and early 1930s, for him a spiritual renewal was the means to defeat the breakdown of modern civilization and the telltale schism.<sup>xxiv</sup> Never one to examine primary documents or specialist histories for which he was later devastated, his thought paralleled the period’s catholicity of historical interests and for denoting life as totality of actions and ideas as well as facts. Rather history had a “rhythm of growth” that went beyond brute materialism as he transmuted Marx’s economic determinism into political and religious ones. Toynbee saw there were necessary creative leaders setting in motion processes of dynamic change and growth. In a mode of respecting the creative fertility of origins, he believed that as long as the leadership sustains the same creativity that generated its birth as a civilization, the process of growth would

continue. Even with the breakdowns in modern society, for Toynbee modern man could renew himself, for very significantly he attributed breakdown and disintegration to human weaknesses that people have the capacity or remedy. The microcosm of the individual could in the end salve the macrocosm of culture-wide breakdown. The internal life of a society could heal the schism more than economic manipulations. Because of the recurrent dynamism of human history, he ventured that the intellectual could join with the spiritual as a way out of crisis.

Finally, the issue of culture in a mass society also can be found as an immediate intellectual influence on the Abstract Expressionists, Joseph Campbell, who spoke at the Club just after the publication (according to *The Tiger's Eye*) of his "long-awaited" book about mythology, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1949. Willem de Kooning considered Campbell a very influential figure among his colleagues as well as himself.<sup>xxv</sup> Many artists including Newman (*Vir Heroicus Sublimus*), Seymour Lipton (*The Hero*), David Smith (*The Hero*), Richard Pousette-Dart (*The Path of the Hero*), all of 1950-51, and others did works of the "hero" -- the seminal individual among many cultures who changes the world. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell, once again, defined the "problem of mankind today . . . is precisely opposite to that of men in the comparatively stable periods of those great co-coordinating mythologies. He complained that the "lines of communication between the conscious and the unconscious zones of the human psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two. . . . The modern hero-deed must be that of

questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the *coordinated soul* [my italics] . . . full human maturity through the conditions of contemporary life. . . . [This will bring about] a transmutation of the whole social order [which] is necessary, so that through every detail and act of secular life the vitalizing image of the universal god-man who is actually immanent and effective in all of us may be somehow made known to consciousness.”<sup>xxvi</sup> To coordinate the human soul reflects the period’s continued desire into the 1950s of reintegrating man in the quest for social transmutation, the prime social goal. Campbell does not elaborate the syntax for this that Giedion did – the space/time continuum – but he recognizes more clearly than Giedion did in his early writing the need to find a symbol individual or form to represent this hope and memory of a people – the mythic hero and his archetype of action – departure from common society, initiation, and return to it.

Thus it is quite evident that recognition of mass society theory was widespread in American as it was in Europe. It was simply a constant no matter what discipline and no matter what politics. From the socialist Read to the royalist Eliot, from the Marxist Greenberg to the democratic Dewey, it formed the center of thought in the late 1930s. For it addressed modernity, culture, creativity, psychology, personality, politics, and other central issues. To address one issue to be drawn to them all. *They are all intertwined.*

## Jung and His Times

I have saved until last, however, *the* direct source for Pollock and for most other Abstract Expressionists of the fear of modern man and the need for spiritual revitalization – Carl G. Jung. It is well known though obfuscated because of the fifties emphasis on subjective difficulty for its own sake. However, we should not believe that Pollock's use of Jung is that of simply a single patient and his therapist, as has been traditionally assumed. It is much a psycholization of much modern culture and history and the problems of the individual. As is late Freud's, Jung's psychology and Pollock's interest in it are not just a methodology to recognize and investigate personal neuroses and unconscious mental processes but those of society, too. In keeping with his times, Jung's psychology is a seeking of socio-cultural as well as personal mental health. In America, psychotherapy had become the cutting edge of social criticism and change, and this epochal event in twentieth century life began around World War II, that is, Pollock's era. His engagement with psychology is symptomatic of this change and his later popular image as "disturbed" is only a showcase of the emergence of "Psychological Man" that came later after Jung to dominate American society in the second half of the twentieth century.

We can say Freud and Jung's and for that matter, most other, psychologies – including recent diva Julia Kristeva -- are social criticism as well as individual treatment – perhaps more so -- because new scholarship has begun to recognize that they had personal and contextual roots. It has also



begun to recognize that not only do these psychologies interpret and analyze culture as well as the individual, they make it. That is, they form a view that very deliberately is intended to influence and change the world around them. Weinstein and Platt (1973), Rieff (1959, 1966), and others have studied the personal and cultural origins of Freud's work. Jung has had less study in this regard but Peter Homans's *Jung in Context Modernity and the Making of Psychology* of 1979 has helped originate the process.<sup>xxvii</sup> What has become evident despite strong resistance from psychological institutions and their flock, including the art world of the personally therapeutized, is that the origins of Freud's psychoanalysis and Jung's analytic psychology lie as much in social forces as in the introspective and scientific genius of these figures. In other words, the principles that these psychologies trump as ahistorical, transcendent, the same everywhere and in every mind, are in reality socio-cultural ideas produced by the individual needs of the psychologists and their culture. Every culture and people has its psychology as we saw with the behaviorist Benton. Homans calls this their "deep sociality." They may have lasting value for modern life, but they are as much cultural as psychological. Such "deep sociality" will be the nature of our additional look at Pollock, or rather, Pollock's use of Jungian psychology to address the cultural problems that interacted with and may have even helped precipitate, in the contextual sense, his personal problems.

The roots of Freudian psychology and the origins of depth psychology are now understood to lie in the gradual but decisive transition of the West from a

rural to an urban and industrial civilization. The industrial revolution produced massive social dislocations and the destruction of the integrated wholeness and stability of agrarian time and place.<sup>xxviii</sup> This weakening of a satisfying order, the loss of its icons including its symbolic structures and myths, and the destruction of its ritual confidences and master narratives led to increased social and individual isolation and disorganization and a lack of commitments, communal identifications and creeds. It also led to an increasing secularization of a formerly Christian culture, and the loss of its moral code of checks and balances, its controls and releases (hence, of course, the resistant Regionalism).<sup>xxix</sup> The result has been “spiritual impoverishment,” the most popular discussion of which was Max Weber’s “disenchantment” where modernity that rationalized and bureaucratized industrial, urban life was thought to have snuffed out a spiritual being, too. (Pollock’s colleague Mark Rothko squarely addressed this “disenchantment” when he declared in 1948 that modern man regrettably failed to recognize the need for a “transcendental” society.)<sup>xxx</sup> Philip Rieff concluded in the influential *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, that in the twentieth century, “our revolution is more Freudian than Marxist, more analytic than polemic, more cultural than social.”<sup>xxxi</sup> Although that originally led to a new introspection reflected vividly in art (surrealism) and literature (the stream of consciousness novel), it was “scientific” depth psychology that became the most successful means to understand and modify the inner disorganization and unexpected introspection produced. In other words, psychology began to reconceive and re-organize the

dislocated individual and his waning culture. It obviously replaced Benton and Pollock's behaviorism.

Thus scholars are beginning to recognize that the origins of psychoanalysis and its introspective "realities" emerged with the social and cultural forces that generated them. Society and social conditions thus do not simply complement independent psychical reality; they deeply interact and shape its consciousness.<sup>xxxii</sup> For example, Carl Schorske and William McGrath have studied Freudian psychology as specific responses to the anti-Semitic political structures of turn of the century Vienna.<sup>xxxiii</sup> And it was in response to the shaping social forces that Freud's cultural orientation moved from that of Jewish culture with its community of heritage and symbolic order, outwards to the hoped-for safety in the more prestigious and more modern secular and objectively, scientific worlds of late nineteenth century Vienna. In short, cultural forces helped shape consciousness and the theories that reflect upon it. The inner world and its sociohistorical contexts and understandings interpenetrate.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

There has been and still is, of course, great resistance to the contextual study of depth psychology. Indeed, for most of its life, scholarship of depth psychology was controlled by its practitioners and its institutions: "In the 1970s, scholarship . . . was still under the control of what could be called the 'Freudian mystique': the view that depth psychology was a cluster of competing schools, one of which was right."<sup>xxxv</sup> Art history and particularly the study of

Pollock have been subjected to these disputes. Their psychological readings, however, do not illuminate or reorganize the cultural terrain from which the psychology and Pollock comes, that is, their cultural context. They remain directed toward his individual psychobiography.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The rise of depth psychology is one of the central elements of twentieth century life. What had begun as a theory of the mind, exploring its difficulties and its patterns of change penetrated intellectual and social life of the West, particularly America. It influenced and began to set the terms for discussions of immediacies of the self and its interactions, as it became a form of interpretation of society and culture and of art, literature, and the humanities in general. In its popularity, it also became, most importantly, a shaper of that culture. Social critics and moralists have commonly stated that it replaced age-old religion as the institution and ideology for organizing ethical life. Psychological thinking has thus taken over much of the symbol-formation necessary to form and maintain a culture. The result was the making of an understanding of a different man, the modern “psychological man” in Rieff’s formation, who was independent in regard to the past and hopefully self-sufficient in regard to the present. Psychological man is characterized by the declining power of religion to organize his life and inwardness; a heightened sense of personal self-consciousness, in which consciousness tends to be structured and meaning realized primarily in the context of personal, private, and psychological experiencing and personality; and a growing split between

this self-consciousness and the social order, the latter losing its power to attract allegiance for its own sake.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Psychological man is modern man and in Freud's psychoanalysis, he himself as a modern man is the product of his response to the changes in his world. ("Modern man" is a concept that reflects the intense periodization of the modern times. From Baudelaire's call for heroic art of the modern era, that is, the mid nineteenth century France, it is recognition that profound changes had taken place in the modern, industrial age.) Freud's new life as a modern doctor in Vienna moving toward freedom from restricted Jewish life gave him independence and autonomy and led to his liberation from the past and his inclusion in the new social order of middle-class intellectual life of science. Since his father belonged more to traditional than modern life, Freud – "oedipally" – had to forge his identity, autonomy and inclusion in the new life.<sup>xxxviii</sup> In this regard, Weinstein and Platt cite Heinz Hartmann's well known observation on the effects of social change: when social character of the external world changes, creating stress, the ego will attempt to fulfill its organizing functions by increased insight into internal processes. (Think of Abstract Expressionism and World War II.) Freud codified his own consciousness and that of those living the new social and economic life of the modern world. He thus made this reality a part of personal and ultimately social consciousness of the modern world, thereby creating the possibility for himself and others through therapy to live and adapt to that world, a world different from his father and that of others. Particularly in relation to the

traditional strictures of the father, psychoanalysis defined the rights of the new individual within the family. To put it in Freudian terms, this became the rights of the independent ego within the individual personality vis-a-vis the superego of society and family. Psychological need for greater autonomy in an urban industrial as opposed to rural village life matched the social need for the same. Psychoanalysis codified this social condition as human psychology. Ironically, much like Marxism in America in the 1930s, depth psychology was originally seen as the most recent chapter in the history of science with the social key to the modern age. Both offered the rules and byways for change and renovation at that time.

To be sure, Freud did not seek fully and self-consciously to renovate modern life. With him, science and treating mental illness was always manifest, culture-making latent.<sup>xxxix</sup> Yet particularly after 1914, the time of the break with Jung and the beginnings of World War One, Freud redirected psychoanalysis to the analysis and *implicit* transformation of culture. Indeed, he devised praxis for transforming it with a language that was, unlike surrealism and film, minimally symbolic and discursive and thereby could be learned and adopted by others.

With Jung, it was the other way around. He took on an explicit prophet role from the beginning of his work and the life of the collective unconscious was his means. Jung's psychology developed from the representative, and as in Pollock's case, exemplary intertwining of the personal with the social. Unlike Freud, Jung came from a traditional Protestant background of Swiss

uprightness. The dominant parent, his father, was a traditional minister, who according to Jung's accounts was rigid and conventional.<sup>xl</sup> Jung revolted against that Christian conventionality institutionalized in the Swiss social environment and that modified revolt became the basis of his work.<sup>xli</sup> Rejecting Christian dogma, he still felt the need, however, for a symbolic order that would take its place by giving meaning to the new modern, world. Jung realized early that men needed an idea of larger whole, social as well as "cosmic," of which they are a part. In every human situation a number of concrete strands converge to create the particular variant of the "world:" tradition, the ongoing processes of everyday life, the political order, the economy, friends and foes, the predominant culture and local subcultures, understandings of man's psychology, passions, and goals, and today's trinity of "race, gender, and class." This worldview is very much an internal one but it is shaped by exterior conditions of time and space.

Jung searched for such a cosmos that was appropriate for himself and his view of modernization. After his initial unhappiness with his father's culture, he discovered Freud in the first decade of the twentieth century and became enthralled as Freud's favorite disciple. He saw Freud's psychoanalysis as the opening of a something completely new – a modern and unprecedented consciousness. Freud, too, had psychologized religion and rejected it, developing psychoanalysis as alternative form of meaning making. Gradually, however, Jung developed his own ideas of the psyche. Unlike Freud, he still saw and needed for himself the spiritual sustenance that for centuries religion

had provided. He felt that sustenance could be found where all decisive strength could be found – in the psyche. To Jung, the unconscious was a repository of what had been lost in modern times under the impact of urban and industrial ratiocination and death (as in the World Wars with their mechanistic assembly lines of death and destruction). That is, it was possibly a place of the spiritual as well as personal. In correspondence with Freud and after a trip to America, tensions mounted so that by 1913 a break was at hand. His unresolved childhood and adolescent religious experiences reemerged under the impact of his understanding of the unconscious, and he increasingly associated himself and his psyche with mythology and religious symbol making. In his major thesis that defined the break with Freud, *Symbols of Transformation* of 1913 (formerly known as *Psychology of the Unconscious*) Jung addressed his respect for Freud but then critiqued him, publicly completing the break.

In *Symbols of Transformation*, Jung begins an attempt to reflect upon the implications of Freud's psychological ideas for traditional religious values in the context of modernity, in other words, for the new world view that he was seeking. Jung indulged himself in self-absorbed fantasies that related his dreams, and most importantly, associating them and himself with mythological figures and forms (really, the paradigm of his psychological method). His discussion of his dreams and their possible mythological associations exposed and climax his criticism of his father's rigidity and define his difference. He preferred a more personal-narcissistic and otherworldly kind of religious



experience. Jung transposed his fantasies to a mystical form and to a cosmic level, fusing his own mental life with cultural forms, thus making them grandiose but personally experienced mythologies.<sup>xlii</sup> With psychologized mythology as the common denominator of inner life, then, he began his own psychology. He also advanced a new theory of modernity and reinterpreted Christianity, after Sir James Frazer and Lucien Levy-Bruhl, as part of worldwide ritual life.<sup>xliii</sup>

Jung then developed his critique of Freud and his own form of psychoanalysis over the next few years. Its major tenants were in place by 1917 and while elaborated and enriched, they never changed for the remainder of his life and work. Jung accepted Freud's concept of unconscious but felt that it lacked depth. For Jung, the unconscious and neurosis were about more than simply personal problems. Instead, Jung felt that Freud's ego centrality did not take into account the larger implications for both the individual *and* society at large. For Jung personal fantasies, as he had demonstrated to himself, were also collective, that is, rooted in the deep sociality of culture and human life. He called that collective fantasy life the archetype and if one probed deeper, Jung believed it made possible the rediscovery and validation of a group of cultural symbols that, because the unconscious was an allegedly universal structure of the mind, could revitalize the impoverishment of modern, mass man, who had been cut off from the traditional sources of these symbols. These symbols could release the energies for creative living and could support mental healing by generating a sense of continuity with the 'origins of things,'

much as other sets of symbols had done in traditional societies (such as gods or totems). Jung also made a distinction between Freud's ego and everyday life and his own need/recognition/belief that there was a broader psychological structure than just the ego -- the self. Jung saw Freud's superego as the rigidly personal that he was against, the world of his father's excessive social rationality and discipline, and he repudiated it. For him, Freud's ego was also too much the center of balance between only rigidity of the superego and the chaos of the subconscious. This was his father's attitude to the spiritual; an all or nothing approach. Instead Jung proposed the establishment of the self as a midpoint between the ego and the deeper and wider sociality of the collective.<sup>xliv</sup>

Jung was thus a psychologist of the social and cultural as well as the self. He was also a psychologist of modernity, for he saw the personal crisis as one of living in modern culture as well. It was not only psychological conflicts and the need for individual religious meanings that gave rise to Jung's thought but the needs of modern, urban culture, too. Although the culture issues of modernity can be recognized as separate, they cannot be completely separated from the personal and religious. To engage one was to engage the other, for they are *inseparable*.

Jung was a psychologist, moralist, and social critic who reinterpreted modernity to fulfill needs that he felt his culture required. That his psychology could analyze modern culture and reintroduce in a new form traditional meaning that did not offend those values made it still acceptable to modern, secular, scientific values and culture. His social theory then composed four

elements: the nature of traditional societies; the nature of modern societies; the dynamics of the shift from one to the other, and the role of psychology in codifying and encouraging the change. In Jung's view of the unconscious, he felt that traditional Western culture expressed its desires through symbols and myths of religion, that the Enlightenment and especially its science discredited this process, causing a collective repression of psychic depth in general; and that this depth reasserted itself in the form of the very appearance of depth psychologies themselves in the twentieth century. In so saying, Jung claimed, unlike Freud, that the new depth psychologies did not constitute a clean break with the past, but instead retained strong internal relations with the old religious traditions.<sup>xlv</sup>

Psychoanalysis thus could solve the two problems of Jung. It could be modern and it could be traditional, which would also solve the issue of separating from his father's creeds yet continuing the need for a modern meaning in life. The symbolic meaning-making capacity of Christianity could be taken over by the symbols of the unconscious. They could interface with modernity and spiritual tradition and resolve them both in a psychology that embraced all of man's inner depth. Thus both Freud and Jung sought to redo modern culture and its crisis in their own terms. Freud wanted to break with past and unmask it with depth psychology in the hope of adjusting and making healthier Western culture. Jung wanted to revitalize a contemporary culture that he felt had lost its relationship to the past by means of a depth psychology that reformed and modernized the humanism of Christianity and spiritual

orders.<sup>xlvi</sup> His system would provide a more modern symbolic and cultural view, a modern form of world meaning, and not simply analytic science. For him, Freud's psychoanalysis and understanding of the unconscious as personal and subjective could only be a means toward a larger end. As we shall see, Pollock's view of the unconscious was closer to Jung than Freud – although the art world has largely treated it as the former.

To Jung, as long as urban, industrial man kept up with meaningful collective representations, his psychic balance was maintained and he was healthy but, very significantly, modern man lacks this balance. Jung believed him to be uprooted and torn out of tradition and traditional meanings, disorganized and stifled. From the beginnings of his views, and only accelerating from there, he sensed that a tradition less, authoritarian, excessively rationalist, modern man was depersonalized. In this, Jung reflects his agreement with and participation in the age-old but increasingly relevant notion that the problem of his patients' life is the problem of mass man and modern mass society. For him, modern man – has succumbed to “mass-mindedness, “mass rule,” the “infantile dream state of mass man” and ultimately “mass psychology.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

In naming his problem as that of the “mass” and in his personal experience and resulting psychology, Jung reflects, as Homans has pointed out, his absorption in a dominant cultural question of the twentieth century – that of the threat of “mass society,” a problem of “our time.”<sup>xlvi</sup> To understand the depth of this problem, we will take an excursion into the nature and

development of this theory that is only second to Marxism in its influence and power in modern times yet often unrecognized as such; it is fundamental to the understanding of Jung, Pollock, and modern life.

#### The New Lethalness: The Cultural Threat of Mass Society in the late 1930s

We have seen that the idea of a widespread recognition of a dissociation of sensibility and the split personality of man dominated much thought in the 1930s. We have seen that such a dissociation and split in expanded form lay behind the psychologies of two of the most important thinkers and cultural theories of the twentieth century, Freud and Jung. Now we need to look further into the specific issues that the inner conflict of man was understood by many to have engendered in the 1930s. That conflict was called mass society theory.

Mass society theory is a master narrative of modernity. It inscribes some of processes of modernization, its difficulties and its damages. It, too, is a cosmic view of the effects of democracy, capitalization, industrialization, and secularization on the politics, social organizations and culture of modern times and it expressed a moral concern with a feared deterioration of life, creativity, and freedom in the modern world.<sup>xlix</sup> However, it is not new to the modern world, for it is immemorial to Western civilization.

With the establishment of the Greek democracy, there immediately arose questions whether those who governed did so wisely. Did they have enough, intelligence, wisdom, and learning? Were they a people or a mob? Hesiod already had his doubts. He concluded that steady deterioration of human

society had already taken place – a myth of a golden age followed by decline. He also predicted a gloomy future. Heraclitus and Herodotus, too, held similar views that now became apocalyptic: the revolt of the populace would doom civilization. Already they rendered key themes of the theory -- social atomization, lack of authority and respect, the disintegration of social bonds, and a lack of awareness about the real world.<sup>1</sup>

“Mass society” theory thus began at the beginning of Western civilization and continued throughout its development. Even after the Enlightenment with its belief in the common man and his capacities to live wisely, it took on new life. Firm democrats such as Alex de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill were among the first to realize a possible divorce between liberty and equality. Although the idea of a golden age that had deteriorated was long dead, they saw weaknesses with the assent to power of the majority that could threaten freedom and individuality. Their liberal philosophies saw problems with the individual and the mass: the contradiction between social equality and human excellence, the harmonization of the general will with the will of the ruler, the nature of culture, and the coexistence of ideology and critical thinking. Sounding like conservative social critics of today, they believed in equal opportunity, not coerced equalization, and feared the excesses of democratic despotism. The great egalitarian, Mill still feared “collective mediocrity” and the transformation of society into an undifferentiated whole and the appearance of a single, repressive pattern of cultural belief and mentality. Homogeneity would break the bonds of distinctive social groupings and hierarchy, precipitating a

totalizing society -- a mass of frightened and isolated individuals scorning distinction and achievement. Such a society meant the triumph of the “vulgar.”<sup>li</sup>

Later in the nineteenth century, Nietzsche and Burkhardt, both of whom were great influences on Jung, added another dimension – the intellectual plebian. Nietzsche especially feared “plebian” utopianism that would flatten out the world, eliminating originality and creativity. His goal was creativity, not equality, and he sought a triumph of the strong, independent, and creative over the “herdeninstinkt.” This philosophy alone, of course, in its way a variant on “mass society” theory immensely influenced Western culture from De Chirico to Clyfford Still. Nietzsche is fundamental to modern thinking in the first half of the twentieth century and a major influence, as with Burkhardt, on Jung and others.

By 1890, deep preoccupation and fear of the damaging effects of spreading egalitarianism and democracy upon cultural and political life found further echo. It took the form of worry about crowd and collective behavior. With a sweeping historical vision, Gustave Le Bon wrote of modern industrial civilization dominated by new modern masses. Culture was thought to be increasingly homogenized, irrational, and clannish with little room for creative individualism and independent judgment. The masses and an imminent cosmic cataclysm were linked.<sup>lii</sup>

In modern times, the power of this theory increased seemingly exponentially as industrialism, socialism, war and revolution brought forth seeming proof of the triumph of the mediocre mass. Freud was influenced by the crowd psychologists especially in his *Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* of 1921. Although he avoided this cataclysmic tone, Freud saw the problem as psychological. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* of 1930, he noted that “a great part of mankind’s struggle concentrates on the task of creating an appropriate and satisfactory equalization between the individual and the cultural demands of the mass.”<sup>liii</sup> Freud saw parallels between personal and civilization development, between childhood individual neuroses and those of the origins of civilization. Indeed, by *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud had developed a deep concern for the internal origins of civilization and the analogies or not of the “process of civilization and the path of the individual development.”<sup>liv</sup> In what are, in effect, *cultural theories*, Freud stressed the presence of the irrational in advanced societies and modern industrial and urban democracies. This brings into play the growing sense, in the new humanistic science of sociology, of the breakdown of communities under urban conditions. Socialist criticism and other mass society theorists increased this fear.<sup>lv</sup>

The reign of the mediocre Nietzsche feared found greater influence, particularly in America with an heir to Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, in his *The Decline of the West*, written during World War I. *The Decline of the West* was a marvelous piece of Germanic pessimism – it went through fourteen printings by



1920 -- in which Nietzsche's predictions of a lawless despotisms and military commands in such societies were considered to be prediction of the future. Spengler incorporated his cultural pessimism in a theoretical framework and symbolic order of biological cycles of the birth, growth, maturity, and death of Western civilization with its last days ruled by warlord Caesars. (Is Spengler the source of the modern theory of the living and dying cultures with which we began our study?) Much like the last days of Rome, rival dictators would dot Europe and engage in final conflict. Through the comparative study of the lives of earlier cultures, Spengler argued, one could discover the culture's inner rhythms and then define the stages yet to be created in the West. In the wake of the World War One, through Spengler's biological metaphors, mass society theory was increasingly becoming a symptom, a diagnosis, and a prophecy of a culture anticipating its own end. The individual would not be able to change this future. Instead, as in Clyfford Still's work, he should simply extend a cold, clear gaze that comprehends the necessary facts of the future.<sup>lvi</sup>

Perhaps the most useful conduit for Spengler's thought in America came through the writings of Lewis Mumford, the seminal cultural and urban critic between the wars. In his early work in the 1920s, Mumford had contrasted the virtues of village to the urban Moloch of the machine. After a review of the first volume of the *Decline of the West* in 1926 for *The New Republic*, Mumford adopted Spengler's language and Olympian critique of modernity as his own and spent the remainder of his life as its polemicist. In his *Man and Technics* of 1931 and *Technics and Civilization* of 1934, Mumford argued that man was

artificial and modern civilization clashed with “Nature.” Echoing Spengler, Mumford wrote of the clash as the issue of modern life. The machine was the devil and which tried to control nature and man. For Mumford, the struggle with what I have called mass society should be the theme of the modern world. It was the history of mankind’s moral prophecy. <sup>lvii</sup>

Skepticism about modern society thus increased to become cultural pessimism that genuinely feared modern mass man. The Great War increased such pessimism a thousand fold so that the earlier criticism of Mill and de Tocqueville that balanced reformism, social optimism, and belief in the rationality of man was replaced by the modern versions of “the theory of mass society” that began in the late 1920s after the postwar numbness of the early decade. It took ten years for the war to be fully absorbed and its heritage made known. Those modern versions were now decidedly anti-democratic. Society was considered under siege by the mass, “a wasteland of irrationality,” and its formerly well-ordered structure was now seen to be disintegrated, undifferentiated, and leveled. With the success of industrial society with its technology and its bureaucracy modern times had brought about another unwanted development: the confrontation with authoritarian politics.

According to this aspect of the theory, modern equalization resulted in unprecedented psychological, aesthetic, political and social confusion in which a gray, undifferentiated mass was thought to be held together by state machineries and blind myths, as the philosopher Max Schuler (translated into English in the 1920s) described it from his own country Germany. He

prominently described this as “massification” (*Vermassung*), a leveling and an increasing uniformity in society.<sup>lviii</sup> This is a key component of modern mass society theory.

Such epochs of undifferentiated homogeneity led to increased irrationality, of infantile, destructive behavior and thinking from politics to, according to Scheler, the wave of fantasizing vitalism in Nietzsche and Bergson that appealed to the modern society. Vitalism, he thought, was an obscure mysticism spreading throughout society. Scheler was the first to describe this modern society as subject to “massification.”

The fate of man in such a society was that of a depersonalized and lonely individual. Reflecting these views of especially postwar cultural decay, mass psychology, and the danger to cultural elites of modern man and the machine age, in 1926 Jose Ortega presented another very influential view of the new mass man theory. Much like Spengler, Ortega viewed the new urban industrial society of technology with great distrust.<sup>lix</sup> It is Ortega to whom credit is given for the term “mass man,” a term for modern man, a self-conscious search in the 1920s. In his classic *The Revolt of the Masses* of 1926 (translated into English in 1932), “mass man” was quantitatively different than previous men and another part of “mass society theory.” Ortega noted “man previously emptied of his own history, lacking a memory of his past, and, therefore, submissive to any of those disciplines which are often called international. Rather than a man he is the shell of a man made up only of *idola fori*; he lacks an inner self, an intimacy, inexorable and inalienable, a self that cannot be

revoked.”<sup>lx</sup> Mass man is characterized by mediocrity; by conformity; by vulgarity; by rootlessness; by authoritarianism; by unwarranted self-contentment; by simpleminded thinking; and by barbarity. Ortega sees a profound threat to life and civilization by a mass society of rootless individuals in revolt against tradition, against creativity, and against distinction. Modern man is brutal and mean and state machinery democratically but autocratically enforces his will.

For Ortega, mass men despise culture both old and new, particularly the world of “creative culture.” That which he does not understand, he scorns. Thus modern art and culture are saved because the separation of mass man and creative elites endows the latter with an allegedly independence of judgment they have never enjoyed before. Confusion reigns in art in the contemporary as it gives up references to human forms and becomes art for art’s sake.<sup>lxi</sup> Such an event has no predictable outcome.

Ortega’s widely influential formulation was followed by the third part of modern mass man theory, an even greater, and perhaps, more powerful one – Karl Mannheim’s famous *Man and Society in the Age of Reconstruction* of 1935. Mannheim both described the causes of the ills of modern society and its main features. To him, modern society is riddled with different levels of development from the agrarian, artisan, to the industrial, the result of which is a social catastrophe of “disproportionate development of human faculties.” Men learn and function with rationalized forms and applied science while their minds and morals remain undeveloped: “rational social control and the individual’s

mastery of his own impulses do not keep step with technological development.”

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On the one hand, Mannheim’s analysis reassumes Marx notion of the uneven development of capitalism. On the other, it interfaced with widespread concepts in America in the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1920s, William Ogburn popularized the concept of cultural lag. With “cultural lag,” Ogburn argued that various elements in society change at different rates and those disparities were responsible for the tensions in modern, mass society. The great leap in the industrial structuring of modern society was not being matched by a correspondent leap in the superstructure of culture, art, politics, and the like. “What was needed . . . was a concerted and conscious effort on the part of society as a whole to anticipate technical change and to plan for its incorporation into the community by adjusting the cultural base.”<sup>lxiii</sup> While the conflict between civilization and culture was not new, the search of a culture or a meaningful way became central to the 1930s. Increasingly, urban industrial culture that had electrocuted Sacco and Vanzetti or reduced men to machine tools threatened leading to a newfound cultural awareness of popular culture, of cultures other than the modern and the West or folk and subcultures within.<sup>lxiv</sup> To do this, it needed to accelerate its pace of change, a key point of cultural analysis to anthropologists and others.

The importance of cultural analysis as the primary tool for determining social relations and their disproportionate changes was evident also in a very prominent study of “Middle America.” Applying typical anthropological methods

to American experiences, Robert and Helen Lynd's famous investigations of Muncie, Indiana published as *A Study in Modern American Culture* (1929)), and *Middletown in Transition: A Study of Conflict* (1937) concluded that "common" American communities suffered from a fundamental malaise that could be "traced to the failure of its system of values and beliefs to keep pace with the technological changes that had affected its everyday life."<sup>lxv</sup> This failure affected all aspects of social life and it reflected the inability to assimilate the new machine age and its effects. The Lynd's concluded that "in view of the rapidity of some cultural changes in Middletown in recent decades, its resistance to change, its failure to embrace change as an opportunity to lessen its frictions, may constitute a liability to its own values."<sup>lxvi</sup>

However, interfacing with these popular ideas of the time, Mannheim is completely original in its emphasis on the difference between the "functional rationality" (really irrationality) of bureaucratic life and the "substantial rationality of morality and human ideals. For Mannheim, there is an "unharnessed irrationality. . . always present in the actual working of modern society, and from time to time, [it] mobilizes the impulses of the masses."<sup>lxvii</sup> The conflict between ways and means and between functional and substantial rationality had led to the disproportionate development of human capabilities in modern society. These conflicts included the increasing interdependence of social institutions; the breakdown of communities and social groupings such as the family; the rise of bureaucratic society; and moral disorder resulting in threats to individual initiative, creative culture, and personal freedom. While

Mannheim was not as apocalyptic as others were, he saw a modern world threatened by laissez-faire capitalism that allowed the seething masses to take power. His own solution was the planned economy.

(In this way, mass society theory's rejection of "regimentation" also becomes one with an earlier thirties' conception that Pollock also absorbed. That was the Regionalist critique. As Thomas Benton wrote: "I realized that the supposed and *much-harped upon standardization of America* [my italics] was a neat descriptive formula which bore only a surface relation to fact. My experience had brought out infinite varieties of ways of living and doing which the formula did not fit." <sup>lxviii</sup>)

And that variety as opposed to standardization could be found in Benton's support for Frederick Jackson Turner's definition of American behavior and mind that was expressed in his conceptions and its personalities and psyches noted before:

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom.

The modern world according to mass society theory is thus irrational, even irrationally rational, and structurally unsound. And the most important

victim of its onslaught is the individual. As Ortega and Karl Jaspers in 1931 wrote, the latter in his *Man in the Modern Age*: “in modern times men have been shuffled together like grains of sand . . . [lacking] a historical substance [with] which they imbue . . . their selfhood . . . (This lead them to) a feeling of powerlessness (which) has become rife, and man tends to regard himself as dragged along in the wake of events which . . . he had hoped to guide.”<sup>lxix</sup>

As Salvador Giner writes, this last sentence reveals one of the most inmost feelings of mass society theorists: their feeling of frustration at the final failure of their elite leadership of society. It turns out that intellectuals and creative figures, too, much to their annoyance, were subject to the condition of modern life. And as the believers that they were the principle carriers of rationality and of individualism and creativity, their despair took on existential qualities. Jaspers argued that the mass society is inescapable, that we are all suffering from a “chronic lack of selfhood,” and that we ‘no longer possess an isolated self.” Creative life and individualism had been now been defeated and not increased by democracy and modern life.<sup>lxx</sup> To many intellectuals, mass society is the greatest threat to need for cultural and creative distinction.

We will leave the direct discussion of mass society theory for now. It will be taken up after the Aftermath of the Second World War when it takes on a new complexion as the “lonely crowd” and “totalitarian man.” But its importance for the period under discussion and the acceptance of Jung, Pollock’s formative years of the 1940s, cannot be underestimated. For “mass society theory” seems to be an unrecognized force and widespread influence in



the life of the late 1930s, as Irving Howe pointed out earlier in our discussion, and in most of the formulations we have discussed. Its criticism helped lay the groundwork for enfolding Jung within American cultural debates.

### Jung's Psychologizing of the Mass Society Threat

We saw that Jung confronted what he saw as the problems of his time in his psychology. In criticizing Freud's valorizing of science and reason, in rejecting the Christian "myth" and its spent power of organizing the West's inner life and values, he addressed the ultimate issue -- of modern man as mass man and of modern society as mass society.<sup>lxxi</sup> As we saw, both depth psychology and "mass man theory" result from a similar diagnosis of modernity developing in the wake of urban industrialism. For Jung, uprootedness, isolation, lack of tradition, authoritarianism, and excessive rationality constituted the predicament of the contemporary psychological patient. *His analysis is that of mass man theory.* Both considered modern man as emotionally unstable, capricious, hysterical, and easily subjected to bureaucratic and authoritarian (in the guise of egalitarian democracy or the will of the people) rule. He, too, recognized the alleged depersonalized, lonely individual of modern society, emptied of his history, lacking a memory of his past, a shell of man without an innate self. Mass man was very different from the medieval man, who, while anonymous, was happily communal and living a life of meaning that a vital religion had given to him at that time.<sup>lxxii</sup> Freud's version of the emerging force of the twentieth century -- rational, analytic "psychological man" -- was a horror to Jung.

Jung sought a psychology that remedied these problems and the issues of mass society and mass man, in other words a cure or therapy of the resulting social ills. His means was psychology but his analysis was social and cultural. He had rejected Christianity as much as Freud but his response was not to simply study religion and tradition psychologically and the effects of its welcome decline in the development of modernity but to resolve its loss and redeem it. He thus rejected Freud's codification of the first views of the modernizing project and replaced it with his own – the continued place of ritual which he called a numinosium – his personal-mystical brand of religious experience -- in human life, the need for the unrecognized part of the self – for a man, woman, for a woman, man; and the need for the site that will bring forth these personal/social forces as the collective fantasy or “unconscious archetypes.” These religious forces took the form of an “immediate experience” by which he meant an irruption into the overly rational consciousness of collective material.<sup>lxxiii</sup> For Jung that would be the collective unconscious -- the source of common human feelings and religions' forces, for it consists of the oldest and most fundamental psychic contents of mankind. The history of man's inner life and its manifestations in art, myth, religion, prehistory and so on reveal such old contents. (Jung thus reflects earlier beliefs in the psyche as the conservator of meaning as religion once was.) As such they consisted of the essence of tradition and traditional man, or “archaic man” – as Jung called him, who was not autonomous, aloof, and rootless as modern mass man had allegedly become. (He relied on the ideas of the collective representation of the

non-Western peoples discussed by the anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl in this, as did the surrealists). Jung sought to integrate modernity (awareness of the new consciousness of the psyche) and tradition (the archaic or collective unconscious of the psyche, the source of all tradition) from which mass man was alienated in a way that would resolve the cultural crisis of the twentieth century. His psychology would be the assimilation of the past to modernity and the resulting formation of a new form of modern consciousness. It was a third way between the two.

As Benedict and others in the 1930s had given a modern cultural profile to psychology in her popular *Patterns of Culture*, Jung and Freud, too, gave a modern psychological identity to culture. In other words, what Jung and Freud conceived as characteristic of the individual mind was an internalization of the division in Western cultures in the first half of the twentieth century for their generations. For Jung, Freud and eventually for Pollock and Abstract Expressionism, psyche was psychoculture and civilizations writ large. “There is a ‘sociological unconscious’ just as there is a psychological unconscious.”<sup>lxxiv</sup>

Jung thus offered a solution to the dilemma of modern civilization and mass man through the Platonic tradition of the West – self-knowledge and self-understanding. Caught in the conflict between natural, archaic, and instinctual endowments and the need to adapt to rationalistic and collectivist norms, modern man had become neurotic. He thus needed a cure which became the goal of Jung’s analytic psychology – the process of individuation in which the nature of self was resolved within the private life and not by merely

adapting to social life. Jung proposed the development of a modern self – natural, spontaneous, and genuine. That self would arise at the *midpoint*, that is, at a point of balance between the conscious and collective unconscious and from the “god within” or religious spirit. (That is, from a balanced relationship and not, as is sometimes misunderstood, from the total subordination to the collective unconscious.) The primary theology of his therapy was to activate the life affirming and self-constructing, self-generating forces buried in the unconscious, thereby making a new individual and ultimately, a new culture and society. Neurosis thus could be construed as a creative illness. Neurosis and the unconscious were thus a source of illness but also of health. *They were dualistic.*

Thus Jung could repudiate Freud’s more socially adapted man and the authoritarianism of his father’s Christianity, and the repression and emptiness of modern urban life. His psychology was a diagnostic tool to form and generate his emergence new types of individual self-engendered and coherent autonomy. Both personally and intellectually, he saw religious life thus formed the matrix out of which the new man would emerge. Religion had traditionally protected man’s individuality; it was the reference point outside modern rationalism and communalism. Organizing and creating symbolic form and order to the irrational facts of personal experience, it consisted of inner transcendent experience that alone can protect the individual from the otherwise inevitable submersion in the mass. Modern religion, however, had become rigid,

rationalistic creeds and its organizations, authoritarian if not totalitarian.

Marxism and the church were one and the same in this dogmatic manner.<sup>lxxv</sup>

The end result was a form of modern, but not creedal, religious experience. Jung rearranged the inner life of his patients/subjects so that they would live independently, inwardly, and coherently in the modern world. This called for the ideal rearrangement of the structure of the psyche in which the externally driven persona and ratiocinative conscious ego would be lessened and the shadow side of dreams, the fantasies of the other sex within, and the collective archetypes or traditional, ancient patterns experience of other cultures in unconscious depths would emerge. These latter would rise from a numinosum, a personal-mystical spirit affect elements would rebalance and re-coordinate the psyche. "Thus Jung's concept of individuation [his core process] was not designed just as a psychotherapeutic strategy, isolated from its social context. It was addressed with equal seriousness to the problem of modernity, understood as mass man in a mass society."<sup>lxxvi</sup> For Jung, then modern man psychological quest is for such numinostic symbols that can be lived intensely and naturally. They will arise spontaneously from the unconscious in the form of archetypal images from which new "gods" will be formed. Unlike the thirties Diego Rivera's new "gods" that were industrial as they were in his Detroit murals Jung's could only emerge from within rather than without. And on an individual level, since the individual expresses in his personality the characteristics of his culture as a whole, and particularly the qualities and problems of the particular historical phase in which he lives, the

problems of the individual could be understood and solved through the resources that the culture lacked. For Jung and for Pollock, psychotherapeutic change was the same as cultural change. By facing up to his alcoholism, Pollock implicitly understood that he faced up to the cultural issues of the era.

Jungian psychology was thus *affirmative* as it sought to create a new modern social being through the psychic activity of the individual. By recognizing, reorganizing, and rebalancing inward choices, many of which emerged from the pressures of the collective unconscious, Jungian psychology aimed at a new man, an integrative “psychological” man that evolved out of the fragments of modern culture toward a more fulfilling and satisfying future and way of life. And what is true of the individual is true of the culture – it, too, must reorganize its forces. Thus Jung’s analysis had its origins in personal and socio-cultural cognition of conditions that transcended the individual. For him, the individual, the psychological, the social and historo-cultural, and increasingly, the political, are one, all turning destructive powers into healing forces. To Jung, the previous psychic order had led to World War I and totalitarian states.

That Jung offered a solution to psychological and cultural problems of mass man thus helps explain why the American Eastern establishment and others embraced Jung in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Partly through the program of the Bollingen Foundation and the Psychology Club of New York, for example, Jungian thought was spread far and wide at this time. The Foundation was founded by Mary Mellon, first wife of Paul Mellon, and the son

of the founder of the National Gallery in Washington. An art world person and a premier socialite, Mary Mellon wholeheartedly embraced Jungian psychology as a new form of consciousness that had specific social ends. After she attended some lectures at the Jungian Psychology Club and with the outbreak of war, she established Bollingen with the explicit hopes that it would provide new wisdom and understanding that would resolve man's internal conflicts that were now enacted as the next world war.

Like Jung, she saw war as the result of the upheavals in modern consciousness necessitating change: "While man is busy killing himself he has no time for why he is doing it—who he is, or who he may become for so doing. But for this very reason . . . the few who are concerned with consciousness are forced to make even more manifest their belief in the part of Man which is his ever nourishing and renewing force; and without which he cannot live."<sup>lxxvii</sup> For Mellon, much like T. S. Eliot's mythic method, Jungian psychology and its use and roots in psychology, archaeology, anthropology, ethnology, and "the history of the word itself" would make manifest new consciousness and wisdom. Such new understandings would create a new balance in man in which his various feelings and tendencies would "fall into place and & work in harmony." (C.f. the Bollingen to the goals of theosophy of spiritual openness and balance that would create personalities that would obviate war.) The Bollingen Foundation began publishing a pantheon of new or old thinkers that amplified this Jungian approach including St. John Perse, Paul Valéry, Paul Radin, Gershom Scholem, Joseph Campbell, Heinrich Zimmer and many others. While not all

Jungians, if at all, to Mellon and thus to the Eastern Establishment, their thought helped to gather, order, and evolve human consciousness.

With their support of the arts, the Mellons thus put forth an expanded Jungian program to resolve much of inward difficulty that had precipitated war and disorder in the modern world. The poet Kenneth Rexroth summed up the importance of the Bollingen Foundation and its significance in American cultural life in its time by describing it as a pivotal swing in Western culture. For it reclaimed interiority and reinstated values in a search for new meaning that would refound a “collapsed Western civilization.”<sup>lxxviii</sup> For the Eastern establishment, then, as well as artists and intellectuals, the solution to social and political problems was cultural, not simply political, that is, who governs and how. *Among the cultural elites, mass society analysis was not second to Marxism; for very many, it was first.*

Jungian psychology and its program was seen in America at the end of the 1930s and beginning of the 1940s as a form of addressing a deep social crisis -- the very rootlessness, ignorance, lack of self, the need for self-determined creative life, etc. that mass society theory, the World’s Fair and American utopianism, Jung, and Nazi Germany were defining on the big screen. As Diane Trilling noted in 1947, “dictatorship, war, and all the other hideous phenomena of our political day undoubtedly answer a profound need in the modern mass-personality.”<sup>lxxix</sup>



We can thus see why Jungian psychology and its thesis of creative illness and transformative, inward growth would strike a profound cord in America in the late 1930s. It sites itself within the debate about the appropriate culture for modern America, insinuating itself within the self-consciousness and uncertainty we saw about American cultural identity. *Jungian psychology addressed the dominant dilemmas of mass man and mass society of the time and proposed solutions to it. As such, it was a social statement. Pollock's problems and use of it were a personal response to the cultural situation at large that he saw as causing those problems. Pollock thus understood Jung's visionary view and connected his psychological needs to the central themes of his era. In so doing, his work and thought assumed a public rather than an exclusively private aesthetic.*

*Illustrations*

Fig. 1. Nuremberg Rally, Germany, 1936.

Fig. 2. Jose Clemente Orozco, *Man Released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life*. 1932, Oil on\_canvas, 7 x 8 ft. Dartmouth College.

Fig. 3 Jose Clemente Orozco, *The Masses*. Lithograph on fabriano paper, 1935.  
12  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 16  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, introduction, in Federic Douglas and Rene D'Haroncourt, *Indian Art of the United States* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1941; reprint 1969), 8.

<sup>ii</sup> See Stephen Polcari, "Pollock and America, Too," in *Abstract Expressionism The International Context*, ed. By Joan Marter, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007) 182-195.

<sup>iii</sup> Barnett Newman in "To Be or Not/6 Opinions on Trignant Burrow's *The Neurosis of Man*" in *The Tiger's Eye* 1 # 9 (October 1949): 122, stated that he had both agreed and disagreed with Read. The poet and longtime friend of Mark Rothko, Stanley Kunitz, personal communication, March 21, 1979, noted that Rothko read Read. Still, in a letter of May 10, 1946 published in *Clyfford Still* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1976), singled out Read for criticism. His criticism, however, is in keeping with Still's frequent denials of any debt to anyone and his desire to be independent of any popular system of criticism.

<sup>iv</sup> The Abstract Expressionist sculptor Herbert Ferber, personal communication, April 13, 1978.

<sup>v</sup> Read incorporates the thought of these figures in his writings from *The Meaning of Art* of 1931 to *The Grass Roots of Art* of 1947 and they remained fundamental to him through the remainder of his career.

<sup>vi</sup> This comment is probably unfair to Greenberg whose criticism was actually, as we shall see with "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," more of a response to cultural debates and issues than heretofore recognized. See Florence Rubenfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life* (New York: Scribner, 1997).

<sup>vii</sup> See Larry Lutchmansingh, *Sir Herbert Read's Philosophy of Modern Art*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1974, 29.

<sup>viii</sup> See, for example, Herbert Read, *Art and Society* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1937).

<sup>ix</sup> Herbert Read, *The Politics of the Unpolitical* (London: Routledge, 1945) rev. ed., 13-33.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>xi</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid., 124-128.

<sup>xiii</sup> Read's arrival at editor completes a journey that was exemplary of the journey of many English and American intellectuals between the wars. A World War One veteran, Read moved from the late 1920s belief in the utopian power of the machine to enable social change to an advocacy of Marx, then of Freud, Nietzsche, Frazer, and Levy-Bruhl in the late 1930s finally to Jung and Bergson, too, in the 1940s. For a discussion of Read's artistic philosophy and development, see Stephen Polcari, *The Intellectual Roots of Abstract Expressionism* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Microfilms International, 1981), 123-46.

<sup>xiv</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford, 1975). 106.

<sup>xv</sup> Quoted in Florence Rubenfeld, *Clement Greenberg/ A Life* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 58.

<sup>xvi</sup> For example, Pollock's friend, the "Indian Space" painter Peter Busa listed it as a book artists read at the time. See Stephen Polcari letter of February 10, 1978 to Peter Busa, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, upon which he wrote.

<sup>xvii</sup> Peter Busa, noted this in writing some thoughts on the letter. See Busa Archive, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art.

<sup>xviii</sup> Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture The Growth of a New Tradition*, Fifth Ed., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 13.

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid., 879.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxii</sup> Ibid., 880.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid., 872-873.

<sup>xxiv</sup> See C.T. McIntire and Marvin Perry, "Toynbee's Achievement" in *Toynbee Reappraisals* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 3-31.

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<sup>xxv</sup> See Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 285.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Abacus, 1979), 328-329.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Peter Homans, *Jung in Context/ Modernity and the Making of Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, 1995). I am indebted to Homans analysis.

<sup>xxviii</sup> See F. Weinstein and G. Platt, *The Wish to Be Free* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

<sup>xxix</sup> See Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic/ Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 1987).

<sup>xxx</sup> Rothko, "The Romantics were Prompted," in *Possibilities* 1 (Winter 1947/48): 84.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 241.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Homans, *Jung in Context*, xxv.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> See Carl E. Schorske, *Fin de Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. See also the writings of William J. McGrath.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Homans, *Jung in Context*, xxxiii.

<sup>xxxv</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a small group of graduate students wrote of Pollock and his work as a form of Jungian self-analysis and symbolization. They were famously attacked by the powerful Chief Curator of the Museum of Modern Art William Rubin who took time off from acquiring Picassos and Stellas to attack two youthful M.A.'s and a Ph.D. Rubin denied much serious interest on Pollock's part in Jung, and to confound and obfuscate, offered a Freudian speculation himself as a counter. Francis O'Connor has remained as the leading Jungian critic of Pollock while recently, the Freudian critic Donald Kuspit typically spurned Jung and examined Pollock in strongly psychoanalytic terms.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Homans, *Jung in Context*, 193.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii.

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xxxix Ibid., xliv.

xl See Carl G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffe (New York: Vintage, 1989).

xli Homans, *Jung in Context*, 116.

xlii Ibid., 57.

xliii Ibid., 87-89.

xliv Ibid., 141.

xlv Ibid., xxxii-iv.

xlvi Ibid., xliii.

xlvi Ibid., 180.

xlvi Ibid., 174, 153.

xlx Salvador Giner, *Mass Society* (New York: Academic Press, 1976), 260-61. I am indebted to Giner's book, one of the best reviews of the history of "mass society" theory.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 1-4.

li Ibid., 43-47.

lii Ibid., 57.

liii See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961).

liv Giner, *Mass Society*, 88.

lv Giner, *Mass Society*, 118.

lvi For Still, see Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 114-16.

lvii See Roger Sandall, "Splengleriana," in the culture cult.com June 16, 2006

lviii Giner, *Mass Society*, 72-74.

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lix Ibid., 74.

lx J. Ortega (1943) vol. II, 1164-65, cited in *ibid.*, 76, note 17.

lxi According to Erika Doss, Henry Luce, publisher of *Time* and *Life* magazines, followed Ortega's thinking after reading *The Revolt of the Masses*. Like most abstract expressionists and intellectuals, Luce feared both marxism and mass man by the end of the thirties. And like the others, he felt his class, businessmen, were a creative elite. Luce also supported the arts particularly regionalism. As will be seen below, then, fear of mass society was widespread but resulted in no one artistic vision.

lxii Karl Mannheim (1940), 41-43, cited in Giner., *Mass Society* , 83, note 31.

lxiii Ibid.

lxiv "The Culture of the Thirties," 157.

lxv Cusker, "The World of Tomorrow," 11.

lxvi Cited in *ibid.*

lxvii Ibid., cited in *ibid.*, 64, note 34.

lxviii Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton/An American Original*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 170.

lxix Jaspers in Giner, *Mass Society*, 86, note 41.

lxx Ibid., , 86

lxxi Homans, *Jung in Context*, 174.

lxxii Ibid., 172-180.

lxxiii Ibid., 187.

lxxiv Ibid., 155.

lxxv Carl.G. Jung, *Civilization in Transition*, in *Collected Works* vol. 10, (New York: Pantheon, 1964). See *ibid.*, 180.

lxxvi Ibid., 179.

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<sup>lxxvii</sup> Mary Mellon, cited in Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 46, note 72.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> Rexroth, in *ibid.*, 47

<sup>lxxix</sup> “July 5, 1947” in Diane Trilling, *Reviewing the Forties*, intro. By Paul Fussell, (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1978) 208.



## **The Mexican Notebook and the Symbolics of Pollock's Early Work**

First generation Abstract Expressionism is mostly a mythic, tragic, and epic art. Much of it sought to investigate the nature of civilization and the nature of the man that it produced. (They were one and the same.) To do that, the human personality or psyche had to be examined. That examination was the subject of Abstract Expressionist art including that of Jackson Pollock. To search for the "right" personality/psyche/culture that determined and corrected human (Western) behavior was the order of the day. Personality/psyche/culture determined the pattern of behavior and the nature of human expectation. In this time between the wars and at the advent of the Second World War, the internal nature, patterns and destiny of man were of fundamental concern for attempts to control the threat of mass man.

The new man would reject the mechanistic world that was leading to violence and death. He put down roots in nature and the past to counter the shallowness of modern man. He would emphasize those parts of the psyche that needed exposure and new power -- the Jungian nuministic unconscious -- that would deliver a new way of life (*Modern Man in Search of a Soul*). He would be spiritual and anti-rational. He would above all be creative, birthing the new individual/psyche/personality and culture. Pollock would deliver a self that is creative and that endures. The rest of this study will elucidate the new that was needed in Jackson Pollock and the West. It was thought that to achieve regeneration, a new self and a new harmony in the individual and in civilization

that matched the new era, a man of deathless creativity, had to be established. And to that represent regeneration, Pollock would focus on the image of growth or in human terms, as we shall see, copulation, pregnancy or fecundity, and new life as a baby. As his era noted through the overall concept of “living” and “dying,” death is to be followed by rebirth.

In his early paintings and drawings, Pollock conceived of and symbolized an inwardness ground in the ideas of his era. From the very beginning, Pollock’s thought was *dualistic* or *dialectic*, as key people like Rivera, Orozco, Benton, Jung and others taught him to be. Perhaps the best single definition was put forth by another recognized influence, the surrealist Andre Masson, who believed that in the permanent state of becoming that is reality, all things carry within themselves their opposites; death is inherent in life, and life in death. For the surrealists, as we will see later, the human state was one of perpetual transformation, whereby everything becomes something else and everything contains the possibility of becoming. To do all this in the late 1930s, Pollock assumed a specific persona with specific spiritual tasks and powers -- the shaman, who we will discuss presently. Suffice to say at this point, the shaman is a leader of inner transformation. And suffice to say that Pollock’s lifelong conceptualization has more to do with the thrust of surrealism than the popular inventions of the 1950s as something completely different.

By 1934, Thomas Hart Benton had left New York, moving to Missouri and leaving Pollock, although Pollock still had his brother Charles to provide

the strong leadership that he as a young man craved. Nevertheless, strongly imagining that there was a void in his life that needed to be filled, and feeling vulnerable at a time when the world was descending into strife, Pollock turned toward an art that seemed more dramatic and increasingly violent, the famous art of the Mexican muralists. Such a choice seemed appropriate because Mexican art represented epic human and socio-political conflicts and struggle, as well as death and rebirth on a national and world scale, and in the late 1930s the menace of fascism dominated all else.

Pollock, however, did not simply embellish and expand upon Mexican mural art but he recast it, as he did much of the 1930s, routing its themes and images of upheaval and renewal from the exterior to the interior world. In this he fused his crisis with that of civilization, the particular with the general, the personal with the political, and the psychological with the modern in industrial society. In transforming Mexican visionary, epic painting of that new modernity of the 1930s, Pollock truly found his own voice and made new art. It is easy to see in retrospect that he would “graduate” to the violent Picasso of *Guernica* and other modern art after his absorption of the Mexicans.

Pollock drew from the great Mexican Muralists known as “Los Tres Grandes” -- Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. These artists were already legendary by the 1930s and each in a different way could and did contribute to Pollock’s maturation. He drew from them much more than has been recognized. To be sure, as it is known, in his drip

paintings, he studied and employed Siqueiros's aggressive and searching technical experiments in combination with Orozco's historical panoramas of strife, and together they set an example for emotional expression that few in the era could match. He even drew from Rivera at first, indirectly through Benton who was influenced by Rivera and probably encouraged Pollock to follow suit, but also from the Federal Works Progress Administration of the mid and late 1930s when Rivera dominated much artistic thinking and envisioning. Pollock also drew directly from Rivera's work in California and New York. Although unlike Benton and WPA artists, however, Pollock did not look to Rivera's Giottesque *faux naïf* attempt at a new folk tradition, which was most popular at the time.

As a young boy in the 1920s, Pollock's first engagement with art consisted not only of the interrelationship of art with the new alternative religiosity that Schwankovsky taught him but with Rivera and Orozco. His brother Charles had written to him, telling him to read the articles in *Creative Art* of January 1929 on Rivera, *The Arts* of October 1927 on Orozco (and *Creative Art* of December 1928 by Benton), stating that Rivera and Orozco had done the "finest painting." He praised them for recognizing and visualizing the "implements" of the modern world.<sup>i</sup> (To define and articulate those instruments was another goal of the art of the interwar period from Benton's *Instruments of Power of America Today* of 1931 to Rothko's *Implements of Magic* of 1945.) In *Creative Art* he found an article by Orozco, too -- Orozco's first manifesto, "New World, New Races and New Art." Orozco would become a

seminal influence on Pollock in the following years but even then, Pollock wrote Charles that “I became acquainted with Rivera’s work through a number of Communist meetings I attended after being ousted from school last year. He has a painting in the [Los Angeles County] Museum now. Perhaps you have seen it, *Dia de Flores*. I found the *Creative Art* January 1929 on Rivera. I certainly admire his work.”<sup>ii</sup>

In the 1930s, artists in America recognized not only Paris as the center of new art but Mexico City;<sup>iii</sup> Mexico was considered equally avant-garde and Pollock himself said he wanted to go there. This influence has been largely overlooked in modernist accounts of the development of twentieth century American art. As we have noted, it is only what has contributed to high modernism that has been seen as important.<sup>iv</sup> To be sure, the Mexicans and particularly Rivera have been recognized as major figures in terms of their impact on the social and political art of the thirties, but the broad nature and value of their work in itself has all but been invisible and still is in most writing about American art. Further, as a result of this failure, their possible centrality to modernists such as Pollock and his friend the Abstract Expressionist sculptor Rueben Kadish and later the New York School artist Philip Guston has not been sufficiently researched either.<sup>v</sup> As we will see below, Mexican art was the founding father, along with Benton and the American culture of the thirties, of Pollock’s art. Only later and mostly just through Picasso and surrealism did European modern art enter the picture. In a way, European art

simply reaffirmed and extended the fundamental art and thought that Pollock had already developed under the impact of the Mexicans.

The Mexicans were an influence on Pollock and others not only because of his enthusiasm for their art but because they were artists whose epic vision of birthing a new culture dominated the decade. The Mexicans contributed to, if not defined and initiated, many of the questions we have examined or will examine. These comprise among others the formation of cultural mind and identity, their relationship to the past, the archaic or brutal yet fertile nature of that past, the search for social and cultural transformations, the place of cultural structure in the development of civilization, the evolution of national and world civilizations over space and time, and the nature or personality/psyche of man and human possibility particularly in the modern industrial age. Pollock and to a degree other Americans would absorb, on their own terms, the popular Mexicans' visionary search.

While Rivera and Siqueiros were important to Jackson Pollock, they were not the most significant of the three "Tres Grandes" Mexican muralists for him. The one who most influenced Pollock's imagery, form and, indeed, his entire conception, was Jose Clemente Orozco. Pollock's close friend Reuben Kadish, who worked with Siqueiros around Los Angeles,<sup>vi</sup> noted that he "passed Siqueiros off. 'The *real* man,' he said, 'is Orozco, and his *Prometheus* at Pomona is the thing to look at.'<sup>vii</sup> As I have written, not only was Orozco the most influential Mexican muralist for Pollock, but Pollock's work would not have developed without him.<sup>viii</sup> Most significantly, Kadish suggested Pollock was

going “*way overboard*” (my italics) in response to one particular painting of Orozco’s: *Prometheus* (1930) at Pomona College in California (fig. 1). Returning to California from New York in the summer of 1930, he promptly went with his brother Charles to see it and held



Jose Clemente Orozco, *Prometheus*  
1930

He soon described it as “the greatest painting done in modern times.” He kept a reproduction of it on his studio wall.<sup>ix</sup>

Indeed, Pollock went “more overboard” than Kadish or anyone else has imagined.

Influenced by the art dealer Alma Reed and her Delphic Movement, a group of Indian-inspired pacifists in New York for a short time in the 1930s, Orozco increasingly utilized classical subjects such as Prometheus in his work. The Delphic Movement also was behind his *Brotherhood of Man* fresco cycle at

the New School of Social Research in New York, also dating from 1930, which Pollock probably saw, as his teacher Thomas Hart Benton was painting the *America Today* cycle on another floor. Pollock posed for Benton and likely met Orozco then. After their initial rise to fame in Mexico at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City and elsewhere, by 1930 Orozco and his colleagues had become prominent enough to be asked to do murals in the United States and *Prometheus* was among the first Mexican murals painted in the country.

Indeed, *Prometheus* is also among the first modern expressionist, allegorical and mythological murals anywhere. It reflects Orozco's capacity to be universalizing, that is, to address topics of modernity, as well those of Mexico. Prometheus, of course, is the Greek Titan who stole fire (knowledge) from the gods and gave it to humankind to transform man's destiny. In the painting, humankind receives the gift with mixed feelings. Zeus promptly subjects Prometheus to eternal suffering for his efforts. Orozco's rendering of the subject of Prometheus's troubling gift thus suggests the complex, dualistic cost of the agencies of human development

In *Prometheus*, Orozco realized his mature concepts -- a giant, dominant, central figure engaged in an act of transfiguration; humanity depicted as a crowd; and the double-sided cost of change, here depicted as fire -- in a style that combined traditional representation with modern abstract expressiveness.<sup>x</sup> In the humanity as crowd/mass image, Orozco created a chorus of different human reactions to the two-edged sword of Prometheus's



revelation and transformation. Some welcome the gift of the transforming fire, significantly turning towards it, and some flee from it. On the ceiling touching the central panel, Orozco closes the painting with a group of interlocking, expanding, flaming rectangles, that is, a group of abstract shapes that symbolize the divine metaphor of dualistic fire and perhaps God. The portrait of Prometheus as a figure engaged in a transforming act cannot be underestimated, for throughout his career Pollock's art was shaped by it.

By 1938, after several years of study and emulation of Thomas Hart Benton's work, Jackson Pollock became increasingly introspective in both his personal and artistic life. He developed a more expressionist, acerbic, and violent art that, while symbolic and powerfully rhythmic in composition, seemed more attuned to the world's and his own growing somberness. By now it had become evident that, with civil war in Spain, the remilitarization of Europe, the possible coup of Hitler's generals, Munich, and the Rape of Nanking, and the emergence of the dangerous modern individual, mass man, a second world war was inevitable, indeed imminent. Paralleling these exterior crises were personal ones. In 1938, Pollock was hospitalized for alcoholism, and, as the psychological and emotional difficulties that would plague him for the rest of his life became manifest, he began four years of Jungian psychotherapy.

At this moment, Pollock turned decisively towards Mexican art. Such a choice seems appropriate because Mexican art represented conflict and

struggle on a national, even epic, scale. Pollock drew especially from Jose Clemente Orozco whose allegorical art was well known and respected in the United States. Orozco's historical panoramas of strife set an example for emotional expression that few in his era could match. Pollock, however, did not simply embellish and expand upon Orozco and other mural artists as he had done with Benton. He recast Orozco, rerouting images and themes of upheaval and renewal from the exterior to the interior world. In transforming the Mexican epic painting of the 1930s, Pollock found his own voice.

Mexican mural painting, particularly the work of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Orozco, had a great impact on American painting in the 1930s. In this decade of economic catastrophe and sociopolitical upheaval, climaxing with mass man and world war, the art of these Mexicans opened the way for an American art that was also political and historically deliberate. For many American artists of the decade, the primary sources of new art and thought were Mexico and Paris. The second one-person show at the newly opened Museum of Modern Art in 1931 had been Rivera's. In the 1920s, the three Mexicans, or *Los Tres Grandes*, had turned largely to telling the story of Mexico's struggles from prehistoric and pre-Contact times to the present in styles that fused modern European art with the art of the Renaissance and Baroque. In the United States this fusion, together with subjects derived from mythic and folk histories, provided rich themes for artists to explore, and many did.

Fire was a frequent symbol in Pollock's time. Orozco, Sir James Frazer, Jung, Nietzsche and proponents of shamanism made it into a ritual symbol, and Jung probably drew upon the idea from Nietzsche whom he greatly admired. (There is no evidence that Pollock read Nietzsche but he was familiar with those who did such as Jung and Herbert Read who incorporated him in their thought. It is this indirect manner that the period's cultural history would often influence Pollock and he would find reinforcement from one widespread source or another.) Pollock's colleague Clyfford Still also enveloped some of his earlier figures in fire and then made his abstraction ultimately of fiery figural forms that self-generate.<sup>xi</sup> One further direct influence was Andre Masson whose early work such as *Still Life with Candle* of 1922-23 contained a candle as a symbol of the popular Heraclitus concept of fire as the substance of the world, the primordial element out of which everything arises. For Heraclitus, everything is born from the death of something else. Fire is thus a creative and destructive duality, destroying the old to bring in the new, a trope that would become standard with Pollock. The same held true for Orozco, too.

Probably around 1938, Pollock painted two works whose source and meaning points to this metaphor. We briefly looked at Pollock's [*Composition with Figures and Banners*] which consists of flags, banners, and embracing figures in a torched world. That painting and *The Flame* (fig. 2) of the same time period were inspired by the fire symbolism of Orozco, most probably *Man*



of *Fire* in Guadalajara although Orozco used fire in many paintings from the Dartmouth murals to *Catharsis*. Orozco employed fire as a common motif that changed meanings from creative to destructive forces depending on the context. While Pollock's paintings of fire are more abstract than Orozco's circular image in *Man of Fire*, they were no less dualistic in meaning.

In Orozco's *Man of Fire* in Guadalajara (1938-40) a single figure representing humanity is engulfed in flames, surrounded by several figures representing the elements (fig. 3).

## Orozco, man of fire

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In contrast, Pollock's figures are less specific and *The Flame* is abstract except for what *may* be an embracing couple on the left. The "couple" (we can see several white fingers of one of the participants) is penetrated by flame and its immediate source may be a similar couple in [*Composition with Figures and Banners*]. Ultimately, however, the original source may be an embracing couple next to Orozco's *Prometheus* and his gift of fire/knowledge/ and new civilization. In Pollock's paintings and in particular *The Flame*, he evokes a near total, all-over cataclysmic upheaval and conflagration that the fire of the new engenders. A world of fire and flame is thus a dualistic symbol of destruction

and creation that he knew and could easily adopt. The cleansing psychic/spiritual nature of upheaval was often conceived as purification through destruction in his era.<sup>xiii</sup> Both world wars were often described in their early years as a necessary cleanser of the corrupt worlds that led to them.

Pollock then takes these ideas further in a brilliant lurch, which as it turns out was ahead of his time and ahead of his work, and indeed ahead of our general discussion. The painting *Untitled [Overall Composition]* of the time period 1934-38 (fig. 4) is an unprecedented and unique foray into abstraction.



Pollock seemingly gives up subject matter for an all-over swirling mass of short



comma and squiggle brushstrokes across an entire canvas. Not only does this work anticipate the figurative work throughout his career such as *Portrait of .M.* of 1945, it *H* obviously anticipates his allover drips. *Untitled [Overall Composition]* consists of a total urgency of integrated, overlapping, curvilinear red, black, and white marks and strokes. The marking seems to be derived from Siqueiros's idea of marking a space and then making a form afterwards, the result of his experimental use of proxyalne, stencils, and the like. He called this ground-covering "controlled accidents." The crisscrossing of the marks seem to be suggested by Signorelli's *Damned Cast into Hell* (fig. 5)





or Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina*, old master paintings that Pollock mostly studied the time along with other old masters.

The remarkable originality of [*Overall Composition*] was not followed up at this time. In a mode typical of Pollock, he lurches forward in one direction and then another until he arrives at the drippings of 1947-50. And even then and later, he quickly turned to other directions. Pollock's mode of creativity is stops and starts, not a smooth unfolding. For now, let us return to the emergence of Pollock's array of generative symbols that reveal him as seeking to reconceive and reconstruct the world and his own self as he knew them.



Just as a flame is a symbol of the creative and destructive that are one and the same, so is the figure that brings this about -- the mythic, transformative hero Prometheus -- in the painting of its name. The further impact of the Mexicans can be immediately found in the notebooks Pollock did ca. 1938, particularly the almost completely Mexican notebook, number three. Two early drawings in Pollock's third notebook reveal his struggle to find the right image that suggests symbolic creation or the duality of regenerative life and death based on the work of the Mexicans.

The two pencil and gouache drawings, 461r and 462r, present an exaggerated female figure with arms raised to the apex of a triangle. Sheet 462r was apparently executed first, and the exaggerated figural form of this drawing is taken from Siqueiros's monumental *Proletarian Victim* of 1933. The painting was exhibited in The Museum of Modern Art's 1934 show, *Modern Works of Art*, and published in the catalogue. (The painter's sole owner, George Gershwin, who was a good friend of Siqueiros, later gave it to the museum in 1938.) Behind the figure in Pollock's work is what seems to be a rising white and black diagonal plank to which she is attached. The plank becomes a sword-like thrust above the figure's head. This image is based on a pencil drawing (1926) by Orozco for *The Trench* (1928). Pollock has made the figure from the rising white plane into the idea of the cross. In Orozco's drawing and painting, the cross is a crossbar.

It has convincingly been pointed out that the source for the image of a voluptuous female attached to a plank is a mural, *The Struggle against War and Fascism*, painted in Morelia, Mexico by two young friends of Pollock from Los Angeles, Reuben Kadish and Philip Guston.<sup>xiii</sup> In that work, Siqueiros's *Proletarian Victim* is attached to a cross, in effect, martyred. Pollock would have known this work since Kadish and Guston in particular were life-long friends.

Pollock's sheet 462r (fig. 6) seems to a summary of that image done not only in his usual graphite and colored pencils, but also gouache. He has not attached a full-figured woman to an abbreviated cross to represent the martyred proletariat as his friends have, however, but to express his theme of creation or new life. This seems to be the case because the even more exaggerated curvilinearity of the flesh than is seen even in Siqueiros and Kadish/Guston works suggests the fecund female, a fecundity that triumphs over the bare bones of a hip and socket (a shamanic x-ray death symbol?) that

make up one side of the figure. Pollock would go on to use both images

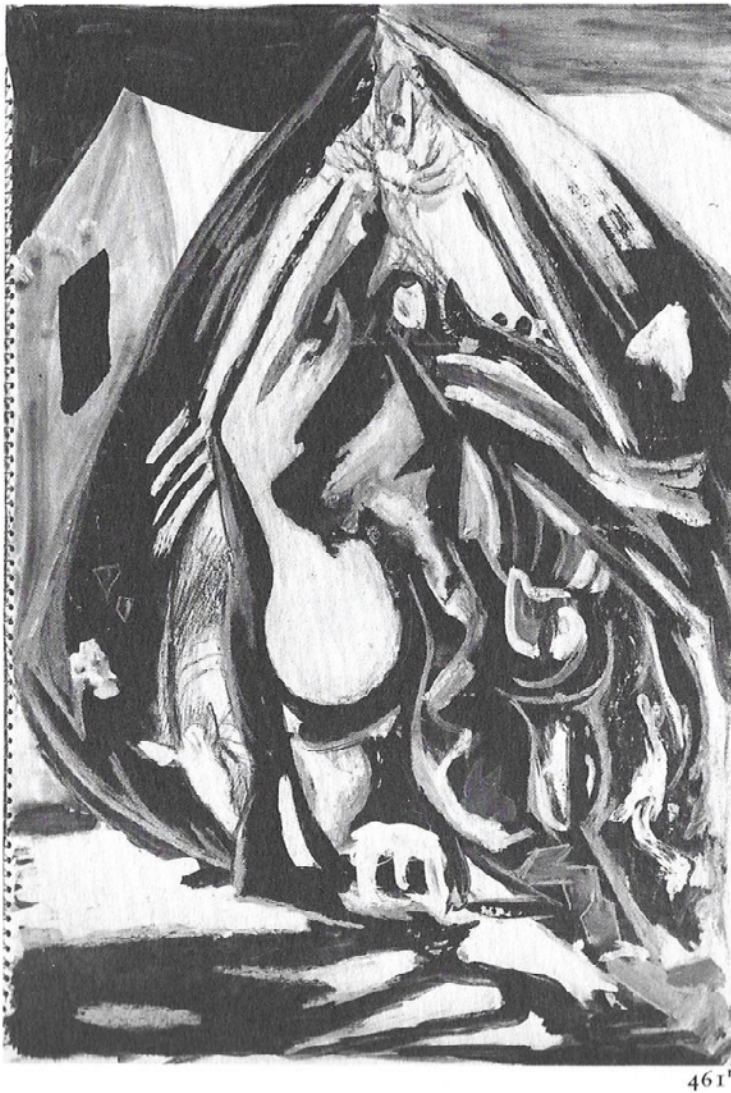


repeatedly.

Pollock reinforced the idea of fertility with what woman reaches for. She reaches at the very top for a bent-over shape with a large head that is most likely a child. The bent-over shape then seems to be that of a womb with a fetal form within. Such a suggestion may seem far-fetched to some observers but

typically in looking at Pollock's work, parallels in some works can often illuminate difficult forms in others. Further evidence for the proposed association will be pointed out shortly. Suffice to say here that there may be direct sources for this image of a fetal womb although it is different in meaning: the biomorphic frieze of hieroglyphs in Siqueiros's *Tropical America* (1932) and the panel at the left of Siqueiros's *Portrait of Present Day Mexico* from the same year. In the latter panel, Siqueiros has enwrapped Mexican dead in serapes to represent their slaughter under the government of Plutarco Elias Callas. The serapes have large strong curvilinear edges within which lay large, ambiguous shapes. Pollock took this image, which he saw in California, and joined it with the traditional drapery of old master painting to articulate an enclosed shape with a child within. The whole enveloping shape above the figure's head thus becomes a womb with child for which the fertile woman on the cross is reaching.

In contrast, in sheet 461r (fig. 7) the female form is halved, its right section open to an "x-ray" configuration of bone, ribs, and sinews.



461 r

To the figure's left is a horse's head, a standard image used by Pollock, shortly to be derived from Picasso's *Guernica* and its drawings. For Pollock, the horse, usually combined with its alter ego, the bull, suggest a creature of sacrificial suffering.<sup>xiv</sup> (The horse and bull are, of course, the protagonists of the bullfight. The Spaniards Goya and Picasso made their conflict into human metaphors. For all three artists, the bull may be the victim as well as aggressor but the horse never

afflicts pain. He only suffers it. Pollock frequently represents the horse and bull tied together and often locked in mortal combat as the psyche battles against itself with its capacity for aggression and suffering. The animal as protagonist and victim is a common theme of surrealism, too.<sup>xv</sup>)

This woman also reaches upward. What she grasps in this example is not a pregnant womb but a bunch of brown branches (difficult to see in the reproduction because of its dull brown and white colors). Those branches represent fertility and eventual new growth, as will also become clear below. All of this takes place in front of a white house drawn from Orozco's work. All forms are encompassed by a strange cape-like shape again drawn from the Siqueiros and also from Orozco's representation of Mexican women in serapes. In 461r, however, Pollock has made the serape or cloak suggest an all-enveloping womb for all of the figures and forms.

In its way, the child in the womb shape of sheet 461r evokes a similar and clearer image in the earlier drawing 405r in notebook one (fig. 8).

405<sup>r</sup>

Notebooks one and two

were devoted to learning and taking command of Benton's analytic methods from old master art and the foundation patterns of the West, yet they also contained images that were most probably later additions because they are of different media. They also were out of keeping with the rest of the notebooks and the pages. In drawing 405r, the womb and child shape is a part of a rectangular drawing that had been added to the left of the page. The drawing

as a whole consists of lamentation-like figures before Calvary in the distance. No old master source is known for this drawing but the combination of the ritual death of Calvary, darkness, and the womb and child suggest the combination of contrasting life and death that would become standard in Pollock's art.

To return to our principal discussion of 461r and 462r, it is important to note that the human figures reaching upward to grasp a new or fecund form also represent one of Pollock's favorite images. Orozco's mythological painting *Prometheus*, of course, showed a giant figure that reaches upward toward the light that will illuminate, transform, and give wisdom and creativity to the earth and its people. Pollock's sheets 461r and 462r reenact the giant Promethean gesture, this time in the more creative form of a fecund woman and her gifts of fertility in the form of the branches and baby. The redeeming symbols of fecundity together with the creative force that transforms life thus take center stage early on in Pollock's work. With these drawings, it is evident that Pollock was becoming a *mythic* artist, an artist who invents, repeats, and yet varies the same ideas. With them, too, we see Pollock repeat yet also invent from the previous forms and their patterns as Benton taught him. The intensity in these drawings does not reflect mere spontaneity, troubled "psychological fantasy," or common sexuality but an analytic mind and artist at work. Sketchbook three, the Mexican, is thus a major site of Pollock's developing capacity to symbolize. In it, he fuses historical and expressive sources with personal inventions to summarize and evoke a larger philosophically cultural



stance that faces both personal and public crises. The obscurity of the imagery here as elsewhere has seldom been interpreted. The difficulty of such an endeavor and the enabling fiction of “it’s the unconscious” have prevented most critics from seeing Pollock’s intention to dress his stance toward the modern in mythic form so as to link his work to an authentic modern tradition -- the Mexicans, shamanism, Jungian thought and other ideas -- and then redo himself and his own world. His modern myth-making made a *cultural* point that seems to have been lost on contemporaries and critics alike.

It could be also be linked to another of Pollock’s interests -- theosophy -- for the gift-giver was a central idea of theosophy. The gift-giver, usually one of the Masters of theosophy, helps humanity improve itself and search for new spiritual life through beneficent work. He is of higher intelligence and “soul,” and Pollock’s love of Prometheus, both in painting and idea, may be because he seeks those who can spiritually benefit him. Krishnamurti was, of course, such a figure but the conceptions of the creative unconscious and shamanism would soon take over this role for Pollock.

In the next two pages of sketchbook three, Pollock’s concept of female procreativity as a mythic, life-giving and life-transforming force sets the stage for his work. It develops further through the choice of an image that he seems to believe to be as direct as possible, as opposed to his previous more art historical and symbolic forms. In sheet 464r (fig. 9) we find a graphite and colored pencil drawing of female genitals, an archetypal procreative and thus



creative form.

Pollock owned a

medical book, *Gynecology*, which had a number of illustrations, although none of which exactly match this drawing.<sup>xvi</sup> He significantly sought to research this idea even though in the end he did not specifically use what he read. He used

CRIII: 464r in his drawings (CRIII: 473r) (fig. 10). Significantly, Picasso used



male genitals in the same way



in his work inspired by Marie Therese-Walter (fig. 11).

In 463r (fig. 12), Siqueiros's bird presides over a related whirlwind set of forms that at first seem to be capes but their true form gradually becomes



clear.

Lisa Messinger has

pointed to Andre Masson's *In the Tower of Sleep* (1938) as a work that was reproduced in *Cahiers d'Art* in 1939 which Pollock may have seen and then drawn upon for this work.<sup>xvii</sup> He seems to have done that here in the swirling, curvilinear effects and the sense of overlapping and unfolding forms which are also found at the lower center of the Masson. But Pollock has transformed that sense of unfolding into a field of vaginal forms reflecting the same thought that

inspired his own drawing 464r. Particularly this is true at the right, where labial lips emerge and also in the center where other forms echo the shape of fallopian tubes. At the center below the pointed wing of the bird is an oval with a white curving form. This shape tops 462r and is probably the baby-in-womb form again. The bird, then, presides over this field of fecund dreams as most of the imagery of the drawing is a dream emanating from the barely visible brown, central lower section. There a man lies hugging the ground with his fingers extended. He seems to be dreaming this dream of the teeming and swarming creative. Messinger has also noticed that a vaginal image, derived from a gynecological drawing, seems to form the head of a shape attached to a cross in 473r, a key image in Pollock's work.<sup>xviii</sup> Although not in the notebook, independent sheet 479 (fig. 13) also records proliferating female genitalia and "babies" in the womb as burgeoning growth, this time arising from bones on





the ground.

In all of these drawings, the imagery has adapted Benton's rhythm so that form and imagery flow, proliferate and overlap, formally and expressively matching the meaning of the work.

Pollock thus utilized *procreative* forms to suggest *creative* life. He learned this from the Mexicans as we can see in one of Pollock's most provocative drawings. In a drawing from 1939-40, sheet 555, Pollock renders what seems to be copulation with the earth. This drawing has been a favorite for arguing that Pollock had a troubled psyche and thus has been a source for much speculation about his fears of sexuality and alleged trouble with women; but I

believe, however, it has a characteristically predictable source and a characteristically predictable meaning if seen within the larger context of the era.

Sheet 555 (fig. 14) is a drawing of penetration of the earth and penetration, a frequent topic of one of his painters of interest, Diego Rivera.



From the penetration of the earth that leads to new, redeeming hydroelectric power symbolized by a woman to the images of the industrial “penetration” in Detroit (“Steam and Electricity”) to the upper left corner of copulating genitals in one of the central rays at the Rockefeller Center,





Natural penetration and copulation were a symbol for human social creativity and for all that Rivera intended in his art. Pollock knew of these images and their meaning and most importantly he adopted the theme for himself.

Sheet 555 repeats Rivera theme of the fecund copulation of the earth as symbolic of the germination of life. Indeed, Pollock drew his image of the central penetrating column or pipe from such an image rendered by Rivera. The image is at the center of Rivera's *Man at a Crossroads* at Rockefeller Center (fig. 15). It is the pipe to and from the lower strata or subterranean forces of the earth that feeds and flows to the machine that engenders central dualistic rays of cosmic and earthbound germinations, both natural and human. Surrounding the pipe in the Rivera are its immediate results -- new rows of fertile fruits.

Pollock drew his idea and theme from this image but he added his own symbols of the nurturing soil and fecund new life that were necessary for fructification. While the columnar phallus repeats the Rivera's pipe column, Pollock added an enwrapping snake, a frequent and common symbol he used for the unconscious, the "dark god." The top of the column branches out, Pollock's concision of Rivera's fruitfulness and an echo of the branches of drawing 461r and others, as we will see. Surrounding the column is a mandala, a prominent Jungian mythic symbol (and used by others as well) of the goal of wholeness. It is usually in the form of magic circle, square, or quaternity. Jungian theory represents the psychic process of organizing a center order to being, that is, a new personality/psychological order. The mandala is also the birthplace of the gods and is placed over chaos to enwrap and transform it. The column phallus is further surrounded by crisscrossing legs and arms, suggesting the coordination and unity of different parts, as we shall see below. Further, the crossed hands are surrounded by a bright aureole suggesting a radiant event taking place. The crisscrossing arms also suggest a crucified figure (a cross is barely visible in reproduction), which, like the Mandela, is again a frequent Pollock symbol. Around this complex is a cape with radiating curving lines and Pollock's common dualist symbols for the unconscious processes of sacrifice or destruction, the horse and bull.

There are many symbols here -- too many to maintain a focus on our discussion of fertility. Let us put them aside at this point so that we can continue our discussion of Pollock's symbols of growth and development of

1938 and beyond.

To the image of penetration of the earth in sheet 555 can be added drawings of actual human copulation. Drawings such as # 491 (fig.16) of a couple embracing in the so-called “psychoanalytic drawings,” for example,



491

491

indicate further procreative acts.

The result of such acts is pregnancy and Pollock draws that several times in this period again inspired by Rivera. In the Chapingo chapel, Rivera had painted a voluptuous, pregnant nude after Tina Madotti. A fecund body seemingly molded of clay, the figure evokes the earth goddesses of fertility such

as that of the Aztec Coatlicue/Tonantzin and represented the Mexican continent. Other images of pregnancy abound in Rivera's work.

At the bottom of Pollock's pencil and colored crayon drawing in 475r (fig. 17) in the "Mexican" notebook lies a



pregnant woman, his "fertile" earth. Her swollenness gives birth to a complex scene above, the most relevant image for us now being the uterine shape once again, this time filled with the full figure of the crucified Christ. Again we have a complex image that we will explicate presently. Suffice to say at this point that this image is a simple representation of pregnancy and its results.

Perhaps the most inventive image of concentrated fecundity is 469r (fig. 18), again in the “Mexican” notebook. Lisa Messinger has described this strange representating



Pollock, Sheet # 469r

on as a “surreal composite of both and male and female body parts -- breasts, uterus, testicles, penis, hair, intestines, and a six-fingered hand.”<sup>xix</sup> The brilliant combination of fecund images of sheet 469r is illuminating if we compare the drawing to well-known Picassos of the period such as the painting of Maria-Therese Walter, *The Dreamer* of 1932 (fig. 19), formerly in the Klaus Perls Collection, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.





One of a

series, this painting or its composition is one that Pollock must have known because by now the telling familiar branching forms at the upper right of his composition are taken from the Picasso as a direct quotation. (Such a Picasso idea and image thus lies behind other uses of branching lines that we have seen such as 461r.) The Picasso, with its oval forms around the fecund Maria-Therese, symbolizes fertile life -- as does the Pollock. The ovoid forms also recall the pregnant female in Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* of 1932, a painting

in the Museum of Modern Art in New York that Pollock was well known to have admired (fig. 20)



Picasso, Girl Before a Mirror, 1932

That Picasso represents the theme of fecundity, which was popular with the Mexicans, and others as well, and this additionally indicates how prevalent this theme was in the era between the wars. Thus, it is no surprise that Pollock chose it. Pollock's ideas are those of his era. He is not the exception but the rule even if his particularization -- for example, the Mexicans, Jungianism, Native American symbolics, etc. -- is his own. He thus does not have to be brilliant or verbal or profoundly intellectual, only *au courant*. This is what his brother Charles meant when he *said he knew the issues and these are some of the issues*.<sup>xx</sup> Interestingly, such themes indicate the change in Picasso who also went from representing his bottles of absinthe and guitars of cubism to themes of fecund, mythic woman. Picasso followed the trends as well. That the

figure is Maria-Therese is just his particularization of the period's themes; he inflects them through people in his own personal life but it is the overall theme that matters most, not the personal life, as was the case with Pollock. Picasso made this abundantly clear not only in his paintings but his sculpture of the period in which Maria Therese's voluptuous form is fused with male genitalia, a concept ultimately related to Pollock's and the ultimate source of Pollock's vaginal head figure. But Pollock feminized both Picasso and Orozco.

Pollock knew that possibilities are first those of the mind. This seems to be confirmed by the inscription at the right of the drawing below the penis in # 469r with another fertile figure which reads "passive fantasy/active fantasy." Michael Leja has noted that these words refer to "the Jungian distinction between fantasies that erupt into consciousness and those that require action from the ego to bring them into consciousness. Jung described passive fantasy as the product of a dissociated psyche and a completely passive consciousness in the subject. Such fantasies, in contrast, are produced by healthy psyches and are among the highest forms of psychic activity, since they involve the positive participation of consciousness with unconscious materials. They are, furthermore, 'the principal attribute of the artistic mentality.'"<sup>xxi</sup>

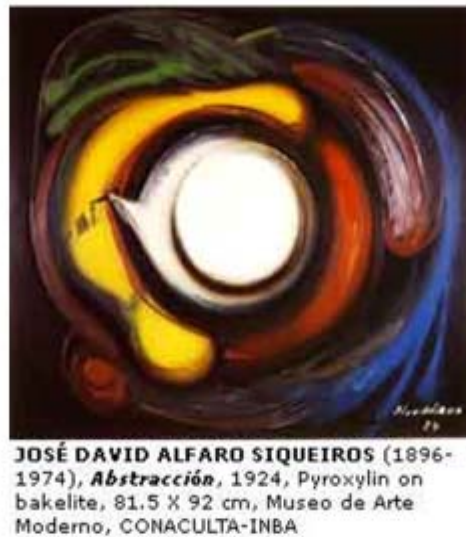
If this inscription is directly relevant to the drawing -- it does not have to be -- but if it is, Pollock uses an image of rich fecundity to suggest the creative, psychological capacities of the artist. It is this that is pregnant within Pollock's consciousness and it is this that needs to be giving birth.



And birth is the result of pregnancy. Throughout his work, Pollock paints and draws innumerable birth scenes with their final results -- babies -- in symbolic and pictographic terms. Let us look at the simplest and most direct one. [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*] of 1938-41 (fig. 21) displays all three of the characteristics Pollock revealed in his drawings.



The painting presents a scene of a public ritual birth that draws upon the Mexicans. Rising above a horse-skeleton is a fully fleshed woman with a Siqueiros-like head, that is, an intense white much like Siqueiros's (*Rotation*)



(fig. 22)

and the

later *Patricians and Parricides* and *The Face of Treason* finished in 1947. For Siqueiros, and probably for Pollock, such heads, as do babies, refer to the seat of vital energy. The horse skeleton resembles the skeleton figure in Orozco's crayon drawing <sup>xxiii</sup> for [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*] as much as the actual panel for *Gods of the Modern World*, one of the Dartmouth murals, from which it was drawn. Together the skeleton and the curvilinear woman form a "hump-like" shape which we shall see always suggests pregnancy and birth for Pollock.

These forms are surrounded by the many gesticulating figures bringing up in our discussions the idea of the crowd or humanity which Pollock knew from Orozco's *Prometheus* and other works such as El Greco's *The Dream of Philip II* (plate 92) (fig. 23)





and especially

the detail of the *Burial of the Conde de Orgaz* (plate 86) in M. Legendre and A. Hartmann's *El Greco* (Paris Hyperion, 1937).<sup>xxiii</sup> They celebrate what is taking place. In shamanist terms, which we will see is very important to Pollock, they can be considered to be in a trance-rapture. Behind the crowd is a wall of flame, that familiar symbol of possible creation/ destruction. For Pollock, the

choice seems to indicate creation because of the two remaining symbols. One is a serpent that crawls below the horse skeleton and seems to “guard” the dark ceremony. Clearly drawn from Orozco’s similar form in Dartmouth (fig. 24),



Orozco, Snake, Epic of Civilization

it is a pre-Contact as well as Native American symbol. In many shamanic cultures, the serpent denotes the presence of a primitive deity and its nature powers. It sheds its skin periodically and thus is continually reborn like the pre-Contact plumed serpent: “[B]ecause it sheds its skin, it symbolizes resurrection . . . because of its sinuous movement, it signifies strength . . . it represents the evil side of nature, too, [and] is a potent manifestation of the energy of birth and rebirth, sex and death.”<sup>xxiv</sup> (Recall that the snake is wrapped around the rising phallic column in sheet # 555.) All mysteries of the universe, such as the cycle of the sun and moon, the seasons and the sounds

of life at dawn, manifested unseen powers, the life energy or vitality that activates body and soul. <sup>xxv</sup> These are all Pollock subjects.

As noted above, the snake is also the Jungian symbol of the dark god, the unconscious, functioning as does the plumed serpent for the development of a new selfhood since it requires the shedding of the old, that is, destruction, and the emergence of the new, that is, reconstruction: “The Snake, because it casts its skin, is a symbol of renewal, a sun symbol.”<sup>xxvi</sup> And, the snake is the subject of Hopi ritual in the Snake ceremony that Pollock had read about in the Smithsonian Institution’s *Nineteenth Annual Report Bureau of Ethnography* Publication. There the primary purpose of the ceremony was thought to “bring rain and thus to promote growth . . . . [T]his desire . . . dominates all the rites of the Hopi ritual.”<sup>xxvii</sup> The presence of the serpent in the painting thus signifies that change needs to take place in psychological as well as real space and that change requires darkness as well as light. (Also rebirth from bones -- ancestors -- is a shamanic trope. It is often expressed as a “refleshing “of the bones. Pollock shared this concept with his fellow Abstract Expressionist “shaman,” Clyfford Still, an issue which we will discuss further below.)<sup>xxviii</sup>

[*Bald Woman with a Skeleton*] is thus what Pollock’s work has always been considered to be in modernist criticism -- a psychological fantasy. But what a psychological fantasy! Such modernist descriptions do not begin to do justice to works such as these.



In a second symbol, Pollock clarifies this scene further, for it clinches the process of rebirth or resurrection that the horse sacrifice and dark god requires. That symbol is an upside-down baby emerging from between the legs of the bone horse skeleton. Though hard to see, it clearly is there and it clearly has been used before. Pollock cast this image of a small human figure with arms up as the centerpiece of the chinaware bowl that he gave to a Dr. Wall in



1938 (fig. 25).

The figures thrusting in all directions across the surface of the bowl in a palette of flame Dr. Wall described, in his words, as representing the “Flight of Man” after Pollock explained it to him.<sup>xxix</sup> The thrusting form in the bowl and the painting has a source that further explicates this flight, journey, or life process

of man. The baby may be taken from a Michelangelo drawing of 1532-33 (fig. 26) revealingly entitled “Resurrection.”



## Michelangelo, The Resurrection

Recall that Pollock drew from Michelangelo before. He owned several books but also went to the Frick Reference library to study works from which he drew. The form has obviously been chosen for its meaning and for the representation of rising and resurrection with its up thrust arms since it does not really look like a baby. A real baby form will be chosen shortly. [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*] is thus a scene of rebirth or resurrection. All elements function together to represent a ritual rebirth from the darkness and sacrifice. This painting is a Pollock *Prometheus* once again, then, in which ritual life generates

anew. And the life is for what was known as the “people” or the masses that surround, witness, flee yet guarantee the event. Pollock thus addressed his deed to the public. As in Orozco’s painting *Prometheus*, Pollock’s presents a birth or ritual act for the good of the public, some of which are pleased and some of which are fearful.

Ironically, with [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*], he fulfilled Benton’s definition of the kind of art needed in America. In the 1930s, Benton wrote an essay on Regionalism in which he criticized modern art in the sense that despite its technical developments, modern art ended up merely in a “private soul cultist.” Modern art, he said, separated itself from a publicly meaningful subject, from ideas, legends, stories, religious or secular and concrete factors of a public nature in order to sustain itself. For Benton, the anarchic individualism of modern art expresses nothing whatsoever of the driving forces of society. Ironically, despite its obvious rejection of Benton’s social subjects, despite all the inventiveness of [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*], Pollock’s painting, nevertheless, has a meaningful subject and an idea based on religious legends or rites that are meant for the public. And even though modernist critics in the early 1950s embraced, in obvious willful radical chic, the anarchic individualism and its “private soul cultism” vilified by the previous generation of the thirties such as Benton and the Mexicans and praised Pollock, [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*] is not a representation of “anarchic individualism” or primarily the tortured soul of Pollock but just what Benton called for -- the driving forces of society needed for its nurturing. For Pollock,



however, they were psychological and cultural in the late 1930s, not social and regional.

(Ironically, too, [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*] seems to be a fulfillment of an earlier idea at the end of notebook one when Pollock was copying old master art. The drawing CRIII: 425r (fig. 27) consists of a truncated, single, semi-fluid female body above a copy of Giotto's *The Vision of Saint Francis in*



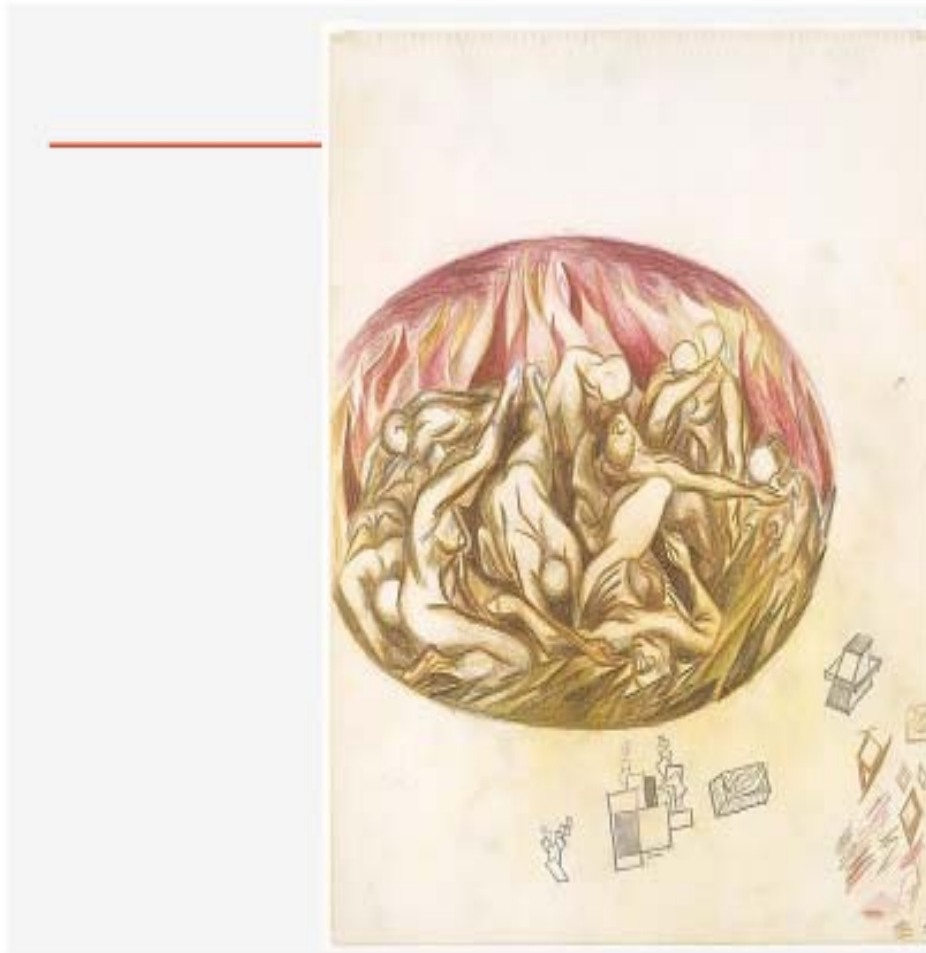
*the Fiery Chariot* of ca. 1290.

425<sup>r</sup>

Like his earlier drawings, the woman is an irregular, concentrated fragment -- what I have called an emblem -- and significantly, she also prefigures a Pollock symbol, for a skull in graphite pencil is attached to the top of the female torso. Because the skull is in a different medium from the colored pencil torso, it could have been added later, but if it was done at the same time as the torso, it is the first instance of Pollock's use of death imagery. The combination of fleshy form and skeletal head foretells the symbolization of life and death, and death and rebirth that is so fundamental to him as in [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*].)

Pollock makes ritual birth, or really, new birth or renewal, a frequent subject that we will explore beyond our schematic introduction to his symbols and themes. We will not go into them now except to discuss the next major symbol used by Pollock: the baby. For a man who never had children, Pollock's work is full of images of babies. They have ritual, cultural and psychic significance once again and are not necessarily, if at all, biographical. Although Rivera's frequent use of a symbol of a child as the innocent new was also an inspiration (see Detroit, for example), most often Pollock uses the dualistic child from Orozco's Dartmouth murals as his ideal child form.

We see this image in the last page of notebook # 1. Drawing 452r (fig. 28) is a reprise of both old masters of that notebook with Orozco's symbolic imagery, probably at a later date. In the drawing, a stack of bodies is set



forth before a conflagration in the rear, with spring-toned, dagger-like, yellow-green maguey plant leaves in the bottom front.<sup>xxx</sup>

The stack echoes many Orozco images of people suffering and the dead such as those in the Hildago murals and those in Dartmouth. In Pollock's full drawing, the stack is flattened into a shallow shape, a cascading bas-relief of overlapping, crisscrossing bodies, muscles, angles, and intervals, cf. *Overall Composition*. The crowd suggests mass death, and with its body parts the scene is grim yet hope appears. A male figure seen from behind holds out with a stiff diagonal arm from Orozco's *Prometheus*, *The Trench* and other paintings, a

newborn to a large-breasted, that is, fecund woman. All of this takes place in a dynamic format, an oval, not the usual format used by Orozco except for his Guadalajara cupola of that year. The format does echo, however, similar designs Pollock drew from his old master books such as *Klassiker der Kunst*, *P.P. Rubens* (p. 314) and from Benton. Interestingly, the oval shape of the format is not unrelated to the curvilinear shape of the womb in his drawings where life itself is born.

The newborn with the large skull and small curving if not skeletal body is derived from Orozco's stillborn child in his Dartmouth frescoes. For Orozco, it was a symbol of education "dead on arrival." But for Pollock, it stands as a dualistic symbol that trumps its lack of life with the possibility of the new. The Orozco stillborn child is a new and major symbol for Pollock, one which he used often in his dualistic way. Thus this last image of Pollock's first youthful notebook represents a death-and-renewal scene using Mexican elements. This depiction is also dualistic, complex, and varied as Pollock's first plaques were, with their newborns and families and their dead in the course of the life journey. By means of the Mexicans, Pollock moved into the beginnings of his obsession with representations of "the flight of man," and the conflicts, suffering, and death and renewal of dualistic "living and "dying" or creation and destruction that dominates his art and the thinking of his era, as we have seen. As he absorbed and transformed Benton for his own ends in his first notebooks, in the Mexican notebook Pollock absorbs and transforms the Mexicans. Death and renewal takes place in a self-induced, self-perpetuating

cyclic dynamic format, the oval, and the heads of its participants are sometimes bare. The event is thus of the mind. For all its physicality, Pollock depicts imaginary psychic events.

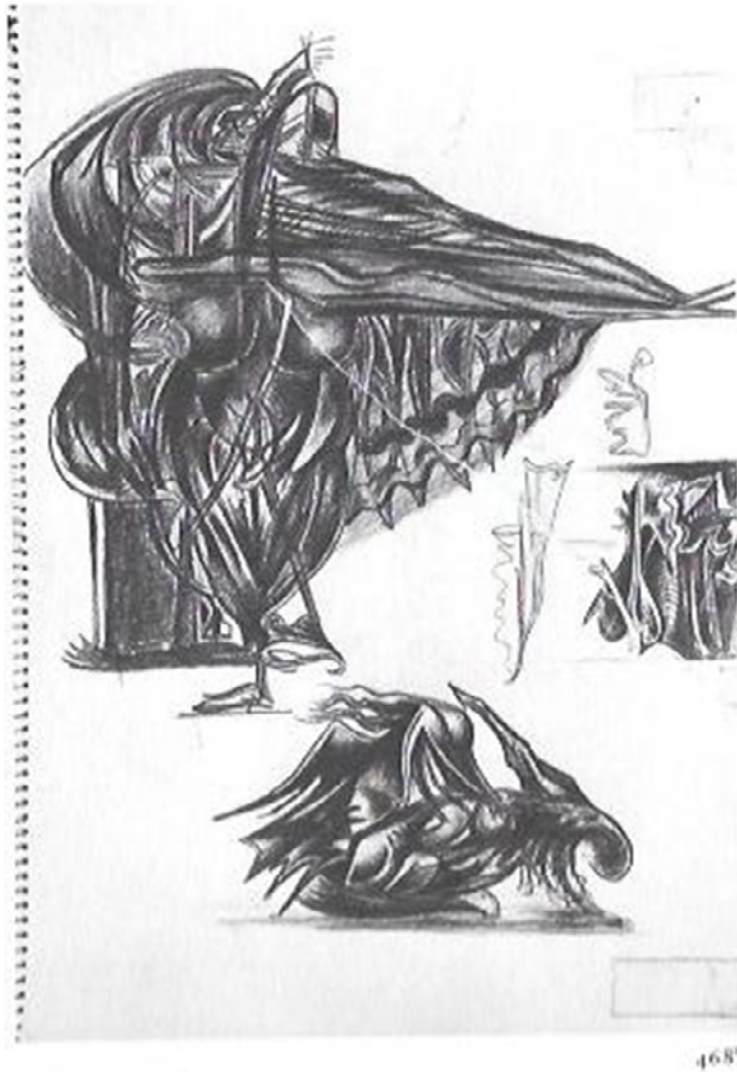
In the first pages of sketchbook three, the domination of symbols from the allegorical Mexicans becomes immediately evident. So is Pollock's search for a way to develop an expressive use of his mastery of active form. The images of this notebook are more turbulent than completely dynamic, as were his analyses in the earlier sketchbooks. In most of them, he does not use Bentonian devices except fitfully in a truncated fashion. Just as often, the images reflect a visionary dynamism derived mostly from the Mexicans. It is as if he has played down Benton's structural principles for the moment so that he can absorb the dramatic richness of Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros. Only then can he invent and speak on his own with a combination of all of them.

Thus in 1938 a new Pollock appeared, an artist who had absorbed the mysticism and ritual of El Greco, the vitalist bodily force, and structural dynamics of Benton, the introspection of Ryder, the struggle for renewal and regeneration of the Mexicans, the thirties, Picasso, shamanism and surrealism, and the concepts of the cultural and psychic life of the period. With this foundation, for the rest of his career Pollock would forge a symbolic and allegorical art representing and then enacting the forms, ideas, and structures of the journey of life and death (creation and destruction and rebirth and renewal of personality/psyche) as he understood it. In this conception of a broad, epic voyage, he came to his mature art and to the art that defines

Abstract Expressionism. His greatest achievement would be to realize a structural, that is, “abstract” yet concrete expression of his idea.

With our understanding of the fertile womb, the child, the Promethean dualistic hero and fire, nature rebirth, penetration, pregnancy, growth, and new life, we have a foothold for understanding Pollock’s complex and difficult drawings in his confused and messy years, particularly from 1938 to 1941. Pollock’s thinking is genetic or developmental in character. Whether drawing upon the Mexicans, the WPA, shamanism or the psychologist Jung, Pollock was working in accord with the deepest wishes (living after dying) of his era. For them, historical evolution was a series of changes that led to a higher stage, a greater development, that is, process, growth and transformation. Pollock’s imagery is as organic and dynamic as theirs, expressing vital tendencies. For all of them, developmental sequences or cycles were described in representation and often natural or biological metaphors. With this foothold, we can expand further by putting together the additional mythmaking symbols Pollock used and the issues he represents. Let’s go back to look at the other drawings of notebook three, which are now open to us.

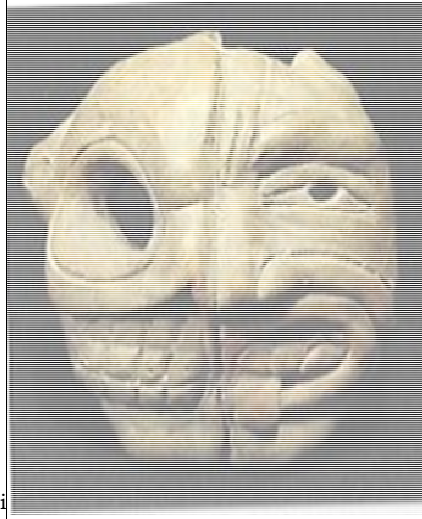
Additional images of fecundity appear in 468r (fig. 29). In the former, the voluptuous female is again attached to a cross.



She is formed with two

heads, however, one a skull from Orozco's row of gods at Dartmouth, the other masked. As noted above, the combination of a skull head and abundant flesh had appeared before in Pollock's sketchbooks -- in drawing 425r in sketchbook one. There, a drawing from life was combined with a head that was a skull, signifying this deliberate dialectic combination which, as we will see, is a shamanic manifestation of the conjunction of opposites.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Flesh and bone as opposites were a frequent symbolic combination used by Rivera. He employed such a pre-Columbian mythic symbol of a half-face and half-skull (fig. 30) in the famous Detroit frescoes in reference to the life and death mask from Tlatlco, Mexico of 1000 to 5000 B.C. Rivera himself described the symbol as “the star, the symbol of life and death since man is ever between



the two.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

The use of bone imagery also became widespread in the 1920s in European painting from Picasso to the surrealists. Bone imagery suggests age and it suggests the base line of human existence. One of its central origins in Europe was prehistoric art that was made widely known as the original expression of humanity for the first time in that decade. In the pioneering writing of Henri Breuil, Hans Obermaier and George-Henri Luquet on prehistoric art, modern artists discovered the origins of art, religious sentiment, and language and myth. Modern artists absorbed and employed stone and bone imagery to thus give deeper resonance to their imagery. Picasso, for example, in his *Bathers* and *Anatomies* of the late 1920s and 1930s



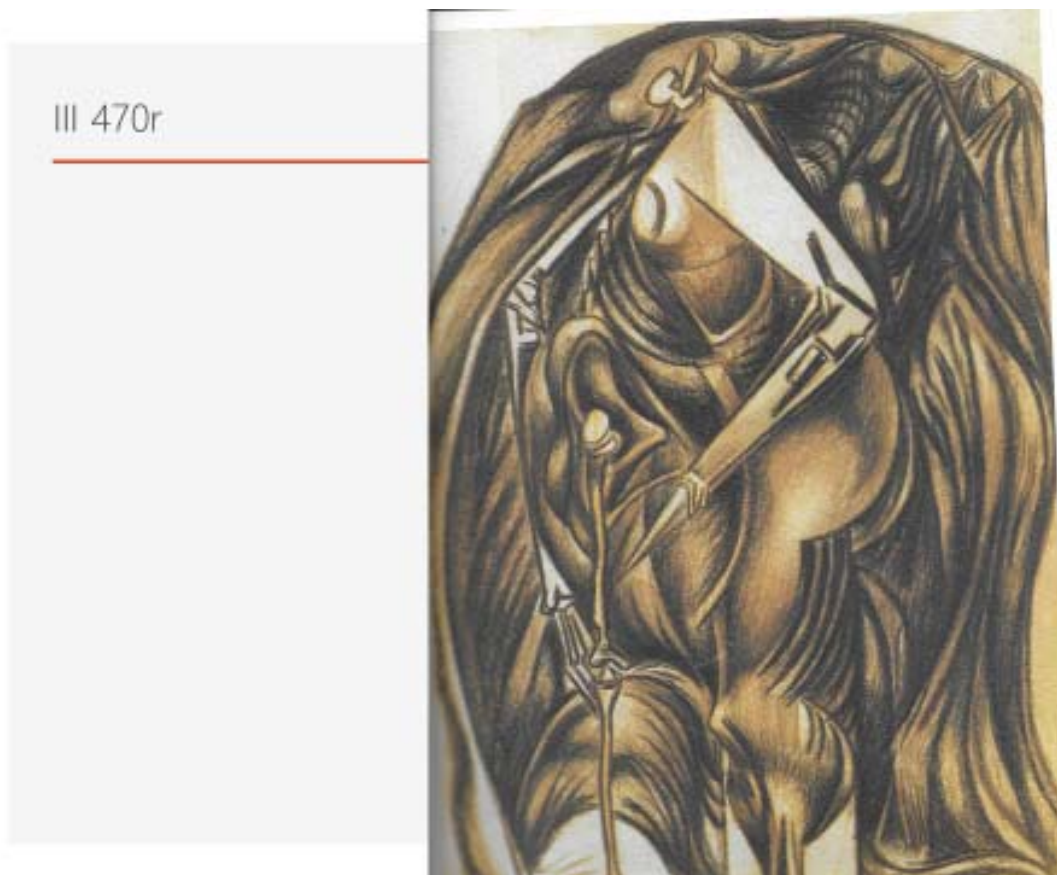
reformulated the human figure to include these foundational references. In his work of the thirties he did the same, such as in *Woman* of 1934, and so did Joan Miro.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Bone imagery is thus a reference to the past, to the fundamental, and to origins, all concepts lacking in mass man. To that baseline in American art was added its ritual use as the referent for ancestors in the artifacts of Western Native American peoples where new vitality was drawn from distant memories of the past through reference to the bones of ancestors in ceremonies.<sup>xxxiv</sup> For many peoples, to refer to the ancient bones of ancestors was to directly contact their ancestral power and make it available to the present. Contact with death was a necessary step in the process of revivifying the present -- and, the future. In many shaman episodes of these peoples, power is realized through an ordeal involving an encounter with "death." The shaman initiate, a role with which Pollock identifies, surrenders to the chaos, making for us the expression of fear and dread to amplify the intensity of the experience.<sup>xxxv</sup>

In Pollock's [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*], then, we have an additional set of implications besides the ones previously discussed. Besides the allusion to Orozco's skeleton, it makes a reference to the Native American ritual use of bone. Further, this ritual reference alludes to the past and origins too. When combined with a fleshy female nude as in [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*] and sheet 468r, we thus have a mythic suggestion of these two polarities of existence -- life as abundant, live, nude flesh and death in skeletal

form. Pollock thus engaged the dialectic process of the past and future for the future arises (via rebirth/renewal/resurrection) from the bones and roots of the past.

This dialectic is further expanded in another drawing in notebook three, sheet 470r (fig. 31) where it is presented in a form that has been used before and will be used again: an enclosing shape or emblematic design.



Sheet 470r is dominated by another large female figure, this one significantly mechanically armed, drawn from Orozco's frescoes in Guadalajara in 1938-39. The figure has a particularly rhythmically curving body. At the top of her neck is the confrontation of two tiny heads, one oval, one a skull. The oval head actually branches to the right as though it was a head of a quadruped animal

with a long back. It rests on the female figure's neck. The skull belongs to a long bone figure that is bent to the right at a joint in its middle. Slightly below that joint is a horizontal protrusion, probably a suggested phallus. The bone figure descends to an elongated, skeletal hand much like that of the dreaming figure at the bottom of 463r. It may, however, also be a foot. The hand or foot steadies another, smaller bony creature that rises straight up. The mechanical arm seems to hold it in place. Significantly, its head lies at the center of Pollock's womb image, which by now is standard. The womb is aptly placed in the abdomen of the female and the phallus of the larger bone figure stands just outside of it. The whole configuration, however, also rests within a large and again standard cloak/womb frame. This drawing seems to represent an embracing couple with a child, and the embrace of skeletal death and fleshy, fecund life, life that can turn dangerously into the deadly, mechanized aggressiveness of the arm. All of this is condensed into an irregular, emblematic design filling up nine-tenths of the sheet. It thus symbolizes what other Pollock drawings in this notebook have alluded to and sometimes presented in their imagery: a total design of the struggle and conflict between the forces of life and mechanization, between darkness and transformation. This design is an allusion to the issue of mass man.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The emblematic form, condensing as it does several concepts and forms is Pollock's version of a shape that will become common among his colleagues and the mythic culture of the 1940s, including the dances of Martha Graham: the totemic form. The totemic form compresses several ideas into one space.

Rothko, Gottlieb, and Pousette-Dart used it often. And so does Pollock; ultimately, Pollock's emblematic structure foretells his "abstractions" and similar condensations.

Pollock's art now has fully centered itself in an imagery of symbolic conflict, dramatized and often consisting of rhythmic and dynamic sections (bodies, radiating lines) within an all-encompassing shape. Often the shape takes up much of the drawing space. Here is the origin of Pollock's emblematic totalizing known as the "all-over" paintings of 1947-50. Pollock would go on to employ this symbolic form often from this point. See, for examples, 463r, 471r, 473r, and many others. As with his Benton rhythmizations, he, however, will not be consistent. Instead, the design of the total event in the work would only become used fully and consistently later.

The ritual knife-wielding subject makes perhaps its first appearance in Pollock's sketchbook three in sheet 471r in the figure to the right (fig. 32).

471<sup>r</sup>

Orozco is the visual source

for such a figure. His knife-wielders usually kill the politically helpless who sometimes are stacked together in an emblematic form that Orozco used often, from *Zapata* of 1926 to *Prometheus* of 1930 and to *Figure with Sword* of 1945. Pollock's composition fuses his familiar symbols into a similar emblem of, most likely, the ritual process of sacrifice for renewal.

Returning to sheet 475r allows us to see a major sacrificial figure and his role in Pollock's thinking. We saw that it consists of a reclining woman who

gives birth in a death-and-rebirth vision before a crowd. The woman lies recumbent on the ground. Lisa Messinger has pointed out that her swelling body, particularly her lower limbs, have been taken from Orozco's male nude peasant in *The Franciscan* and transformed into a woman, much as Pollock transformed Orozco's *Prometheus* into women in 461r and 462r. Her head is formed by the white of the paper, and is the brightest spot in the drawing. This detail signifies the employment of the symbolism of the head for the events of the unconscious. It is a site of struggle and change. The transfiguring head as a symbol of the transfigured mind will become another Pollock psychic staple as in the misnamed [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*].

The woman in 475r is large-breasted in a Mexican muralist manner again, and her abdomen is again large and swelling (cf. 426v). From that fertile abdomen, the sacrificed Christ on the cross rises enclosed within an open womb. Christ emerges into new life at that point. On top of his cross is another nude woman with a bird's head. From her eye thrusts a pointed lance of light, much as that which rose above the woman in 462r. To the right of the woman above the cross, the legs of which trail off into snake-like squiggles, is an encompassing cloak filled with smaller squiggles resembling spermatozoa. A large round burst of yellow light terminates with the thrust of the horizontal bar of the cross at the right. At the lower left center is a crowd of stick figures ultimately derived from the crowds once again encouraging, acclaiming, and fleeing from Prometheus's transformative act in Orozco's *Prometheus*. Pollock's

crowd is matched at the top of the womb/cloak by another. Both crowds are stick-figured or pictographic in style.

Thus, from the detached womb of the reclining woman arises a concise emblem: the birth of a symbol of death and resurrection -- the crucified Christ of Christian ritual sacrifice -- which is attached to the abdomen of the ascending bird woman. The event is acclaimed by the crowd and celebrated with a formal outburst of light and color. Despite the seeming bizarreness of this image, it is well in line with Pollock's better well-known representations.

One must remember that the most important image of the period, the famous painting *Birth* of 1938-41, is an image of a related mythic figure giving birth in curvilinear plenitude. The image and idea of that picture are completely Pollock's, and they climax with the thought and imagery of sketchbooks three. It should also be pointed out that fecund life and interior and exterior female imagery were themes explored by many artists at this time from Rivera to Picasso to Masson.

Thus the renovation of themes of the Mexicans on his own terms can be seen in innumerable drawings and paintings in 1938-41, that is, before Pollock's absorption of modern European art. To be sure, there is evidence of some Picasso and others, but it is limited to adding to the Mexican and Native American iconographic theme that Pollock then used for his own.

Drawing 475r exploits Christian imagery, and if we move a little ahead in the story, shaman imagery too. For example, the bird figure is most probably a

spirit-bird, a guardian of heavenly beings. From its head an all-powerful vision ray emerges. Pollock would go on to frequently use both guardian and bird imagery. Shamanist, too, is the large round burst of yellow light. It signifies ecstatic transformation, as shamanism is a religion of ecstasy.

One of Pollock's major themes in this period was thus ritual sacrifice. The crucified Christ or symbol of the



## Pollock, Naked Man, 1938-41

cross is one sign of it. In [*Naked Man*] of 1938-41 (fig. 33), he drew on Orozco's frequent images, particularly the images of political beheadings, seen most prominently in the *Hidalgo and National Independence* fresco at the Palace of Government in Guadalajara (1937-38). In the work by Orozco, one figure holds



the head of a slain foe. Pollock's figure, however, more closely resembles Orozco's drawing of a figure in the *Hispanio-American Society* panel in



Dartmouth (fig. 34).

Unlike Orozco's figures, however, Pollock's is naked and decidedly simplified except for his genitals and an unusual head that is difficult to decipher. Pollock thus transmuted Orozco's battling sociopolitical figures into his symbolic forms and forces, confirming his lack of interest in the specifics of politics and his move into mythic time and space that still address his personal and yet cultural needs of the reformation of the time.

The figure in Pollock's painting reinforces the transformation of that need into myth, for it is engaged in some kind of ritualistic killing, a knife in its hand suggesting blood sacrifice and dismemberment. While we will discuss the

significance of dismemberment below, blood sacrifice became a frequent topic in American cultural circles at this time. Themes involving rituals, as well as blood sacrifice as a means of death and rebirth as pre-Contact and the cultures of other peoples defined them, were increasingly prominent in the works of the Abstract Expressionists. Diego Rivera, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, Theodore Stamos, Barnett Newman, and Seymour Lipton, as well as the popular anthropologist Sir James Frazer, Carl Jung, and the Abstract Expressionist dancer Martha Graham frequently emphasized the power of sacrifice as renewal.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The surrealists often depicted blood sacrifice, too, as did the Mexicans, e.g. Rivera's *Blood of Heroic Martyrs Fertilize the Earth*. As Sidra Stich writes, Andre Masson, who together with Miro was a surrealist beloved of Pollock, painted a series of massacres, e.g. *Massacre in a Field*, in the early 1930s (fig. 35).



## Masson, Massacre, 1932

His series was inspired by Frazer's descriptions of the traditions of ritual sacrifice allegedly common among rural societies, so-called primitive societies. According to these traditions, at harvest or sowing time the community killed individuals, most often young girls, to promote the fecundity of the land. A licentious festival may have followed: "Death was thereby associated with regeneration as well as the violation of primal taboos (killing and sexuality)." <sup>xxxviii</sup> As with Pollock, the use of sexual imagery relates to ritual fecundity and the cycle of death and life and not the simply psychoanalytic banalities of a "disturbed sexuality."

In his paintings, Masson emphasized scenes of horror through slashing brushwork, disjointed bodies, torn contours, strong color, and spatial displacements, thus heightening a sense of violent destruction in dynamic collision with freedom, revitalization, and continuity. Although sacrifice is a “disordering” force, Stich notes that it restores in its action a connection between the self, others, the natural sphere, and the universe.

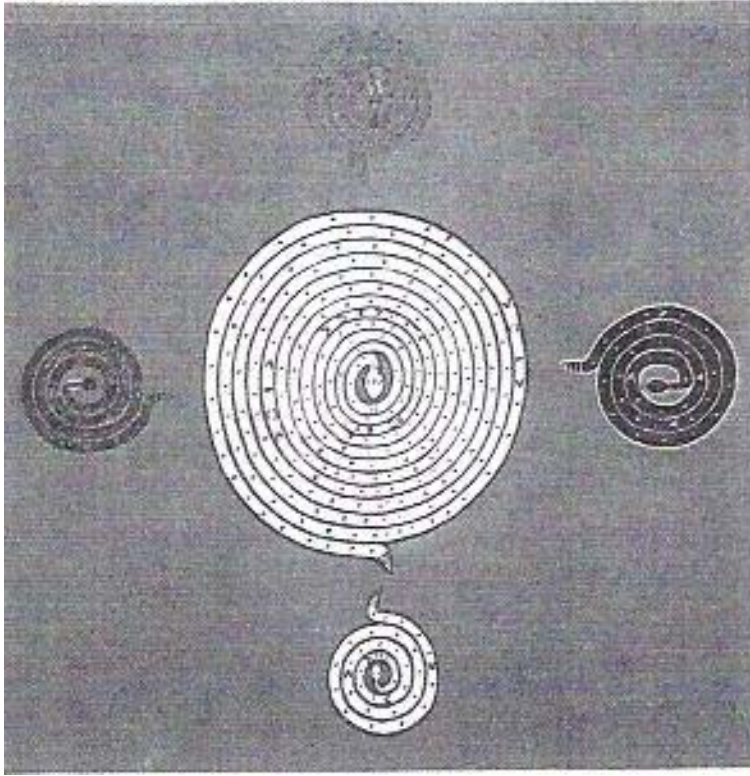
Ritual sacrifice was not, however, an archaic conceit for Masson, nor would it be for Pollock. Masson connected the cycle of human sacrifice and renewal to the situation in Europe in 1933. Stich writes that “the very real situation of renewal following chaos plus the incipient return of a chaos that necessitate renewal were shatteringly immediate in 1933.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Masson felt threatened by imminent threat: “I was obsessed by memories of the First World War, still under the impact of life at the front, where I had been wounded and shell-shocked, and also by events in Europe which looked ominous to me. That was the stimulus behind the *Massacres*.”<sup>xl</sup>

Masson, as the others had done, thus took up references to history and war through ritual sacrifice and death and rebirth imagery. He may also have been aware of the surrealist theorist Bataille’s ideas of viewing sacrifice as a religious act that combines crime with expiation and thus conjoins the profane and sacred.<sup>xli</sup> For him, as he followed Marcel Mauss’s conception, sacrifice embodied a process of painful self-awareness in which the unique autonomous authentic human self dies. It is unlikely that Pollock knew

Bataille, but likely read Jung who wrote extensively of the psychic effects of sacrifice in his major text *Psychology of the Unconscious* (pp. 428-48) which by frequency of occurrence Pollock seems to have known in some fashion.

The nature of sacrifice was discussed in one chapter of *Psychology of the Unconscious* and in one discussion, several symbols that we find in Pollock were used: the crucifixion, the eagle, the sacrificial spot, the fissure in the world (vagina) in the shape of an “X” cross, the “destroying knife,” circumcisions, and the serpent and two other forms, the horse and the bull.

The assertion of renewal through ritual sacrifice in [*Naked Man*] is further confirmed by several other details. On close examination, the swirling, painterly head turns out to be a snake with its head as a horizontal eye in the center of its coils. This form is taken from the “Endless Snake” imagery from the Navajo sand painting of the Southwest (fig. 36).



In this example, the darker, smaller snake to the right of the large central one is the more likely kind of source for Pollock's [*Naked Man*]. "Endless Snake" is poisonous but we can use that power for good (such as gaining ceremonial knowledge) as well as for destruction. Again, the snake is the Jungian symbol of the unconscious that Pollock employed to represent dark forces against which rebirth occurs as in [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*]. Pollock seems to suggest with this figure that psychic renewal can be only achieved through ritual cutting, that is, painful actions, violence, and destruction, or something to that end.

Another detail is the head that the man is actually carrying; it is an elaborated Inuit magical mask, examples of which Pollock would have seen at the American Museum of Natural History and the Heye Foundation Museum, now part of the Smithsonian Museum in Washington. He also would have

found many examples for this mask/head in the *Annual Reports* of the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnography, twelve of which he owned. Here, however, the headdress is exaggerated, its plumage cut by the figure from the mask and strewn about his feet. While a ritual act, here the throwing off of plumage, is reminiscent of the Mexicans and D.H. Lawrence in his novel *The Plumed Serpent* of 1926, it is the ritual figure, the plumed serpent (Quetzalcoatl) that sheds his skin to renew himself. Recall it is a Southwest Native American symbol for the same as well.

Other details may provide further clues as to the meaning of [*Naked Man*]. The emphasis on the genitals, the only feature visible on the body, suggests their importance. They are, of course, a symbol of pro-creative power. The torn and falling forms of the feathered demon mask may suggest shamanist death and dismemberment. And in between the figure's arm and torso presides an unusual humanoid form prominently lit from behind whose placement is closely reminiscent of the installation of wooden figural sculptures at the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Indian Art of the United States" which was held in 1941 (fig. 37), an exhibition that Pollock was well known to have seen.







Pollock might also have developed this curious glyph-like form from descriptions and illustrations in the Smithsonian's *Annual Reports* of wooden effigies on the walls of Native American altars. Together with its surrounding imagery, the principal symbolic figure in [*Naked Man*] seems -- at the very least -- thus to be involved in a ritual sacrifice to increase his creative, magical power and transform himself.

Other works of this period evoke similar blood sacrifices. [*Composition with Ritual Scene*] (fig. 38) is one example, with its earth colors, dense gesticulating dramatic crowds, skeletal forms on ritual altars or biers, and animal heads in the shape of the sacrificial, or in Jungian terminology, "destroying knife" itself.



Pollock reshuffled the components of ritual sacrifice in other works such as the Siqueiros-toned [*Naked Man with a Knife*] in the Tate Gallery in London, too. This work closely resembles a similar form from Orozco's drawing for an illustration for Mariano Azuela's book, *Under Dogs* (1929), which was in the Delphic Studio collection and reproduced in their publication on Orozco's work

in 1932. Again Orozco's work is more socially specific than Pollock's; he drew a soldier attacking a peasant with a knife in the midst of a general battle scene. Orozco's work frequently depicted the thrusting of a knife or sword through a figure in a violent struggle. Pollock turned his composition into a series of closely focused, very muscular forms, multiple biomorphic dismembered and extended nude body parts in a rhythm. Pollock expanded the human figure and spread it out across the ritual bier and canvas (both ritual figure and "victim" seem to be tied together in the drawing coloration suggesting a "self-sacrifice" that is shamanistic, as we shall see), thus distilling the general abstract principle of repeated efforts and acts from the more concrete work of Orozco and transforming its sociopolitical meaning.<sup>xlii</sup> Pollock also scattered some glaring Northwest Coast mask-like heads in the manner of Orozco from the latter's *Dive Bomber and Tank* of 1940. Similarly, in the gouache and ink *Blue (Moby Dick)* of 1943, often invoked as an indication of Pollock's interest in Miro, Pollock floats a beast above a roiling, jagged sea (fig. 39).



However, that sea has been drawn from Siqueiros' *Birth of Fascism* of 1939 (second version) (fig. 40)



and not Miro,

and Pollock has replaced a floating swastika with his beast. In the misnamed [*Composition with Donkey Head*] the “donkey” is a conflation of Pollock’s horse, bull and knife. This is another ritual sacrifice scene based on Orozco’s *Science Labor and Art* in the New School murals. While Orozco used the intellectual and rationalistic and scientific instruments of creativity and construction, Pollock countered with his ritual ones.

Interestingly, Pollock made another use of a contrast of intellect, construction, action, death, and destructiveness in his [*Head with Polygons*] of 1938-41 (fig. 41), a painting based on one of Orozco’s cupolas in Guadalajara.





The Orozco cupola, *Creative Man* in Guadalajara, consists of the constructive actions of mankind, worker-philosophers, and scientists against a background of flame.



One part of the image consists of polygon squares in which the discovering mind of man can be found (fig. 42). The polygons surround a dissected corpse with an open head representing man's mental quest for scientific knowledge and understanding. Pollock joins both images, superimposing the polygon designs over a compressed but curvilinear female next to the hollow man. The oft-misunderstood [*Composition with Ladders*] of the same time period drops

the corpse but elaborates on the angular structures and adds a branch to repeat Orozco and his idea of the search for a constructive, creative life and mind.

Perhaps the significance of the creative symbol should be discussed by means of an important drawing that Pollock did at this time, sheet 556 (fig. 43) of 1938-41.



It contains Pollock's absorption of the issues we have been discussing and the beginnings of his mature way of addressing them. This drawing, with its famous designs, is really an instructional diagram that articulates the thought of this allegedly non-thinking, allegedly mentally skewered artist.

The drawing consists of notes and images recording Pollock's thoughts, or rather as needs to be said about this artist, revealing Pollock as an

intelligent man. It consists of several combinations informally put together on the sheet that cryptically indicate much of his knowledge at this time and Pollock's hoped-for direction. At the left, sheet 556 consists of a mandela circle around a drawing of layered figures before a cross, a sketch for a gouache that he gave his Jungian analyst Joseph Henderson. Around this circle are notations of the four Jungian functions that constitute consciousness: intuition, sensation, thinking, and feeling. Pollock assigned colors to these functions so that they read clockwise from the "top yellow / int. emotion / feeling/ Red / sensation / black (crossed-out) / green / thinking / blue." To the right in parentheses is the notation: "3 humans 1 animal / 1 human 3 animal." Below the circle cross in the center is a diagram of something unknown and to its left is another heretofore-unknown image with a nearby undecipherable word.

This oneness is further reinforced or explicated by the unity of opposites of the Jungian diagram. To Jung and so many others, as we saw, feeling, intuition, sensation, and reason created the balance and integration he sought. In general, in Pollock's work to reform man, to counter the machine, to undermine strictly rational scientific life, to oppose regimentation, and to destroy mass man, new combinations and the integration of previously downplayed elements of the existing personality/culture/society/history had to be revived. In this drawing, Pollock asserted his allegiance to this cultural critique.<sup>xliii</sup>



Pollock further asserted his allegiance to another Jungian idea for reforming man: the introduction of the effects of his lower or animal self into his consciousness. Michael Leja has written that the equation of animal and human that Pollock has written out is Jungian -- the combination of the lower, baser, more instinctual parts of the self with the higher or more human ones.<sup>xliv</sup> This is again another idea of symbolic synthesis. It is also Native American and indicative of the Navaho, Northwest Coast and other peoples. To don masks in their ceremonies, for example, is to become an animal spirit.

Finally, in sheet 556, there are two other diagrammatic images that heretofore have never been explained. One is of a vertical rectangle with lines extending outward from its angles. This diagram has a direct source and accompanying text that explicates it. In a Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of Ethnology's *Annual Report* that he owned it is explained as the Dakota "U-ma-

THROW AWAY THE ASHES AS THEY WOULD BECOME THE PROPERTY OF THE  
careful to empty the ashes on the exposed earth at the back of the  
lodge. No one ventures to step on that virgin earth, and not even a  
hand is ever stretched toward it. Only the man who expects to par-  
ticipate in the sun-dance can empty the ashes there, and after so doing  
he returns each pipe to its owner.

§ 146. The "U-ma-ne."—"The mellowed earth space, U-ma-ne  
in Dakota, and called by some peculiar names in other tribes,  
has never been absent from any religious exercise I have yet  
seen or learned of from the Indians. It represents the unap-  
propriated life or power of the earth, hence man may obtain  
it. The square or oblong, with the four lines standing out, is  
invariably interpreted to mean the earth or land with the four  
winds standing toward it. The cross, whether diagonal or up-  
right, always symbolizes the four winds or four quarters."



PL. 139.—The "U-ma-ne"  
symbol.

Miss Fletcher uses this term, "U-ma-ne," to de-

ne" symbol (fig. 44):

The mellowed earth space, U-ma-ne in Dakota, and called by some peculiar names in other tribes, has never been absent from any religious

exercise I have yet seen or learned of from the Indians. It represents the unappropriated life or power of the earth, hence man may obtain it. The square or oblong, with the four lines standing out, is invariably interpreted to mean the earth or land with the four winds standing toward it. The cross, whether diagonal or upright, always symbolizes the four winds or four quarters.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Thus this is a radical cross of the four directions that define the sacred powers of the earth that man sought to obtain.

Thus this is another quaternary symbol, one that announces Pollock's turn toward and use of symbols of Native American peoples to approach the same woven unity that was evident in the Jungian quadripartite Mandala of symbolic union and transcendence of the four elements or pathways of consciousness. At the same time, it announces Pollock's incorporation of nature and the land, nature and ground into his symbolic complexes.

Finding a connection to the land was fundamental to American culture in the 1930s. The "environment" included not only physical but psychological and cultural nature, too. The earth and nature were conceived as timeless repositories and generative sources of human life. The thirties sought the new of the old intuitive connection with the formative power of soil as well as of the self and past. Pollock's colleague Arshile Gorky summed up the chthonic power of the primal connection to one's own land when he wrote his sister, "Can a son

forget the soil which sires him?" One's personal and cultural ecosystem thus consisted of nature as well as the psychic and social ground one stood on.

Pollock sought such a mental, cultural and physical connection to the soil. Through it, he conjoined the endless array of cultures from which its power arose. By doing so, he would counter the effect of the natureless, rootless modernity of contemporary civilization, the city and the mass. In a way, it is fitting that Pollock chose a Dakotan symbol to reveal his interest in this regard, for it is a form of so-called primitivism that is really a pastoralism frequently sought in the West throughout its history, from Virgil to Giorgione and to its modern version of Impressionism. In his times, that pastoralism had to be inward hence the connection across their natural, although not regional, roots.

And lastly, Pollock joined all symbols on sheet 556 with the last image to the left of the diagram of four directions. This image consists of a series of curves that outline the upright snake that Pollock drew from Orozco at Dartmouth and used for [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*] and other drawings. As we may suspect, it could be a symbol of the unconscious. Underneath the image is a word that is undecipherable at this time.

Thus Pollock employs the imagery and thought of Jung, the peoples of Native America, the old masters and the Mexicans in the diagrams of sheet 556. But more than a fusion of different styles, the sheet indicates the ideal of fusion itself -- of the development of wholeness from disparate parts of all

different kinds. Thus this drawing reveals Pollock's desire for a new wholeness made from various cultures and parts of the psyche with all their implications. It also indicates his penchant for integration as well as manifests how connectedness itself was sought. Pollock's drawings reveal a subject of connection, countering, and connection again. His work would go on to be dedicated to this, both formally and thematically. Pollock's art, as with his life and times, was a balancing act. Thus Pollock's so-called fantasies do not simply mask an incoherence or disturbance, they do much more: they re-envision. Fantasy can be a way to remake. In this sheet, Pollock reveals his overall goal: metamorphosis and dynamic but coordinated change.

In his early work, Pollock experimented with a unity of form and conception. Through interlocking forms, he sought a contrapuntal harmony that he eventually achieved. His transitions were not effortless but awkward, and in his creative dualistic unity, he sought reciprocity. Such a give and take is the "pseudo-equilibrium" and "concentrated fluidity" which was his era's most profound ideal.

The Mexicans sought transformation as a social and political good but Pollock had little interest in class or occupation liberation. It is clear in these drawings that he rejected their and Benton's orthodox social formations. He did not abandon the public good, however, nor transformation itself. He continued to share those goals with his previous generation. What began to emerge was

his own method and means of renewing himself and the dangerous world at large.

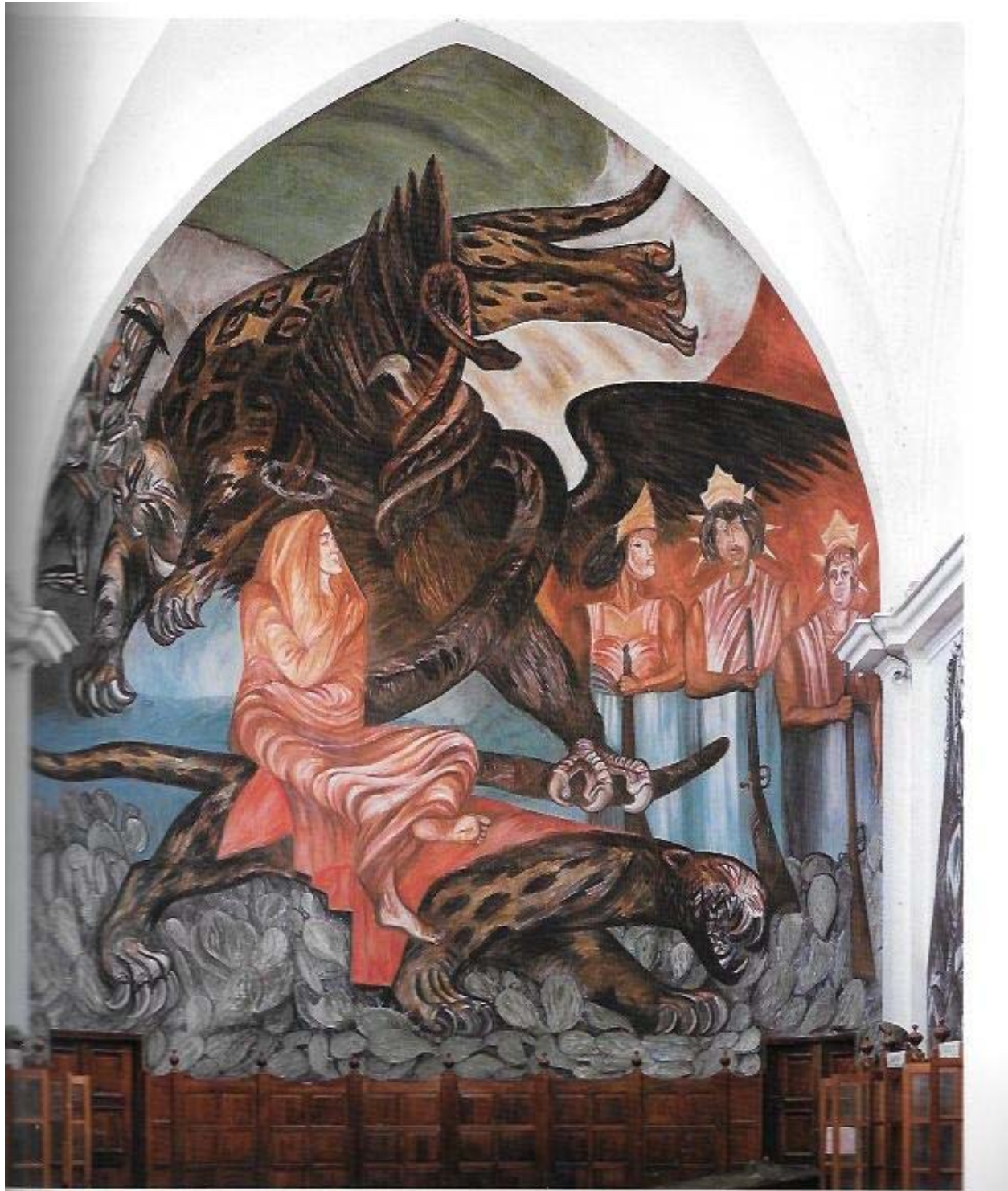
But did Pollock read or know all this? I doubt it. Using Jung or others' words and ideas here and elsewhere add a literary and intellectualized quality that was unintended. Such statements suggest that Pollock worked from a book or from writing. Nothing could be further than the truth. Pollock worked from the common ideas of his era which, as we have seen, were widespread enough to extend from the Mexicans to the modernists. Most likely he got such ideas from them. These statements here just add a more explicit and more explanatory meaning that can help us understand his work. As has been discussed, however, Pollock was aware of these issues and what he knew was sufficient to generate imagery and forms that made sense. His symbols and their meanings are thus contextual; they declare something that was part of his culture. If that sense were not part of his culture, it would not have been included in his work. Lastly, in [*Composition with Woman*] (fig. 45),



Pollock

constructed a single figure of the variety of symbols that were often used to create a complex, varied dominating giant. In this he drew from and joined Orozco, Rivera and many others in their use of images of women as allegorical complexes of modernity. Pollock's series of symbols around the head of a woman were taken from Orozco's *Allegory of Mexico* (fig. 46).





(Hence, the date of 1940-41 would be more precise here than the broader period of 1938-41.) They include two horses on either side of the woman's head, which replace Orozco's jaguar. Their symmetry derives from guardian



figures in Southwest Navaho sand painting, upon which Pollock often drew. (See *The Guardians of the Secret* of 1943.) A detached arm and the hand of the woman are holding the mouth of the horse on the right. At the point where the mouth is held, bright yellow lines flare outward and downward. Thus the ceremony suggested probably shows the exhalation of the magical and mythical breath of life, a common mythical idea found frequently in Pollock's work. (See e.g. *Stenographic Figure* of 1942.)

Interestingly, the arm may also be borrowed from Orozco's work. It first appears in the crowd scene, to the right of Prometheus, but it takes on an additional, now sacred significance in Orozco's *The Trench*. In the latter, the arm extension became the cross of the martyred figures. Pollock seems to have taken this symbol and its significance and used it to give greater meaning to the horse and magical breath of [*Composition with Woman*]. Indeed, he uses the symbol of the horse in several paintings of horse sacrifices at this time: [*Composition with Horse at Right*], [*Composition with Red Arc and Horses*], and [*Composition with Horse at Center*], all dating from 1934 to 1938, probably closer to 1938. [*Square Composition with Horse*] and [*Composition with Horse Forms*] of the same time period further combine the crowd with the sacrifice. The former group seems to owe much to Orozco's *The Dictators* of the Hospicio Cabanas in Guadalajara while the latter seems to employ the fleeting touches of El Greco that Pollock also used in his [*Figure Kneeling before Arch with Skulls*] of 1934-38.

[*Composition with Woman*] also includes many snakes, some of which (bottom center) are topped with light-colored flames. These snakes are borrowed from the raft of serpents in Orozco's *Quetzalcoatl* panel from *An Epic of Civilization* in Dartmouth (fig. 47).



Others (top and sides) metamorphose into lightning bolts. (One of Orozco's erect gods in Dartmouth was surrounded by a serpent and by lightning and is a possible source, too.) On the one hand, snakes and lightning surround gods in Dartmouth. On the other, the two are derived from Southwest Indian art and culture in which lightning and zigzag-shaped serpents can be found, as in an illustration (fig. 48) taken from one of the many Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnography's publications on the American Indian that Pollock



owned.

This image was also

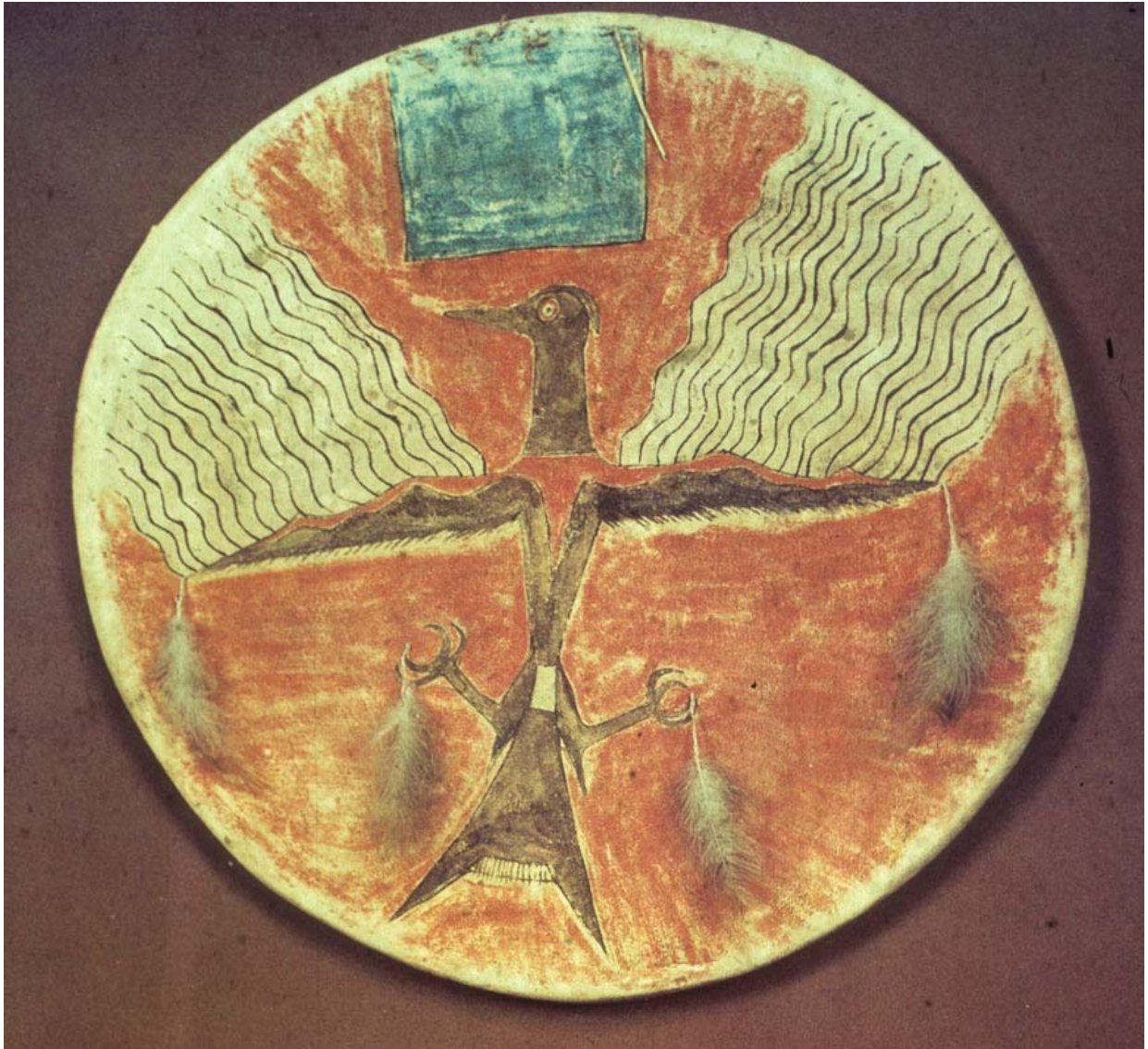
discussed in Bureau publications, for example: “[L]ightning is often given the form of a serpent, with or without an arrow-pointed tongue, because its course through the sky is serpentine . . . its most obvious trait . . . [is] its gliding, zigzag motion.”<sup>xlvi</sup> Snakes, because of their shape and speed have long been identified with lightning by the Navajo, and thus snakes and lightning bolts symbolize fertility and new growth after the turbulence of a storm, for the coming of rain generates new life in the arid southwest.

Interestingly, and not accidentally, Pollock was aware of another symbolic use of lighting as the means to fertility. Diego Rivera’s *Man at the*

*Crossroads*, which we know he saw at the Rockefeller Center and from which he drew procreative symbols of generative force, contains such a use of light as well. Rivera wrote of the symbol of his light that it is “the human understanding in possession of the forces of nature, expressed by the lightening that falls from Jupiter’s fist and then is transformed into useful electricity, thus helping to cure man’s illness. He united men through radio and television giving them light and mobile energy.”<sup>xlvii</sup> In his fresco, light comes from the cosmos and is regenerated through, as one would expect, machines. While Pollock’s symbols differ from Rivera’s in terms of source, still remain mythic and share Rivera’s goal: the transformation of human life for the better through the dynamic and fecund forces of nature. In Pollock’s painting, a downward pointing arrow in parenthesis further *depicts* Pollock’s ideas about the location and source of the figure and the fertile events around it -- the unconscious “below.”

The curving lines that flow from and around the figure further express the idea of new life and power. These emanating rays, which we have seen before, indicate that we are witnessing the emergence of flowing magical power, a common motif among the Ojibwe and others. We can see the same lines in this familiar image of a thunderbird (fig. 49), another well-known Indian (Sioux) symbol of storm and rain, i.e., turbulence and growth, in other words, watery creation itself.





(The Navajos do not have the thunderbird but they do have other symbols such as the “Big Thunder” or the “Thunder People” from which crooked lightning arrows project. They often appear in Southwest sand painting.) Pollock's peripheral wavy skeins imitate this magical manifestation, as do the shining tips in the skein at the center right, which may also suggest imminent flowering. The tones of red and yellow further ground the work in Indian art, and the red sky may also allude to a recurrent Pollock symbol of creation and

destruction derived from Orozco, namely fire.<sup>xlvi</sup> It should be noted that images of the flow of power, fecundity, and abundance were frequent in the 1930s, whatever the aesthetic or idea. Andre Masson, for example, pictured the radiance and fertility of Goethe's mind in his *Goethe and the Metamorphosis of Plants* of 1940 (fig. 50) with its generating colors and foliage.

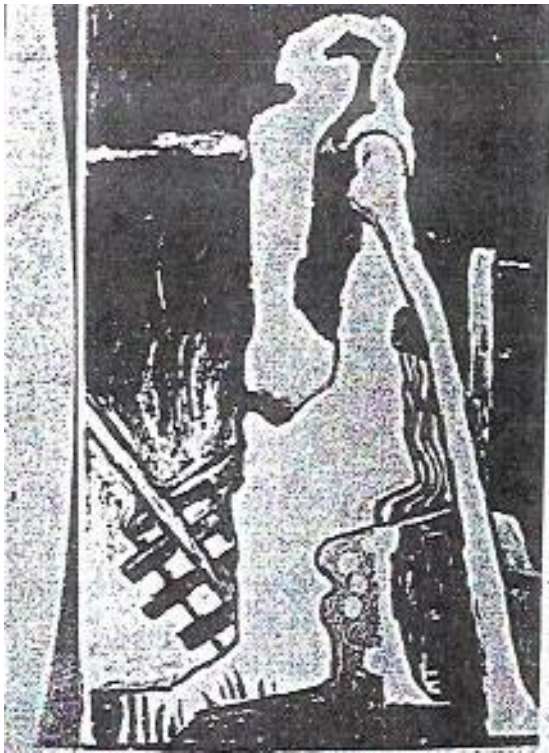


Besides *Allegory of California*, Rivera expressed the abundance, richness, and fruitfulness of nature in his murals such as *Man at the Crossroads* and in his easel paintings such as *Calla Lilies* and *Flower Vender (Dia de Flores?)*, a painting we know that Pollock knew and admired.

(Pollock's colleague, Clyfford Still, an Abstract Expressionist, was interested in and as knowledgeable as Pollock about the cultures of the Native American peoples, particularly those of the Colville Reservation of the Columbian Plateau where he lived; for him, they also symbolized the flow of



magical power or creation itself with the very same vital form as Pollock (fig.



51). Still, who actually lived and worked on and around Nespelem and other reservations in Eastern Washington State and emulated what he learned firsthand, employed the flowing lines drawn from tribal shamanistic ceremonies in his early work. He abutted a somewhat cubist figure with magic radiation. Later, Still's art developed into a semi-abstract representation of the force and powers of shaman ceremony, through which, like Pollock and others, he sought magical creativity and self and cultural transformation.)

Pollock's [*Composition with Woman*] thus suggests the release of new life and power through ritual symbols' transformative processes. It confirms what Pollock wrote in a rare passage of free association on a shamanistic drawing at this time: "Thick / thin / Chinese / Am. indian / s [un?]/ snake / woman / life

/ effort / reality / total [my italics] / shoe / foot.”<sup>xlix</sup> In this comment, Pollock moved from the trivial and everyday to his symbolic pantheon and back again.

(It should be pointed out that Pollock adopted part of this statement for his own signature. In letters to his friend Alfonso Ossorio in the early 1950s such as that of March 30, 1952 in the Ossorio Foundation on Long Island, New York, he would sign them with “/ s / [un]” signifying his identity as a creature of the unconscious and its symbol the “s” or snake.)

Thus, although a single figure, [*Composition with Woman*] is a complex, mythic figure constituted by an array of symbols suggesting fertile growth. The painting joins the dark and light gods and the experience and hope that we have discussed. In this, Pollock’s [*Composition with Woman*] is closer to the dualistic and dialectic tenor of Orozco’s *Allegory of Mexico* than Rivera’s more single-toned *Allegory of California*. All three artists constructed fertile woman from complex symbols. Here as elsewhere, then, Pollock is in line with the allegories and terms of his era. He simply has made them his own.

Let us conclude with one last image that contrasts with [*Composition with Woman*] by its seeming simplicity. We will find, however, that it is no less allusive and that, consequently, Pollock indicated again his ability to find abstract means to say a great deal. The image is actually on the first page of the first notebook but was probably placed there later. We began our discussion in this section with the image of a child surrounded by the curves of a womb that became a central theme in Pollock’s work at the time.



On the first page of notebook # 1, sheet 402r (fig. 52), we can see the simplest rendition of this theme that sums up where Pollock had been and



where he would go.

In the upper left hand corner, among the summary emblems of an old master form is a stick figure, a skeletal child surrounded solely by closed curves.



It is difficult to see at first, but close examination reveals curves suggesting a womb and thus a child, on its back, within it. The skeletal child has a large skull and curving, seemingly humped, fetal body, and is, yet again, a direct evocation of the famous skeletal stillborn child in Orozco's murals that Pollock saw and rendered time and again.

This image sums up Pollock's thinking in the late 1930s; it was obviously added later to the earlier notebook as we have noted about other images there. As we saw in the previous reading, the child is a dualistic, dialectic image of the intertwined nature of living and dying, birth and death, creation and destruction, and death and renewal. That is combined with a Bentonian exercise of form that also summarizes the dynamic, and the all-over emblem of continuous yet dialectic flow reveals that already at this time Pollock understood his direction -- before modernism," before automatism, and before perhaps even before full Jungian psychotherapy. He was moving toward rendering an abbreviated, self-contained image of creation and destruction set with a form of endless flow. In this image, Pollock combines Benton, his archaism and his modern dynamics, with the Mexicans' complex layering and weaving of the essential forces and possibilities of the world. His image is succinct, brief, and almost pictographic. Figure and abstract idea, the past and future, duality, and dynamics are fused to make an image of complexities of "living and dying." The pictographic form is ultimately a form of *potentia*.

Thus we can determine several things from our examination. The first is that Pollock began using his own symbols around 1938 and that he was thus a symbolic, allegorical painter, not simply a disturbed one, a drunken one, or a private one as the standard readings would have it. Indexing Pollock's art to a Freudian-conceived personal life and its alleged expression, the unconscious, trivializes it. Or, to put it another way, Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros did mythic work and they were social; if Pollock did it, it was supposedly his "troubled self" according to the melodramatic script of the 1950s. Secondly, he repeats his symbols over and over again in different compositions and media that belie their spontaneity. To be sure there are embellishments, inventions, variations ("doodlings") and the like in the "psychoanalytic drawings" in particular, but they are variations on issues that he knew and had done before. More importantly, for the most part they are symbols that are preconceived ideas that he cultivated and embellished upon, or to use a jazz phrase, riffed on. Thirdly, he derived those symbols, ideas and meanings from his context to portray his *conception* of the unconscious. In other words, his idea of the unconscious is really made up of the ideas of the inner life from his sources. Those ideas make up a conception that he depicts. They are thus not private but common ideas and issues that Pollock absorbed from the context around him. Fourthly, Pollock's symbols permuted and varied according to his own expressive needs. That is, after absorbing certain formal and thematic sources, Pollock extended the issues of his time in his own way. He uniquely moved from Benton to Mexican to Jungian and other psycho-cultural forms of

expression. In its life cycle, Pollock's art changed. Pollock's adaptability was one of his brilliant characteristics. And fifthly, what matters was Jackson Pollock's work, not a preconceived theory about it. That is, what counts in understanding Pollock comes from within the paintings themselves if looked at closely in an open manner. Sweeping generalizations such as the "unconscious," "fantasy," or tropes about modern man's ideology, or modernist formal evolution, actually blind the viewer.

We are, of course, moving now from Benton's work and into Pollock's own fully mythic realm of psychic myth. Pollock became a mythic artist borrowing and exploiting images and ideas to render his personal and ultimately public renewal, as in the crowds from *Prometheus*. His figures are less driven by structural dynamics for the moment, although they have considerable force and power, and they are more emblematic of his idea for psychodynamics. Pollock found his subject and his mode -- symbol and allegory -- with the fundamental aid of the allegorical Mexican artists. It was they who provided important guidelines for readings not only through form but also through ideas. No doubt Pollock added a layer of psychodynamic structure and meaning to his paintings that made his work original and unique, but it was their network of themes from which he began and elaborated upon. The fact that modern and postmodern critics continue to ignore these issues means that their readings will miss the general theses that informed avant-garde painting in America in the late 1930s.

### *Illustrations*

Fig. 1. Jose Clemente Orozco, *Prometheus*, 1930. Central Panel. Fresco, Pomona College, Claremont, California.

Fig. 2. *The Flame*, 1934-8. Oil on canvas, mounted on fiberboard, 20 x 30 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Enid A. Haupt Fund.

Fig. 3. Jose Clemente Orozco, *Man of Fire*, fresco, 1938-39. Hospicio Cabanas, cupola, Guadalajara.

Fig. 4. *Untitled (Overall Composition)*, 1934-38. Oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston purchased with funds provided by the Brown Accessions Endowment Fund.

Fig. 5. Signorelli, *Damned Cast into Hell*, fresco. Orvieto Cathedral.

Fig. 6. Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonne of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) III: 462r, 1938-41. Pencil, colored crayon, and gouache on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 7. Ibid., CR III: 461r, 1938-41. Pencil, colored crayon, and gouache on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 8. Ibid., CR III: 405r, 1938-41. Pencil and colored crayon on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 9. Ibid., CRIII: 464r, 1938-41 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 10. Ibid., CRIII: 473r, 1938-41. Pencil and colored crayon on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 11. Pablo Picasso. *Bust of a Woman (Marie-Therese Walter)*, 1931.

Ownership in dispute.

Fig.12. Ibid., CRIII: 463r, 1938-41. Pencil and colored crayon, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 13. Ibid., CRIII: 479, 1938-41. Colored pencil on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig.14. Ibid., CRIII: 555, 1938-41. Crayon and colored pencil on gray paper, 12  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 18  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 15. Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads*, 1932. *Fresco*, Rockefeller Center (destroyed). Recreated as *Man, Controller of the Universe*, 1938, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City.

Fig. 16. O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock*, CRIII: 491, 1938-41. Dark red pencil on tan paper, 6  $\frac{3}{16}$  x 4 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 17. Ibid., CRIII: 475r, 1938-41. Pencil and colored crayon on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 18. Ibid., CRIII: 469r, 1938-41. Pencil and colored crayon on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 19. Pablo Picasso, *Dreamer*, 1932. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Oil on canvas, 39 7/8 x 36 3/4. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1997.

Fig. 20. Pablo Picasso. *Girl Before a Mirror*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 64 x 51 1/4 in. The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Simon Guggenheim.

Fig. 21. [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*], 1938-41. Oil on Masonite, 20x 24 in. Hood Museum, Dartmouth College. Purchased through the Miriam and Sidney Stonean Acquisitions Fund

Fig. 22. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Rotation*, 1934. Pyroxylin on bakelite, Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City. Archive of Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura.

Fig. 23. El Greco, *The Dream of Philip II*, 1579. Oil on canvas, 55 ft. 12 in x 74 ft. 80 in. Real Monasterio, Escorial, Spain.

Fig. 24. Jose Clemente Orozco, *Snakes and Spears*, panel 2, *Epic of American Civilization*, 1932-4 Dartmouth College.

Fig. 25. "Flight of Man," untitled ceramic bowl, 1939. Enamel on Limoges porcelain. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Mel and Hope Barkan.

Fig. 26. Michelangelo, *Resurrection*, drawing, 1525-33. Black Chalk, 9.45 x 13.78 in. Royal Collection, Windsor Castle.

Fig. 27. O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock*, CRIII: 425r, 1938-41. Pencil and colored crayon on paper, 18 x 12 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 28. Ibid., CRIII: 452r, 1938-41. Pencil and colored crayon on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 29. Ibid., CRIII: 468r. Pencil and colored crayon on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 30. Life and death mask from Tlatlco, 900-300 B.C. Mexico City, National Museum of Anthropology.

Fig. 31. O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock*, CRIII: 470r. Pencil and colored crayon on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 32. Ibid., CRIII: 471r. Pencil and colored crayon on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 33. [*Naked Man*], 1938-41. Oil on Plywood, 50 x 24 in. Private collection.



Fig. 34. Orozco, study for Hispanio-American Society, panel 16, for *The Epic of Civilization*, 1932-34, Baker Library, Dartmouth College. Pencil, private collection.

Fig. 35. Andre Masson, *Massacre*, 1931. Heiner and Ulla Pietzsch, Private Collection, Berlin.

Fig. 36. Artist unknown, Navaho, *Beautiway-big snake with no end*,” sand painting. Private collection.

Fig. 37. Installation View, “Indian Art of the United States,” The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1941.

Fig. 38. [*Composition with Ritual Scene*], 1938-41. Oil on canvas on Masonite, 19 x 48 in. Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, NAA-Nebraska art association, through the gifts of the Woods family.

Fig. 39. Untitled (*Blue Moby Dick*), 1943. Gouache and ink on fiberboard, 18 1/4 x 23 1/4 in. Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan.

Fig. 40. Siqueiros, *Birth of Fascism*, 1936-45 (second version). Archive of Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura/Sala de Arte Publico Siqueiros

Fig. 41. [*Head with Polygons*], 1938-41. Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 27 1/4 x 19 1/4 in. Location unknown.

Fig. 42. Jose Clemente Orozco, *Creative Man*, fresco, cupola, 1938-39. Hospicio Cabanas, Guadalajara.

Fig. 43. O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock*, CRIII: 556. Pencil and colored crayon on paper, 14 x 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 44. Dakota "U-ma-ne" symbol, *Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology.

Fig. 45. [*Composition with Woman*], ca. 1940. Oil on masonite, 17 3/8 x 10 3/8 in. Private Collection

Fig. 46. Orozco. *Allegory of Mexico*, 1940. Fresco, Gabino Ortiz library, Jiquilpan, Jalisco, México.

Fig. 47. Orozco, "The Coming of *Quezacatl*," Panel 5 from *The Epic of Civilization*, 1932-4, Baker Library, Dartmouth College.

Fig. 48. Snakes and lightning pot, Plate XVI, *Eleventh Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology (1889)

Fig. 49. No Two Horses, *Thunderbird*, Shield, ca. 1870. Lakota Sioux, Denver Art Museum. Painted leather, 17 3/4 in. in diameter. Gift of Reverend C.C. Douglas, 1932.

Fig. 50. Andre Masson, *Goethe and the Metamorphosis of Plants*, 1940. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

Fig. 51. Clyfford Still, *Untitled*, (detail from photograph of eight early paintings). Clyfford Still Museum, Denver.

Fig. 52. O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock*, CRIII: 402r. Pencil and colored crayon on paper, 18 1/4 x 12 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 5. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Tropical America*, 1930. Fresco and applied air gun to cement, 19 ft. 7 in. x 98 ft. 4 in. Pueblo Historical Monument, Los Angeles, Los Olivares Street.



## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Charles Pollock in a letter cited in Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989), 143.

<sup>ii</sup> Document 6 in Francis O'Connor and Eugene Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: Catalogue Raisonne of Paintings, Drawings and Other Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978) IV: 208.

<sup>iii</sup> Fred Adler, personal communication, Fall 1985.

<sup>iv</sup> For a discussion of modernist handlings of Pollock's relationship to the Mexicans, see Robert Storr, "A Piece of the Action," in *Jackson Pollock New Approaches*, Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel eds., (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 33-69.

<sup>v</sup> Ellen Landau, "Double Consciousness in Mexico: How Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish Painted a Morelian Mural," Spring 2007, *American Art*, has begun to remedy that.

<sup>vi</sup> Kadish letter to Ellen Landau, March 22, 1987, cited in Ellen Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abrams 1989), 46.

<sup>vii</sup> Kadish quoted in Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave/ An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1985), 49.

<sup>viii</sup> See Stephen Polcari, "Orozco and Pollock *Epic Transfigurations*" in *Men of Fire Jose Clemente Orozco and Jackson Pollock*, (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College, 2012), and *American Art* (Summer 1992): 36-57.

<sup>ix</sup> Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1989), 298.

<sup>x</sup> See David Scott, "Orozco's *Prometheus*: Summation, Transition, Innovation," *College Art Journal* 17 (Fall 1957): 2-18.

<sup>xi</sup> See Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 101.

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xii Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1990).

xiii. Ellen Landau, "Double Consciousness in Mexico: How Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish Painted a Morelian Mural," *American Art* 21 # 1 (Spring 2007): 75-97.

xiv That it droops like a skin rather than a creature of flesh may suggest that Pollock was thinking of a pre-Contact symbol that Siqueiros used.

xv See Sidra Stich, "Anxious Visions," 140 and *in passim*, in Sidra Stich et al, *Anxious Visions Surrealist Art* (New York: Abbeville, 1990).

xvi. See William P. Graves, *Gynecology* (Philadelphia and London: W.B. Saunders Co. 1919, 2nd. ed.)

xvii. Liza Mintz Messinger, "Pollock Studies the Mexican Muralists and the Surrealists: Sketchbook III," in *The Jackson Pollock Sketchbooks in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), 67, notes it appeared in *Cahiers d' Art* vol. 14: 68.

xviii. Messinger, "Pollock Studies": 71, 79.

xix. Ibid.

xx Charles Pollock, letter to the author, January 1983.

xxi. Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 151-152.

xxii For a reproduction, see Polcari, "Jose Clemente Orozco and Jackson Pollock: Epic Transformations," *American Art*, 6 #3 Summer 1992, 51, and *Men of Fire/ Jose Clemente Orozco and Jackson Pollock*, Hood Museum of Art Dartmouth College, 1-12.

xxiii A social realist representation of the crowd taken from Orozco is already evident in the WPA lithograph *Coal Mines – West Virginia*, O'Connor and Thaw, CRIV: 1063 (P8) of 1936.

xxiv See Joan Halifax, *Shaman The Wounded Healer* (New York: Crossroad Books, 1982), 80.

xxv Ibid., 80.

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xxvi Carl G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, (formerly *Psychology of the Unconscious*), trans. RFC Hull, Bollingen Series, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 266.

xxvii See Jesse Walter Fewkes, "Notes on Tusayan, Snake, and Flute Ceremonies," *Nineteenth Annual Report Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology*, 1897-98, pt. 2, 1009.

xxviii See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 96-97. See also Stephen Polcari, *Jackson Pollock et le Chamanisme*, (Pinacothèque de Paris, 2008), 58.

xxix See note in O'Connor and Thaw, *A Catalogue Raisonné* CRIII: 8.

xxx. The ritual knife-wielding subject is only one of a mass of Pollock symbols discussed below including the cross, the crowd, the womb with fetuses, the radiating head, fire, radiating lines and branches, and a sword opposite to the knife-wielding figure, all condensed into an emblematic shape. Orozco is the visual source for knife-wielder figures. His knife-wielders are usually killing the helpless. For a discussion of Pollock's independent image of a maguey plant and its symbolism, see Stephen Polcari, "Jackson Pollock's Maguey Plant," *Source Spring* 2013: 30-6.

xxxi Halifax, *Shaman*, 77.

xxxii Florence Davies, "Rivera Tells Meaning of Art Institute Murals," *The Detroit News*, January 19, 1933, cited in Linda Bank Downs, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co and The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1999), 86.

xxxiii See Sidra Stich, *Joan Miro: The Development of a Sign Language* (St. Louis: Washington University, 1980).

xxxiv See Jamie Highwater, *Dance: Rituals of Experience* (New York: Alfred van der Marck, 1985).

xxxv Halifax, *Shaman*, 10.

xxxvi See Polcari, *Jackson Pollock et le Chamanisme*.

xxxvii See Stephen Polcari, "Adolph Gottlieb's Allegorical Epic of World War II," *Art Journal* (Fall 1988): 206.

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xxxviii See Sidra Stich, "Anxious Visions," 146.

xxxix Ibid.

xl Masson, cited in *ibid.*

xli Ibid.

xliv For illustrations, see Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Expressionism*, 238-39.

xlvi See Polcari, *Jackson Pollock et le Chamanisme*.

xlvii Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 19.

xlviii See J. Owen Dorsey, "A Study of Siouan Cults," *Eleventh Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology, (1889-90), 45.

l. Frank H. Cushing, "Zuni Fetishes," *Second Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology (1881-82), 9-10.

lvii Rivera cited in Irene Herner, "Diego Rivera Paradise Lost at Rockefeller Center Revisited," Rivera Symposium, Cleveland Museum of Art, December 1998.

lviii. See Polcari, "Jose Clemente Orozco and Jackson Pollock: Epic Transformations," *American Art* 6 # 3 44-49.

lix. See *Untitled*, drawing, in Ellen Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abrams, 1989), 90-92.



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## **Pollock's Primitivism and Shamanic Acculturation**

When on September 1, 1939 “mass man” marched into Poland, the crisis of civilization that had dominated the West in the interwar period became a crisis of survival and the war became the great university of modern man. It also became a crisis for the individual because the individual had lost his personal life. As FDR said in the summer of 1940: “All private plans, all private lives, have been in a sense been repealed by an overriding public danger.” We saw that the interwar period was a period of escalating schemes to change the world and repair if not transform civilization. Further, advancing secularism, a love of the machine, the subordination of the individual to the masses, and the intensification of bureaucratic society all in the wake of World War I made acute to many the problem of human nature and culture in the modern age. Secular theories of doom in the interwar period, that is, theories of mass society that had become standard, seemed to foretell the onslaught of World War II. But such theories and events called for an even greater riposte than between the wars. All responses would now enlarge the consciousness that would defeat the crisis. Victory was required in the theaters of war and the melodrama of the self. It was a question of mind and spirit as well as social and political organization.

In 1939 Jackson Pollock took on this task. Pollock's project was to redo his psychology and its attendant culture in a way that would meet those

challenges and take up those needs, which were his needs as well. That is not to say that Pollock, as with most cultural figures, did not have a political response to the impending war and its crisis. As with most Americans, he most likely opposed Nazism and Japanese militarism although we have no actual statements from him to that effect. (Paintings are another question, as discussed below.) Large political responses, however, were discredited by the late 1930s and Pollock was an artist, not a politician. His chosen path was cultural. He did not join the army and the army did not want him. Fortunately, during World War II the United States Armed Forces generally refused to take artists. They thought that artists they made poor soldiers so they prevented their participation from the beginning. The only first generation Abstract Expressionist to serve was Ad Reinhardt, ironically, the most political, and he was soon released from the Navy for the predictable reason that he was “neurasthenic,” the very concept that preempted the participation of most other artists. The idea of Pollock armed a gun is not a comforting one and the Army agreed. For the war, together with his girlfriend Lee Krasner, much like Salvador Dali, he designed war windows in the early 1940s.

Instead, through Pollock’s loss of private self the West had to be transformed from within, its historical trajectory and cultural patterns renewed in a novel way. Obviously, Pollock rejected fanciful contemporary political solutions. Despite Pollock’s youthful flirtation with the fashion for Marxist-Leninism, by this time he saw change as being more psychological and cultural than political. Even with lingering support for some American artists in 1938

(although not the future Abstract Expressionists) in manifestoes backing the show trials, by 1941 Stalinism was largely a spent force in America. After the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, many artists walked out of the artists' unions and formed a group dedicated to a free art, the Federation of Modern Painters. And despite some continued romanticizing of Trotsky, even to this day he was not only finished but also very dead by then – assassinated by a Stalinist agent in 1940 more successful than Siqueiros. (To be a Trotskyist then meant simply being anti-Stalinist and pro-modern culture, not a complex position to hold.) Even in leftist circles, it was realized that Trotsky would and did kill only a few million less than Stalin when he was in power. It was increasingly understood by Americans that this ideology of liberation, social change, and justice was well on its way to murdering eighty to a hundred million people in the twentieth century – the Soviets thirty million of that, a number that surpasses Hitler easily.

To be sure, there were still some true believers in Marx such as the art historian Meyer Schapiro. Many of these were intellectuals behind the new, more modern *Partisan Review* of post-1938 that had dumped its Stalinism. Yet many in this leading journal in the litmus test of sense and adulthood refused to support America's war effort. To them, the Second World War was just another capitalist imperialist exercise. Robert Motherwell and David Smith held this opinion, too.<sup>i</sup> Clearly, this was yet another opinion that reveals intellectuals as prisoners of ideology. That is, Schapiro was hailed by some for his belief in social art history and for his criticism of other streams of thought

in America in the 1930s such as “modern man,” but populism then went out and immediately failed the critical test of his time and the twentieth century. Indeed, Schapiro was and remained a socialist the rest of life, unable to change his ideology despite the increasingly obviousness of its failure. And in a great irony, Schapiro, the alleged mouthpiece of resistance to the alleged weakness and accommodation of modern American ideologies, himself supported the Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s partly in terms of a popular misconception – “freedom.” In “The Liberating Quality of the Avant-Garde,” of 1957, Schapiro praised the work as an exercise in freedom. Schapiro seems to have gotten it critically wrong on several fronts, or rather, he and others were just as vulnerable as everyone else to political misjudgment. This is not a great track record and reveals, as if it needed to be revealed, that after the failure of Marxist-Leninism by 1939-40, there was, as history has indicated, only government-monitored capitalism and its culture of “bourgeois humanism” that actually was mostly shared across America by many classes.<sup>ii</sup> That was Pollock’s choice and the result was significant art. There was no other real political alternative except in the imaginary rewriting of history in hindsight.

A commitment to human dignity and worth is ideology enough for Pollock and mostly that of his other Abstract Expressionist colleagues. Western humanism that has been an ideology throughout the ages, whether bourgeois or otherwise, is responsible for most culture. Its politics are that which are tolerant and marked by middle-class generosity with its belief in human

capacity and the possibility of social progress in variable ways, not just one prescribed path.

How would Pollock “fight” the good fight then? By the adoption of the transformative cultural configuration then prevalent in the West. That configuration consisted of the conjoining of new disciplines such as depth psychology, cultural anthropology, prehistory, and philosophy. Typically for an artist who was an intellectual, he imagined he could think his way forward with new ideas from the great figures in the first half of the twentieth century including Jung, Frazer, Nietzsche, Bergson, Levy-Bruhl, Campbell, Mumford, Read, Eliot, Pound and Joyce, among others. He also included the French Symbolist poets, surrealists, and modern artists themselves, particularly Picasso. This thrust also included popularizers such as the “modern man” authors. All of these figures were ultimately critics of the nature of the West, its culture, and its individuals. Most rejected the ideal of the rational machine that dominated much of the 1920s and 1930s, which were known as the Machine Age, actually the “Age of Rationalization.”<sup>iii</sup> Most, too, saw solutions to the West’s problems as internal, not external. Adopting a visionary view of mankind, they reconceived it in terms of new understandings which then greatly altered Western thought and, culturally, nineteenth century man.

Pollock knew most of this critical thought directly. We have seen his dedication to Jung. Bergson was everywhere, one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century and second only to Freud as a psychological

theorist to the surrealists. Everyone read Frazer, the doyen of evolutionary anthropology. Pollock owned *The Golden Bough*. So too Levy-Bruhl, who was a favorite of many with his alternative ways of thinking whose effects could be seen among the surrealists, Jung, Read and others, from where Pollock probably picked it up. Eliot and Pound were major writers, thinkers, and critics whose ideas were well-known. Joyce in particular was a favorite of Pollock's. We will perhaps see the presence of French symbolist poets in Pollock's work in the early 1940s as well as among his colleagues. Pollock owned Campbell's *Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* and later, his key *Hero with a Thousand Faces* of 1949. We must remember that Campbell spoke at the Club that year after the "long-awaited" publication of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and his influence was well attested to by many Abstract Expressionists in their work around the 1950s including de Kooning whose own decisive painting *Woman I* of 1950-52 owes a great deal to the mythic ideas of Campbell.<sup>iv</sup>

To be sure, we are critical of these figures today. As time passes, new ideas arise while others fall from grace. We have seen the once unassailable ideas and reputations of Freud and Jung founder. Margaret Mead's reputation has recovered after a fall (and those who attacked her faulted).<sup>v</sup> Frazer divided history into a nineteenth century evolutionary schema of the early history of man in which he moves from magic to religion to science, the vaunted ideal of that century. Frazer thus proposed a ladder of the simplicity of the primitive to the complexity of the modern day. His was the nineteenth century Enlightenment belief in progress. Furthermore, Frazer did this all while

residing in England, that is, without the fieldwork considered absolutely necessary by the next generation of anthropologists such as Franz Boas, the most important American anthropologist in the first half of the twentieth century. And he engaged in comparative evaluations, a technique that was rejected later as all cultures were thought to be *sui generis*. Frazer was already in trouble by the 1920s but *The Golden Bough* remained a powerful comparative “history” or compendium of the habits, customs, and rituals of man, some of which we have already found echoing in Pollock such as fire and sacrifice.

Levy-Bruhl’s reputation has risen, fallen, and risen again. Levy-Bruhl postulated that “primitive thinking” was different from that of modern man. He characterized it as “mystic” -- as seeing all things and events as a product of supersensible forces. With this “pre-logical” thinking, so-called primitive man saw himself as part of the forces of things around him, that is, as part of a continuum of mystic forces that determine all. It was not that it was not logical, just not logical according to prevailing ideals of the West. For him, then, the “primitive mentalite,” was more mystical, unscientific, and supernatural than Western man. In own his time, while immensely popular with the humanities, Levy-Bruhl was criticized by anthropologists for suggesting a *difference* between primitive and modern man’s thinking. Boas, for example, rejected said difference for he believed that here was one human mind with all men sharing equal mental abilities. Now things have come full circle and Levy-Bruhl is being hailed as one of the first to propose different yet equal ways of thinking



between the West and non-West. For him, thinking was cultural *not evolutionary* and the primitive mentality was its own form of logic, neither antecedent nor inferior to the West. His reputation has been fully restored.<sup>vi</sup>

All these figures have suffered at the hands of later thought. Nonetheless, for all of their failings each in his own way made progressive contributions for their own time. Freud and Jung obviously continued and expanded the centuries' old belief in inward as well as outward motivation that they updated for the modern era. Frazer's evolutionism saw non-Western people as ignorant but educable, an improvement on the straightforward hierarchical racism of the nineteenth century. He, too, ultimately suggested an equal capacity in mental abilities for humankind while Boas and his school extended the human mind to all whether different or not. These were obviously steps on the road of progress. Ultimately, the disciplines that came together to form the culture of Pollock and Abstract Expressionism can today be seen as progressive as well as regressive.

For Pollock and his era, the alternative to failed radical politics was radical cultural politics, an area as Philip Rieff noted earlier, that was more successful. And its arena was culture and personality, or rather historio-cultural personality, for they were one and the same. We saw the crisis of the individual and culture as being rife in the 1930s – in Regionalism, in the popularity of psychological anthropologists such as Mead and Benedict and in sociological studies such as *Middletown* where the failure of modernity was

the failure to find the appropriate culture/personality for the age. To resist and redo his troubling culture and the disasters it had led to, by at least ca. 1938, Pollock turned to two other forms of modern counter culture, one imported and one domestic, as the means to address the crisis and resolve it. The import was surrealism, the latest and most fashionable of European modernisms; the domestic was the art and culture of America's Native American peoples.

Pollock adopted mid-century thinking as represented by surrealism, the temper of his time when the surrealists arrived in America after the fall of France in 1940. Although mostly limited in the popular imagination to the erotic, the exotic, the dream and the unconscious, Surrealism was actually a mode dedicated to the transformation of the West through the transformation of culture, civilization, and psyche. As Sidra Stich has written, "in the aftermath of World War I, concern about human nature and the future of civilization reached a high level of intensity. The recognition of a violence as a dominant human trait and the realization that human will had caused destruction on a previously unfathomed scale shifted Western thinking about the nature of life. Conflict and disorder, irrationality and destruction became actualities that could not be ignored or treated as aberrant conditions. Indeed, experience conjoined with the ongoing debate about human nature and civilization, a debate propelled by the writings of Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, and anthropologists like Marcel Mauss and Lucien Levy-Bruhl. Never before was there so much talk about humankind or the status and condition of Western culture. The cataclysm of 1914-18 had severely shaken attitudes and

confronted the modern world with new concerns about the self and society.”<sup>vii</sup> Surrealism, then, was much like Pollock’s earlier cultural universe: both were conceptions devoted to redoing the world by redoing man from within. Recasting the West’s psyche and personality was recasting its culture and civilization.

Surrealism attacked the central premise of “Western,” that is, French life – classicism and the significance of reason – Descartes’ “I think, therefore, I am.” As a result, surrealism sought to undermine mass man’s logic, reason, science, and the classical order with contradiction, disjunction, multiplicity, rupture, and incongruity. In other words, it was part of the rejection of scientific mass man -- hence Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists’ interest. With surrealism, the human form was full of contractions and disorder. Rather than peaceful, nature was aflame with conflict, wastelands, and boundless expanses, and it was full of ruins, trapping gardens, and destructive forces. Struggle was the order of the day. Classical and modern civilizations were deemed the enemy and vital, raw force was proclaimed the true nature of society, culture, and the power of liberation.<sup>viii</sup>

Surrealism was one of many schemes proposed to revise Western civilization in the interwar period. It was a social, intellectual and cultural critique of the West and its standard elements, at least of the nineteenth century -- reason, science, traditional civilization, and order. Instead, it preferred “disorder” or the creativity of multiplicity and disunity in an effort to

put together anew the fragments of a fallen civilization. For surrealism, life was not stability but perpetual motion, fervor and raw, naked force. In many ways, surrealism was the cultural expression of the effects of World War I and its destruction of the nineteenth century Western order through violent force. The result was an art and philosophy that emphasized opposites -- disjuncture and deformed bodies, the violation and refutation of wholeness and unity, the dislocation of the human form, and the change of humanity's status from superior to mere participant in the natural world. While surrealism meant the touting of the unknown and unknowable, it also suggested unrest in which degeneration struggles with regeneration, disintegration with survival. For surrealism, life is activity not passivity.<sup>ix</sup> Echoes of Bergson, biomorphism, and the early twentieth century love of fragmentation were given a cast in modern artistic form. In surrealism, male and female bodies are joined, sex organs exchanged, and individual gender identity transgressed. Formlessness struggles for form yet arrives at a new unknown. Often the mind or head is emphasized as the site of displacement or de-emphasized for the preference of other extremities of the body or humanity itself. (See *Bald [sic] Woman with Skeleton*.) As George Bataille, the independent surrealist thinker who defined cultural order and transgression, wrote in his magazine *Acephale*, a headless figure "reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death. He is not a man. He is not a god either. He is not me but is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself."<sup>x</sup>

Of key importance is the idea of metamorphosis. Surrealist metamorphosis represented the capacity for continuous inner development and of creation and change. Metamorphosis broke down the barriers between different things, states of being, and processes. It also represented the fusion of man with nature as man was part animal, part bird, and part cosmos, the inner and outer worlds. For the surrealists, nature was growth. The surrealist Jean Arp believed that a true work of art does not exist above nature but takes its place within the natural order in the woods, the mountains, as a concrete manifestation of the primal organic process of becoming. He developed a series in 1933 called "Concretions" which realize growth itself in three dimensions. He said that concretion designates solidification, the mass of the stone, the plant, the animal, man, all exemplify such a process. For him, concretion is something that has grown. The art object was the concrete manifestation or deposit of creative growing forces themselves, as his sculpture *Growth* indicates



(fig. 1).

In surrealism, the vitalist tradition in modern art equates artistic creation with the creative processes of nature. Art was a form of primitive animism. Surrealism thus shared with shamanism the theme of a unity of man with nature.

Surrealists put change, growth, and new life in the service of metamorphosis. The desire to represent primordially the human psyche's unity with nature is nowhere clearer than in Andre Masson's interest in the theme of metamorphosis: "Masson's apprehension of man's condition rests supremely on the concept of metamorphosis, the Heraclitean recognition that there is no reality except the reality of change, that permanence is an illusion of the sense; nothing is but is in a state of becoming. All things carry within their opposites: death is inherent in life and life potential in death. . . ." In 1921, on the threshold of his career, his key journey was famously put: "To paint forces: the open road," a metaphor for the age, and for Pollock as well.<sup>xi</sup>

For surrealists, women represented the greatest capacity to grow, to become, and to change. For example, as with other surrealists, the unliberated according to today Masson believed that women, in general, remained in closer contact with the unconscious than men. In his work, the female has the unpolitically correct dual function of being an object of desire and a symbol of humanity's primitive bonds with the creative forces of nature. The supposed connections between woman and earth, sexuality and natural creation is made explicit in images of women where paint is mixed with sand and earth, such as *Figure* (1927) and *The Earth* (1939).<sup>xii</sup> Again this is shamanic.

To counter culture, to redo civilization, to recreate man, surrealism sought elements that lay hidden and repressed and that would change them. For many of the surrealists, they were to be found in the unconscious mind, in

which they believed. (Its existence is disputed by some cognitive psychologists today but in the interwar and postwar period, belief in it was strong among the artistic class.) Some surrealists and especially Andre Breton, the self-appointed leader, were devoted to Freud (and not Jung, whom many of the French despise to this day.) Through the exercise of dreams and access to the unconscious, new ways of thinking and acting were allegedly discovered and they would expand consciousness. Surrealism was dedicated to the marvelousness that underlay a common reality that needed to be released. Shamanism, too, is a religion of ecstasy.

To access the unconscious realm of man, the surrealists developed a variety of techniques including frottage, grattage, decalcomania and especially automatism. All suggested the escape from civilization's reason and direct access and recording of the unconscious. A visual parallel to Freud's psychoanalytic mode of free association, surrealist automatist was a method that allegedly allowed the unconscious to come through, most often by doodling or purposeless drawing. A second stage -- reason and art -- brought allegedly spontaneous forms to fruition. The artist channeled vital movement. (While the surrealist mode was allegedly free -- nothing is always free, of course; the artist tends to repeat his spontaneities after a while which is one reason, for example, Masson after his brief automatist period in 1926-27 gave up the technique on the basis that it was too limited.)



The Americans adopted automatism but quickly and decisively adjusted it to their cultural agenda. That is, Robert Motherwell's misdefinition of automatism as inventiveness for its own sake aside, American automatism created access to the past, not just distorted reality. American automatism summed up and reinterpreted "[the] personal and cultural past, as well as charging of the past, the known, with new life through . . . metamorphoses." That meant conveying in its "vibrations and fusions of meaning . . . the boundless reaches of presentiment and memory . . . of man" and "the physical universe."<sup>xiii</sup> Despite differences, for both groups automatism became an intuitive way of reclaiming the past.

Besides attacking conscious reason and logic, the pillars of traditional and (for the Americans) mass industrial society, the surrealists expanded consciousness through deflating the superiority of the West and privileging non-Western society -- their so-called primitivism. Since they held that the mind contained thought prior to reason and consciousness, they valued thinking that seemed to be outside not only consciousness but outside the West itself, that is, the so-called primitive *The Masses* and children.<sup>xiv</sup> Surrealism emphasized a continuum of experience reaching back into the past of "man" and "civilization."

In surrealism, the study of primitive forms reflected an informed ethnographic knowledge absent in the earlier so-called primitivist generations. Drawing often on Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as well as the entire development

of ethnographic knowledge that had taken place since the first expressions of Picasso and others in early modernism, the surrealists sought to extract universal patterns of human thought and action from the diversity of life and customs and myths.

Surrealists valorized the third world over Europe and particularly America, except for Native America. In their famous map of the world, third world areas predominate. Europe is lesser, and North America barely exists in comparison to Native America and Latin America. But James Clifford suggested that they did more: as with the unconscious, the non-Western became a true *alternative* to the West, thereby suggesting a new cultural relativity and realignment and not just an exotic. To aid in this realignment, they drew upon and participated in the reformulations of cultural orders and contested realities that emerging ethnography also articulated, particularly at the new Institut d'Ethnologie established in 1925 by Paul Rivet, Marcel Mauss, and Levy-Bruhl. These figures trained a new generation of thinking about culture from Leiris to Bataille. All advocated a cultural leveling, juxtapositioning, and relativism that destroyed cultural wholes and hierarchies.<sup>xv</sup>

Another culture that would refound the wasteland of modern Western civilization relied more on tradition. That was the culture of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce. Ezra Pound summed up their view that the West was “a botched civilization.” His “Cantos” were devoted to the “Persephone” principle, much as Mark Rothko was in the early 1940s when he described Still’s work as an

“extension” of it. Rothko probably relied on Pound for the origin of this formulation. For Eliot, the modern urban West was a “wasteland” in need of spiritual revival symbolized by the quest of the “Fisher King” for the “Holy Grail” sought in his poem, “The Wasteland,” based on the mythic writer Jesse Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*.

Guy Davenport also writes

Joyce found in Vico cause to believe that Western civilization is at an end. Olson felt with Mao Tze Tung that the new vitality will come from the East. Pound considered us to be in a blank hiatus between cultures. So did Yeats, and perhaps Eliot. D.H. Lawrence looked for restorative forces deep in blood and genitals, longing for the color and robustness of the Etruscans.<sup>xvi</sup>

All these figures (not to mention Jung and to a certain extent Freud who in *Civilizations and Its Discontents* (1930) argued that Western civilization gone horribly wrong) rely on a mix of many cultures, both ancient and modern, to make their case so that they “universalized” this modern Western quest for spiritual salvation and miraculous revival in the post-World War One period, Pollock’s formative years.

The techniques utilized in this quest were widely influential such as Pound’s “imagism,” with an emphasis on conceptual and emotional complexes that were immediate, direct, and concrete, and his Cantos with their method of striking combinations and juxtapositions. Eliot’s famous method of

fragmentation in the poem “The Waste Land” paralleled surrealism’s use of disjuncture by fusing quotations from the literature of different times and places to create sudden turns in perspective, imagery, voice, and theme. And he exemplified his “mythic method” of finding the classical mythic and primitive beneath the modern by drawing on Frazer, Weston and Jung.

These figures are fundamental to modern culture. Many contemporary American magazines, from *The Little Review* to *The Dial* to the later *Partisan Review*, were devoted to them, and Pollock and his colleagues held them in high regard. For example, they drew many of their ideas from Adolph Gottlieb’s painting *The Wasteland* of 1930 to arrive at the idea of the emptiness of modern life, creating ideographic, imagistic compositions (see below) to dense combinations of myth, history, culture, and interior and exterior life. <sup>xvii</sup> The Abstract Expressionists also were attracted to individual themes such as time, the cyclic nature of history as a continuum, the fusion of inner and outer lives through symbolic discourses, the paralleling to ancient myth and forms, the brutishness of contemporary characters such as Sweeney, the search for spiritual peace and ecstatic experience through the quest for a spiritual revival, and the eternal nature of death and rebirth. Indeed, the “mythic method” suggested by Eliot was of immense interest for the American cultural elite. And it is, besides Read, through Pound, Eliot, and Joyce that early modern thinkers such as Frazer, Jung, Levy-Bruhl, Bergson and others were made known and became powerful once again.

Many Abstract Expressionists, Pollock included, may also have been aware of another “take” on the crisis of culture and civilization. By the late 1930s Pollock may have been aware of what has been called “modern man thinking,” which was a form of modernism in America. Michael Leja has argued that the Abstract Expressionists’ interest in the primitive and unconscious were commonplace in America and were found in popular literature and popular arts such as film noir. Such interest he believes was part of the reforming in the self that was a goal of the interwar and wartime periods. Pollock is Leja’s centerpiece in these discussions. Such a view is well supported, as we have seen, but modern man literature is not exclusive to nor necessarily even the main framework for it, nor are its main themes of entrapment, inner conflict, and the unconscious unique to it or necessarily supportable in the form of their application to Pollock. As a whole, however, modern man thinking joins and reinforces the issues and “isms” that dominated the run up to World War II.

And to top all of these cultural conceptions is modern art, particularly Picasso’s *Guernica*. Here was the greatest representative of the modern, Picasso, painting contemporary history with his advanced forms that also drew on tradition and the ages. It was a potent combination that deeply influenced the Abstract Expressionists as it encouraged the use of modernism *and* tradition, much like the mythic method, to represent contemporary events. Such a combination fused the historicizing of the thirties with its alleged antithesis and made it possible to be both modern and history-directed. That

became the basis of Abstract Expressionism, an art of *mythic and modern* “*history painting*” with a heroic conception and scale, a grammar of tragic conflict and force, and epic scope and ambition. Although it was long unrecognized by its domestication as the personal in the 50s, Abstract Expressionism as a whole was uniquely able to combine the seemingly outmoded idea of history painting with modern devices resulting in the epic and the intimate, emotion and events. Pollock shared this approach in his quest to renew himself/man for his age.

Thus, Pollock was in tune with his age and its issues. His work is personal, of course, but the personal was historically and culturally shaped and articulated. Furthermore, finding the roots lacking in modern man required a trip outside Western culture not only mentally through depth psychology, Joycean streams of connection, surrealism, and so many other things, but geographically and culturally as well; this can be seen as Pollock sought out the “primitive.” In one sense, he had already been engaged in this process, for he had sought the “primitive” that existed prior to Regionalism. Like Gauguin and Benton, he had left New York and ridden the rails to find it. But by the 1940s, under the impact of the abovementioned conceptions, he found a growing interest in America in its native “primitives” -- Native American cultures.<sup>xviii</sup> Such an interest was partly inspired by the New Deal’s change of policy from assimilation to individual support. That interest may also have been inspired by Pollock’s colleagues who thought of such cultures and art forms as the American beginning but there is no firm evidence about whether

Pollock shared or did not share that view. However, the presentation of a possible counter culture in a modern and not necessarily simply American context -- the exhibition of "Indian Art in the United States" that was held from December 1940 to January 1941 at the Museum of Modern Art -- seemed to crystallize a new version of his interest. The (M)odernist was the "Native American" and vice versa. Through the MoMA exhibition, he seems to have devoted himself to a new form as he had to Benton and then the Mexicans. *Pollock adopted a commitment to non-Western and mostly Native American art and cultures to redo his culture, subvert mass man and transform himself and the world through the unconscious.*

Besides the exhibition at the Modern, Pollock knew the cultures and arts of the first Americans through travel, museums, reading, and demonstrations. Reuben Kadish recounts that he and Pollock "were avid, avid gallery and museum goers . . . There was plenty to see, so you could go one day a week and if there was a day in which there was nothing to see, you could always go to the Museum of Natural History and he loved the Northwest; we all did. The South Pacific. Of course there, they were considered to be 'ethnographic,' they had nothing to do with art. But we went there to look at them because they were so exciting. Now they can hide behind the skirts of art."<sup>xix</sup> His friend Harold Lehman also recounts trips to the Museum where they "were fascinated by the totem poles and the carvings of the Northwest Coast, Canadian Indians, as well of course the Mexicans: Aztecs and Mayans."<sup>xx</sup> Further, Pollock has an "interest in Indian lore and ritual and things like that." Kadish recounted that

he, Pollock, and Guston were close to the Los Angeles County Museum where they would have to get down on hands and knees in order to see in the bottoms of the cases of Native American artifacts.<sup>xxi</sup> Pollock must have also visited the Southwest Museum of Indian Art in Los Angeles where there were many dioramas about Indian life and numerous objects although none seem to have been directly influential for Pollock. Lehman and Philip Guston, another friend of Pollock, read "Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot and of course James Joyce . . . Franz Boas, . . . Margaret Mead . . . *The Golden Bough* . . . Campbell."<sup>xxii</sup> As noted, Pollock also owned Frazer and Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* among other works, including those on modern man and anthropological essays. He visited exhibitions of prehistoric art and with one of his Jungian analysts went to the exhibition "Indian Art of the United States."<sup>xxiii</sup> His brother Jay collected many Navaho blankets, and he was familiar with them. Benton, his teacher, would often discuss African sculpture in his classes at the Arts Students League. One can thus assume that he saw most exhibitions on the "primitive" in New York and had a well-versed if amateur belief in the "primitive."

(Along with his Abstract Expressionists colleague Clyfford Still and perhaps Richard Pousette-Dart, Pollock was the most dedicated of these artists to the "primitive." Mark Rothko had no interest, thinking that non-Western art was "brutal."<sup>xxiv</sup> Barnett Newman wrote on Northwest Coast peoples and art forms but seemingly did only one pen and ink drawing related to it. Although Adolph Gottlieb collected art from around the world and incorporated references into his work along with that of Egyptian, Greek and modern art, he



did it under the aegis of the “collective unconscious” as his main motivation. He even declared he was not interested in primitive art for its own sake.<sup>xxv</sup> Relying little on the “primitive” for the most part, Willem de Kooning drew principally from the idea of the mythic advanced by Joseph Campbell for his ancient allusions. The past that Bradley Walker Tomlin drew on was, as it was for Rothko, the idea of the archaic -- the Greco-Roman. The so-called primitive, then, as with the idea of a total reliance on the idea of the unconscious, was, despite standard modernist claims, of uneven interest among the Abstract Expressionists.) For Pollock, however, it was primary.

More importantly for Pollock’s work, he owned a dozen *Annual Reports* by the Smithsonian Institution American Bureau of Ethnology *Annual Reports* which he bought in the 1930s. And heretofore unknown, he was aware of many of the *other* annuals, too, because Thomas Hart Benton knew of them and he was probably the one who introduced Pollock to them. Benton knew because his father was a congressman who was on the committee that regulated government interaction with Indian peoples and cultures. As part of his congressional work, Benton’s father was presented with the *Annuals*. Benton most likely inherited the publications when his father died in 1926 and thus made them known if not showed them directly to Pollock in New York or Missouri. Probably as a result of Benton, Pollock bought a dozen of them in the 1930s most probably on Fourth Avenue, the bookseller’s street in New York.

The fist-thick Annuals consisted of the American government and the Smithsonian Institution's attempts to document culture, art, and ritual in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They made up perhaps the most informative sources on Native American life, discussing and copiously illustrating all aspects of life, arts, and cultures. At the very least, these publications were known world-wide by the surrealists and by Campbell himself who discovered them as a boy and they inspired his life-long devotion to myth. We have already noted that Pollock drew on them for information that greatly furthered his knowledge of myth and "primitive" life that he found in Frazer, Campbell and others. Pollock, then, was informed about the peoples and cultures of Native America and he was interested in them for their cultural expression as well as forms as he was aware of "culture" and patterns of thinking and behavior through his work with Benton and others. Ultimately, ideas from these sources formed the basis of much of his new art and symbolism, largely but not completely replacing Mexican forms. As his close friend Reuben Kadish said of the results of his interest: "In a lot of Jack's drawings you can see motifs with . . . [Native American] reference points."<sup>xxvi</sup> Pollock's ideas were not only primarily aesthetic but cultural as well.

To be sure, on one level there was nothing new in Pollock's interest. His ideas about the Western conception known as "primitivism," of course, was shared by many modernists and his colleagues. The "primitive" and "primitivism" were phenomena of the West consisting of its ideological and selective understanding of non-Western cultures and not a translucent

recording of non-Western societies and cultures -- although the West is not alone in this non-transparency. For the Japanese and Chinese, a related taxonomy is the West as “barbarian.” For a while in discussions in the late twentieth century, the “primitive” was replaced by the “tribal” but objections were raised to that term by some Africans as well. As a result, the “primitive” will be most often replaced in this book by the “non-Western,” an awkward term, a definition by negations, but at least non-judgmental. (The term general term “Western,” of course, is also an inadequate generalization but historical and useful.)

Following the traditional Western epistemology of the simple to the complex and the early to the late, “primitivism” included the idea that the non-Western was simpler and more elementary than the more industrial civilizations such as the modern West. The result was a belief in the prior and fundamental nature of non-Western societies in a simple evolutionary schema in which the non-Western was not seen as complete in itself (*sui generis*) but a frozen stage on the ladder to Western ways. Importantly, today there is a time element in this ultimately nineteenth century anthropological hierarchy primitivism that has finally been understood as being false. While Pollock and his generation saw the non-Western as earlier and fixed, that is, as ahistorical cultures not subject to historical change, such a belief is untenable as well. In other words, the productions of Native Americans were based upon an active historical culture and not an eternal beginning of the evolution of culture as the nineteenth century would have it. The cultures that Pollock knew were particular and subject to time

and space. Additionally, because it was thought that non-Western societies were “lower” in history, there were originally few differentiations made between small rural cultures and major civilizations such as the pre-Contact tribes of South America. Both cultures were treated as equally “primitive” in the first half of the twentieth century. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* was an early means of associating and arranging many different cultures from all over the world into a comparative evolutionary scheme. He also added earlier Western culture to it as had Jung, who was of Frazer’s generation. But as Felix Fanon wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952): “I believe it is necessary to become a child again in order to grasp certain psychic realities. That is where Jung was an innovator: he wanted to go back to the childhood of the world [recapitulation], but he made a remarkable mistake: he went back only to the childhood of Europe.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

By Pollock’s time, the evolutionary schema of “primitivism” had lost much of its power although it had not completely faded for it still dealt with the “origins” and “patterns of behavior” that needed to be restored, thus changing the social organization of human nature. In contrast, Surrealism had indicated that “primitivism” indicated that the West was not superior and that there were *alternative* cultures that could subvert the Western concept of life and culture. In other words, cultures were relative. The thrust of anthropological thought of the mid-century, that is, of Boas and his students at the American Museum of Natural History, supported this.

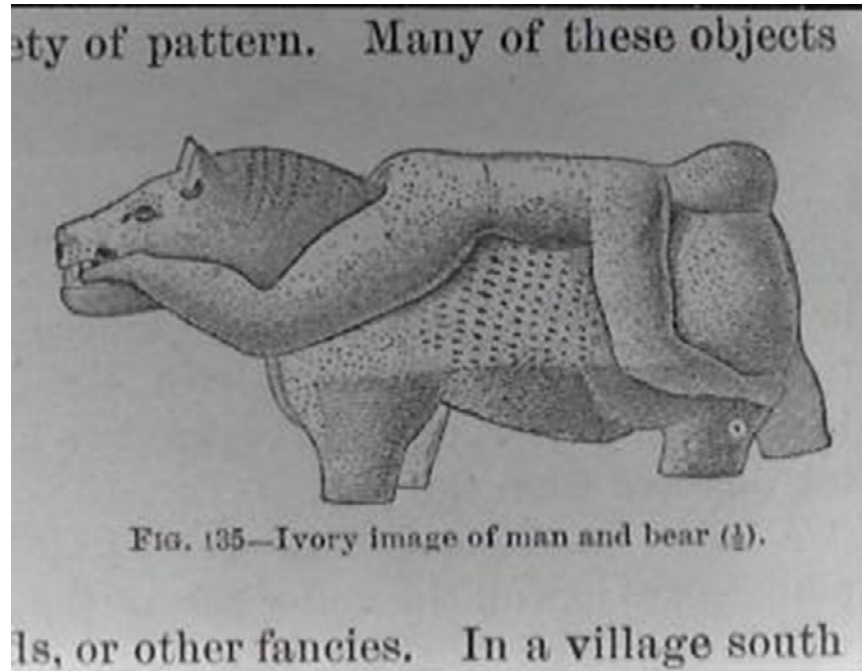
Most although not all Indian products were those of a culture that was based on the rural village and not industrial. They were thought of as being rooted in the rustic “communal.” Pollock’s traditional primitivism also had the additional trait of being more in touch with nature. Earlier primitivism had as well, whether Gauguin in Tahiti, Kandinsky in Russia, or Paula Modersohn-Becker in Germany at her artist colonies as mother and child had also in their own ways.

For Pollock, Native American peoples lived more closely to and more harmoniously with the land than urban man and his human figures attempt to commune with a nature that was spiritual. His concern with nature decentered man and also led to an identification with animals which supported 1930s concerns with identification with the American land and Pollock’s stated Jungian interest in increasing the “natural” or “animal” element in himself. The fusion with the animal can be seen immediately in works such as [*Man, Bull, Bird*] of 1938-41 (fig. 2) in which they join together, lying on top of and interspersed within one another,

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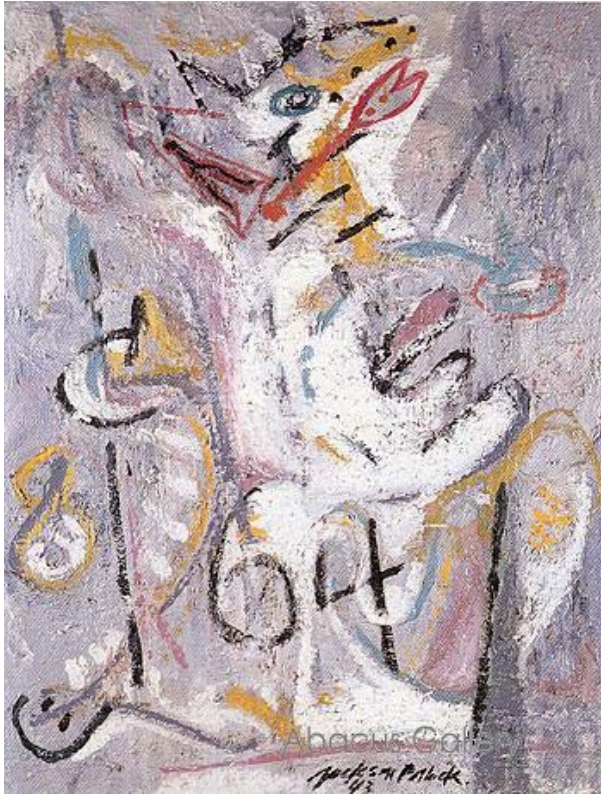


somewhat like Inuit ivory carvings of men and bears (fig. 3),<sup>xxviii</sup>



an echo of which we have already seen in [*Composition with Donkey Head (sic)*]. The lost [*Reclining Figure*], known only through a photograph given to Harold Lehman, and *Reclining Woman* separate the forms to a greater extent. These works may also herald a shamanic theme of incorporation by chthonic deity, part of the process of the suffering ordeal of his initiation journey.<sup>xxix</sup> (*Wounded Animal* of 1943 (fig. 4)





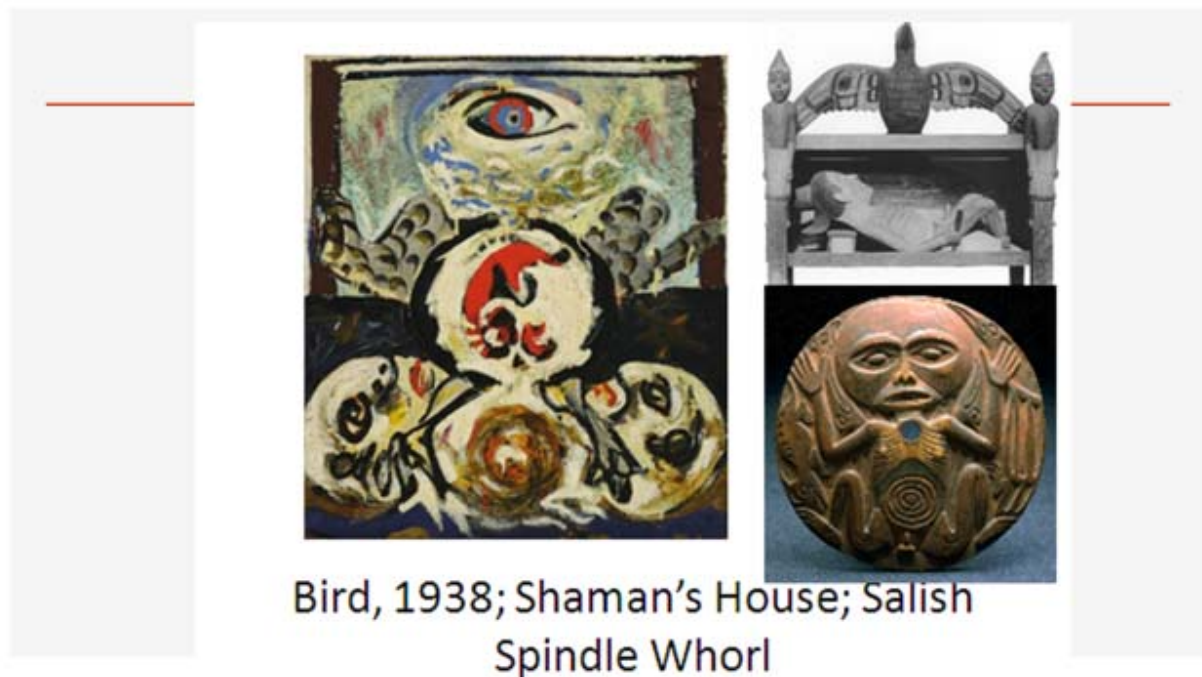
locates nature within in the style of the Northwest Coast such as a Haida slate carving of a sea monster, an example of which can be found in Boas' *Primitive Art* of 1928 (fig. 5),<sup>xxx</sup> a book Pollock's colleagues knew. Pollock must have known about it too, although it was not found in his library, for there are several other forms found in it that related to Pollock's work.) A denied realization in the mass wasteland of the time, the wounded "animal" side of "man," was also recognized by the surrealists who may have been the inspiration for Pollock's version of the theme. For them, denying the rational mind necessitated releasing "the wounded animal within" so that a "sensitivity to the unknown and the unknowable" could be retrieved.<sup>xxxi</sup> For the surrealists, and for Pollock, too, such a view aligns them with mythic and so-called primitive thinking where in which animals are not brutal but the "noble



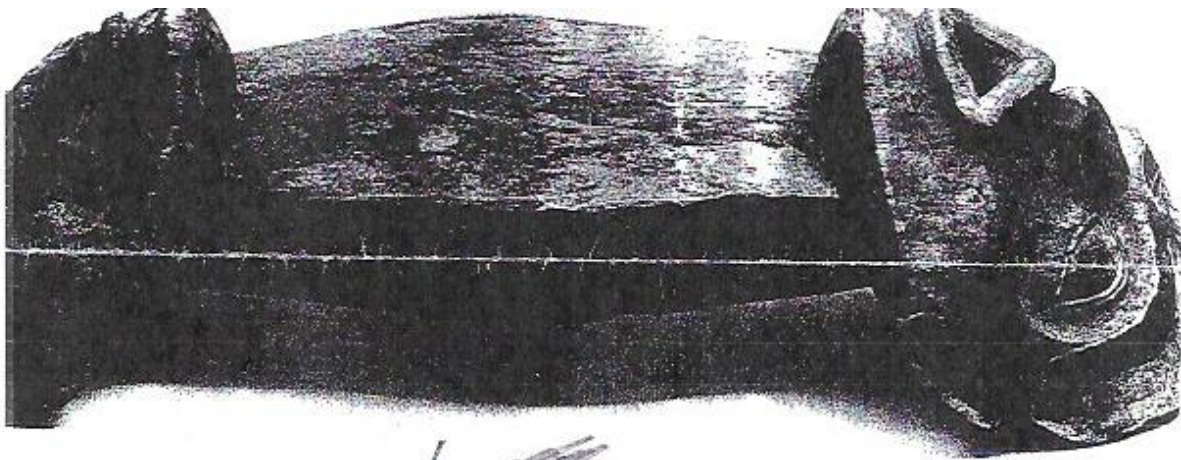
ancestors of the human species who hold special powers.”<sup>xxxii</sup> The need to recognize the animal side of man leads to man’s rebirth as we see in the death and resurrection drawings of Christ on the cross and a man or several draped across his lap. They are joined with an animal form and Pollock’s arrow-snake clarifying what has been put to death and what needs resurrection. Quickly, we see the results of Pollock’s interaction with the “psychic” nature of the Native Americans.

In Native American identification with this idea, natural symbols can represent the liberating flight of inwardness that Pollock and many of his generation sought. For example, shaman identification with birds is found all over the world. The bird always denotes rising, activation, change, and vitality. In some traditions, the bird is symbolic of the soul. <sup>xxxiii</sup> The *Bird* of this time (fig. 6) consists of a feathered creature whose head is the all seeing eye of surrealism bestriding two head masks. *Bird* follows the Northwest Coast Haida work of shaman ceremonies in which a bird bestrides a man in a box, a kind of

casket open on the side, flanked by two guardian figures (fig. 7).



The guardian figures resemble a wooden carving in the American Museum of Natural History (fig. 8).



It also echoes a Nootka Painting on wood from the Museum which was shown at the MoMA exhibition. Further, a swirling concentric circle in the center perhaps represents the shamanic entry into the “Other World” either



above or below.

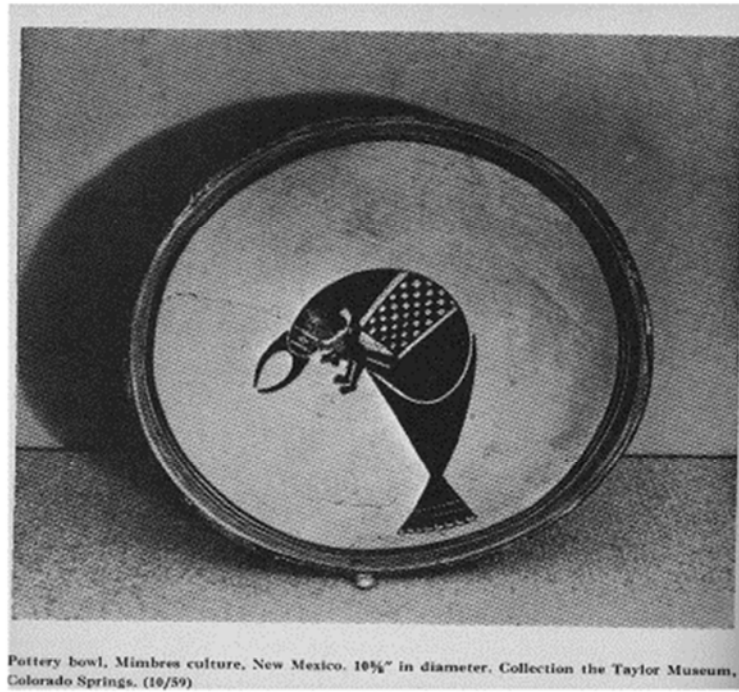
It resembles such a form in the Salish (Cowichan) spindle whorl (fig. 9), a similarly splayed, if shamanic skeletal figure in the American Museum of Natural History.



The larger whorl suggests the shamanic middle world. In an earlier work, [*Composition with Woman*], Pollock had also placed a blank hole at the center of the mythic creature. It was also similar to the “Emergence Centers” in southwest sand painting and the shamanic tradition in which an opening or

hole is the location of the gods descending down to earth or to death in the subterranean regions and a shaman's soul in flight as it flies up or down in his journeys to heaven or hell. In many myths, the center is thought to be the *axis mundi*, the center of the world. It is the threshold or door or passageway to other realities, a subject Rothko addressed in his early work as well.

In the Haida work, the figure below is a commemorative effigy. The "dead" shaman as a disincarnate soul in the form of a crane lifts off to celestial realms.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The upper panel of Pollock echoes that form while it also consists of sand echoing the very earth of sand painting reinforcing yet again the transformative quality of the work as sand painting in the Southwest suggests a fecund gateway to the Other World of spirits. Earlier, of course, Pollock had placed a pregnant woman on the earth or penetrated it symbolizing its feminine fertile quality from which deities spring. Importantly, the center of the bird marks the return of the humpback fetus from Dartmouth, now as an upside down spiral with which the figure is pregnant. Pollock took this spiral form and used it for his standard fetus; originally it was from a Southwest Mimbres pot on exhibit at the "Indian Art of the United States" at the Museum of Modern Art (fig. 10).



He used it often, most clearly in *Night Sounds* of 1944, where it is joined by a gesticulating rectilinear, stick or pictographic figure to its left and a circular, pictographic figure to its right.<sup>xxxv</sup> The spiral in *Bird* further resembles the semicircular drawing III 405r of the late 1930s which consists of heads and figures seen from above.

These works tell us several things in addition to the idea of a non-Western identification with nature. Pollock relied on ritual artifacts and turned them toward his own ends but those ends are more than formal. Indeed, Pollock's subjects may be related to those of the works themselves. Certainly, using Mimbres and others' artifacts to indicate a greater and more desirable harmony with nature within and without is a traditional Western primitivist trope and a theme in several tribes of his era. But as we will see, showing the flight of the inward spirit in shaman ceremony is Native American too.



However, Pollock also joins several images from different artifacts to make a composite image for himself. That is, he uses them to suggest a unified “primitive” idea that lessens the accurate allusions to different groups and distorts the works in themselves. Pollock would go on to do such primitivizing throughout his work.

Other aspects of Pollock’s traditional primitivism also held to the traditional idea that the non-West was more direct, honest, intense and intuitive -- in other words, it could exemplify what was supposedly absent from the conventional mass society of the West. Allegedly in this way, the unconscious allowed for this direct communication as it was primordial, dark, and subterranean, and not controlled by reason. The idea that artistic creativity comes directly from the unconscious further enabled this belief. Free from the restraints of civilization, as Sally Price notes, such views cast the non-Western as the equivalent to bohemia with its counterculture of freedom from restraint and non-conformity.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Significantly, the direct and immediate was also an element of the thirties, a key part of its expressive system.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Pollock continued this goal now through the Northwest Coast and others’ means as most of his work from 1938 onward indicates. Works such as [*Composition with Masked Forms*] with its swirling rhythms and rough paint handling, [*Naked Man*] who strides toward the viewer, (*White Horizontal*) and then the great compositions of the early 1940s from *Male and Female* with its automatist (?) bursts on its edges,

*Stenographic Figure* with its graffiti writing and finally his drippings from *Composition with Pourings I & II* of 1943 onward privilege direct attacks. Alas, the “directness” of the primitive is another Western illusion, created by misunderstandings of, ultimately, the non-Grecian form as unrefined and thus less rationalized and controlled.

Allegedly being in direct contact with the inward life meant that, as symbols of the primordial, Pollock’s primitive consisted of the standard rhetoric of fear, darkness, and pagan spirits. As Andre Malraux remarked, “Primitive Art” is an exploration of “the night side of man.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> In conceptions of primitivism, rites were seen as expressions of irrational fears, nightmares, and the fantastic. Frazer, Benedict, the surrealists, modern man writers, and others lent themselves to this construction of fear and death as the nature of the non-Western. (Northwest Coast artifacts, of course, make up the majority of the Native American collections of the American Museum of Natural History, a key museum for Pollock.) For many, the world of the primitive is a world of fear and intense emotion and darkness not subject to the discipline, if not the control, of reason. Colleagues Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman wrote about this in a famous letter to *The New York Times* in 1943, articulating their feelings (however, Pollock’s approach was much more developed and knowing):

If we profess a kinship to the art of primitive men, it is because the feeling they expressed have a particular pertinence today. In times of

violence, personal predilections for niceties of color and form seem irrelevant. All primitive expression reveals the constant awareness of powerful forces, the immediate presence of terror and fear, a recognition and acceptance of the brutality of the natural world as well as the eternal insecurity of life.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Human sacrifice in particular made up some of these dark rites and magic in Pollock and the works of others.

Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists did not rely on or restate anthropology's actual inquiries into the kinship, economic, and social systems, and distinctive social functions in societies that have simple technologies and a rural village-based way of life. But they did note ritual and expressive systems including dance and that is what, importantly, appealed to Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists. Thus Pollock was a prime player, as all Abstract Expressionism was, in typically imagining the primitive as emphasizing night and darkness. As Price notes, to the West

... the life of Primitives is characterized by "magic, known to us as superstition" (Christensen), "terrorist methods (and) distasteful or even injurious" ceremonies utilizing "sometimes unpleasant materials including . . . blood . . . and viscera" (Wingert), "primal feelings evoked by fear and death" (Mumford), "fear and darkness" (Clark), "ghosts and occult forces" (Epstein), the "depth of [man's] primal urges" (Muensterberger), "fear-laden emotions" (Myers), "malevolence (and the)



fear of monsters' (Rubin), "feelings of awe and dread (and the) terrifying power represented by the mask or icon" (McEvelley), "polymorphous sexuality" (Panter), "dark ritualistic undertones (and) sacrifice" (Kisselgoff), and "ancient pagan ritual" (Fellini's *Italians*).<sup>xi</sup>

As is notable here, these views blanket many other cultures, many spaces and times, and their authors cover many political persuasions. All indicate a lack of specific knowledge about specific cultures, social arrangements, and specific rites and actions knowledge of which the growth of anthropology would eventually provide. Nevertheless, Pollock knew enough about these rites and shamanism to do more than represent simplistic fear, as we have seen and will see more about.

In the belief that the primitive expresses feelings of "night," it was inevitable that the psychological drives allegedly behind them were to be seen as being fundamental and essential to human nature, buried under layers of reason and restraint. As Malinowski said, the primitive mind is the human mind found universally.<sup>xli</sup> Sometimes this psychological state is also said to be similar to that of the child, so the primitive becomes the child of mankind as well. Portrayed as the fundamental layer of mankind, the primitive and the child becomes the bearer of his essential being and consciousness. (This is a variant of the nineteenth century's biological theory which claims that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.)<sup>xlii</sup> To do the primitive is to do the "lower" and "first" of man's psyche across time and space. In this is a false belief in the

“universality” of themes, goals and expressions of the psyche and in the idea of “man” as a whole. Indeed, the concept of the primitive layer of the mind presupposes a similarity and “wholeness” of “man.” The concept of “man” or humanity thus codifies human behavior as seen by the Western mind as being archetypal of all societies. Primitivists saw man as a unified whole and not completely circumscribed by social and historical circumstances within and among cultures.

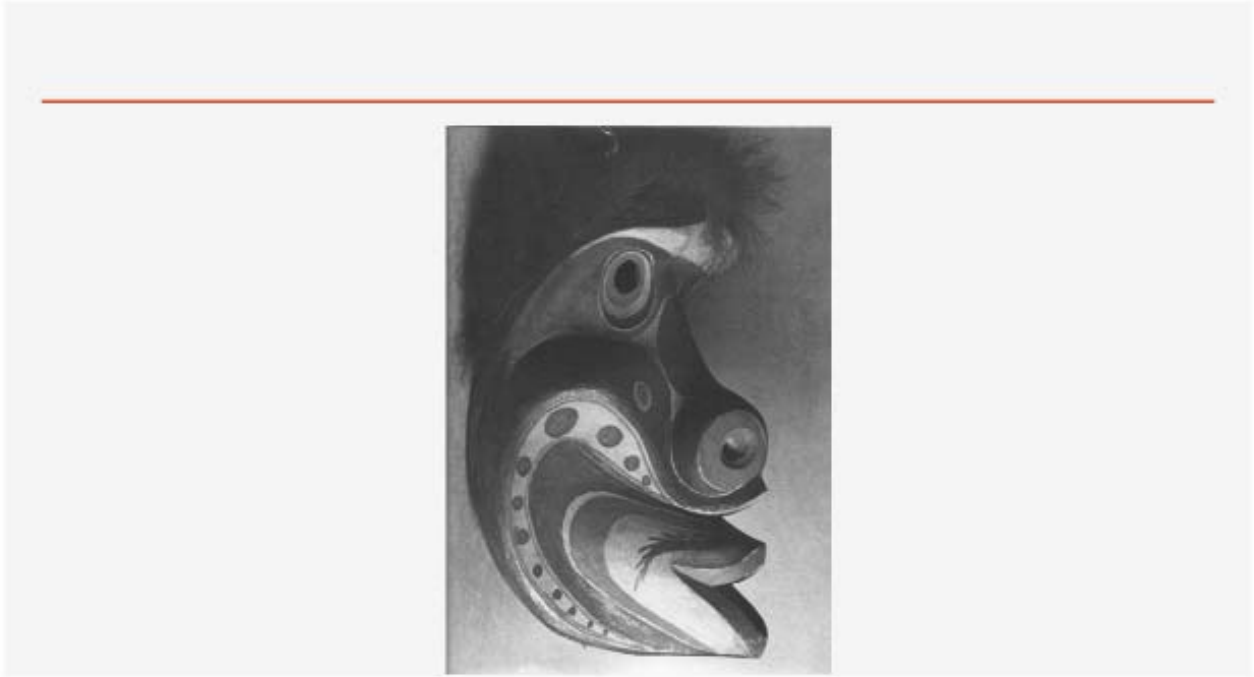
The flip side of rational man was not only primitive “darkness” but a different way of thinking -- mythic thinking. The surrealists and Jung believed that the abandonment of mythic thinking in rationalized, mass production was fatal to that whole, “man.” Pollock and most Abstract Expressionists sought to remedy the loss by revitalizing the psychic primitive. According to Jung, those who sought primitive thought sought the mythic and archaic.<sup>xliii</sup>

The concept that the mind is “primitive” in its fundamental layers and that renewal would come through that mind again transforms the idea prevalent in the 1930s regarding psychologized cultural mind into new terms. We saw Pollock emphasize the head as the site of power even in works such as [*Bald [sic] Woman with Skeleton*] in which he whitened a woman’s head in the manner of Siqueiros. With his turn toward the “primitive,” he adopted Native American forms and concepts, translating that early theme into the masked mind. *Orange Head* of ca. 1941 (fig. 11), for example, consists of a head decorated with most probably Native American markings on its face. Most

significantly, however, its rear side is a Northwest Coast Vancouver Island Kwakiutl mask which was in the Museum of Natural History in New York was exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art exhibition in 1941. In *Orange Head*, the Kwakiutl past lies in the “back” of the mind/head.



Further, the mask is in profile and thus not presented as it was seen at the museum but rather in reproduction (fig. 12).



It is as if Pollock were relying on its reproduction in the *New York Times* which he tore out and kept, rather than his own encounter with it. The catalogue for the exhibition declared that masks transform their wearers. Surrealists masked many figures, taking advantage of the idea in all cultures that masks involve a magical thinking that makes it possible to become something other. In short, the mask can transform.<sup>xliv</sup>

With mythic thinking, ritual symbols and ideas from Native American, particularly Northwest Coast and pueblo, art and cultures, reflect a now evident interest of Pollock's to which I have alluded -- shamanism. The key agent of mythic thinking for artists from the interwar period and beyond was the seer or shaman.

The seer/shaman is the agent who sees behind things,<sup>xlv</sup> an intermediary between the visible and invisible realms, the “normal” and fantastic (to the West). He or she is priest, chief, cosmologist, psychologist, and healer, in other words, a visionary. He or she maps the world and makes connections between its different realms. He acquires his knowledge through direct experience not book learning. In the world, he attains the realities of the beyond through the portal of the psyche. He is more than a visionary, however; he is a marker at and of key life events such as birth, puberty and death -- and a guardian of life, particularly in its forms of fertility: “In this capacity, the shaman mediates the bio-forces of the world, maintaining harmony and balance between species and between males and females, thereby assuring the replenish of life-forms that inhabit the waters, land, and sky . . . [Further,] art plays a pivotal role in shamanism. Shamanic art is cultural power used to define and manipulate the shamanic cosmos. It reflects shamanic perspectives, points of reference, values, and beliefs, as these are encoded in line, form, symbol, motif, composition, myth and cosmology.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

Jack Rushing and Ellen Landau have commented upon Pollock’s interest that was first articulated by his late friend, Fritz Bultman.<sup>xlvii</sup> Several other Abstract Expressionists were interested in shamanism, for example, Clyfford Still, whose use of the shaman persona I have written of elsewhere.<sup>xlviii</sup> Still’s work evidences power, celestial journeys, immersion in fire, x-ray skeletonization, growth upward or rebirth from “boneseed,” and bird spirit helpers. The shaman is a powerful Native American figure with special insight

into “sicknesses” and troubles and thus appropriate for the needs of Pollock and his personal and world views. He virtually alone can communicate with the tribe’s totemic spirits and animals, perform dangerous rituals, and heal the sick. In other words, he has special powers and insight. He attains his powers through dreams, or initiation into such traditional techniques as the functioning of the spirits, the clan’s mythology, and its secret language.<sup>xlix</sup> The shaman-genius is a creative artist who discovers deeper realities of the psychic realm of dreams, myth, hallucination, and automatic writing.<sup>1</sup>

The shaman sees a world of total aliveness, in all parts personal, in all parts sentient, an animism that the shaman uses in the forms of its powers. These powers can be used for renewal and “for bringing into the profane world the transformational powers of sacred time and space.”<sup>li</sup> The shaman self-orchestrates a continuum of consciousness resulting in altered states. He also initiates dissociation and disintegration as well as the procedures for consciously entering into “chaos”:

Living at his edges, standing outside and beyond himself, the shaman experiences ecstasy as a condition of his mastery, although the ordeals and voyages into shadow worlds bring with it a harrowing of the soul that few but the shaman could endure. In the shamanic journey, psyche and cosmos gain access to each other; the shaman becomes the channel for creatures and spirits, for the animates of nature and the designates of gods.<sup>lii</sup>

Pollock may have established his particular familiarity with shamanism from the pages of the Bureau's publications. In one article in the 1881 *Annual Report* that Pollock owned, shamanism is described as the ability to have special dreams and powers, to see invisible supernatural forces (c.f. Levy-Bruhl) and their human and animal forms, to journey to the land of the dead, to recall the shades of dead animals and people, and to teach the rites for festivals.<sup>liii</sup> The shaman is also involved with mythic moon women, changes in weather, fertility, totemic metamorphoses of humans into animals and vice versa, and natural phenomena. This mythic mode of thinking and the belief system of legend, custom, myth, and magic are also described, as is the shaman's powers with moon and sun, wind, rain, and human emotion. For someone attuned to psychic archaism, and for his personal and cultural attachment to the seer personality, shamanism was thus a particularly valuable persona. Like most Abstract Expressionists, Pollock examined other cultures as a way of learning to heal and to empower his world and shamanism's magical creativity and transformation were something to emulate and desire for a troubled self and a bankrupt and spiritually exhausted culture. In this search for psychic and emotional depth to be found in shamanism, Pollock echoed the modern tradition. Modernists from Kandinsky and Klee and to even Nancy Graves and Joseph Beuys, who spoke of the sympathy and spiritual relationship with the primitive arising because of the "nightmare of materialism" which had turned modern life into an empty

material quest. Alienation of life from the “source” is a constant of the twentieth century.

A form of shamanism as known by Pollock, his Russian friend John Graham, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and Still can be seen in a drawing of a Native American Ojibwa Lodge in which a shaman ceremony was being held, and it indicated one of his or her capacities (shamans can be women in a number of cultures): tent shaking. From Henry R. Schoolcraft’s famous work of 1853, *Information Respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, the drawing consists of a ritually-appearing snake, a horned man, a dog-like animal, a bird, and a sun/moon duality.<sup>liv</sup> (Still was called an “Earth Shaker” by a close friend and he included several references and images to shamanist ritualism in his work).<sup>lv</sup> The sun and moon are also combined with perhaps a female head and bull horns in another shaman composite, *Mask*, of 1938-41 (fig. 13),





suggesting sacred space while works such as *Birth*, *Reflections of the Big Dipper*, *Comet* and others represent this cosmic fertility, as we shall see.

In traditional interpretations of Pollock's figures, they are seen as surrealist hybrids, reflective of surrealist disjunctiveness and lack of wholeness, suggesting that the mere irrationality of the figures befit forms allegedly generated from the unconscious. Yet mythic thinking and the shamanist ceremonies of psychic primitivism were more than simplistically anti-rationalistic in the sense of they did not prioritize analytic science or logic as the West had done. Rather than just irrationality in a logical/illogical binary, Pollock's figures consist of spiritual or "ritual" symbols, potentialities, and forces in miniature and simple anatomical accuracy. They are thus essentially metaphors and even allegories, combining symbols with the anatomical expression of their implicit meanings. In shamanic cultures, one of

their most critical aspects is the “activation of the capacity for inner imageries and visions, in other words, altered states so vivified that they bolster ‘normal’ perception and bodily feeling.”<sup>lvi</sup>

Romare Bearden, an African-American artist from the same period who was also interested in rituals, later articulated the very nature of ritual to the generation of the 1930s and 1940s, and how it was confused with, but different from, the mere “irrational.” In a discussion of the activities of the Obeah, a tribal ritual group in the Caribbean that he painted, Bearden noted:

This is something entirely out of our rational experience. Maybe way back in our unconscious that we’ve inherited, as Jung says, there are things that are there. Maybe things we’re afraid of! But there it is . . . Say an African puts on a mask of a tiger, or something like that. He assumes that power. And by assuming that power (and by becoming as fierce as the lion or tiger), he then is protected from the terrors of the universe, for with that extra power, he can overcome his adversaries . . . And so the Obeah has transformed herself into this masklike figure to be commanding . . . to have power which they believe over the occult; the ability to turn back certain forces of nature, to stop illnesses. . . . They have power over events amounting, they feel, to godlike control. So they transformed themselves into a way of life which they feel gives them this extra power, you see, the mask. They become different persons, (a transformation) that starts early in their lives, by initiations; dealing with ancient powers; living

elementally, with nature. . . . I think in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, that is what he sees: these forces around him, these dark irrational forces, to the Western mind. But to the witch doctor, he is just going about his normal way . . . all of these rituals that point to other forces, or ways of looking at the world that we have now for the most part rejected. But they are forces that are still in a certain sense inchoate within us.<sup>lvii</sup>

For Bearden, “primitive” figures represented powers, and not mere Eurocentric and, to a certain extent, surrealist irrationality. (Primitivizing surrealists such as Max Ernst, too, sought more than the defeat of French “reason,” suggesting that the mere irrationality of the figures befit forms allegedly generated from the unconscious.) Ritual thus is part of a system of primitive magic that controls and directs nature and human life. Such a belief is pure Frazerian, tying together his view of the evolutionary origins of man in magical effects directed by ritual for the betterment and improvement of the tribe. Magic was to be eventually superseded by religion and then by science for Frazer, who, of course, was a nineteenth century man.

We have already seen several paintings of shaman ceremonies. All of Pollock’s work from this time on, for example, “separates” him from the quotidian; that is, he departs from the world of ordinary waking consciousness and ventures to the inner psychological regions associated with the life cycle – the “living” and the “dying.” This takes the form barely revealed to the ordinary individual: spontaneous ecstasy, dreams crying for a vision, abduction by a

demon-monster, incorporation by a chthonic deity, sickness, madness, trials, and ordeals.<sup>lviii</sup> Confronting the forces of dismemberment and his own “death” was the ultimate subject of many of Pollock’s works from 1938 to 1941. The fact that the figures are nude is part of their ritual social leveling, cleansing, and rebirthing. So too was the shamanist “trial by fire” of [*Bald [sic] Woman with Skeleton*] and [*Composition with Ritual Scene*] in front of the “community.” In these works, Pollock indicated his initiation into the realm of “chaos” in which he seeks contact with and control over spirits and forces inaccessible to quotidian life and the normal person. The shaman’s tapping into power allows for the reversal of his “death” and some control over the awesome forces of the “*mysterium*” in these works. Some peoples believe that the call to shamanism, if refused or thwarted, can lead to death, something Still directly noted by stating that his works were about “life and death.”<sup>lix</sup> Fear and death amplify the intensity of the scenes Pollock and Still painted.

Accounts of the shaman’s inner journey are those of turmoil and distress. These accounts condense personal symbolism through a mythological text that encompasses the wider human experience. Through creative expression, the human condition is elevated, mythologized, and, at last, collectively understood. A transpersonal language emerges recounting the most intense psychic details. Claude Levi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell stress the integrative aspect of the language of myths. Mythological conceptions form an explanatory system which give significance and direction to human suffering. The seemingly irrational is actually ordered

although dualistic, that is, paradoxical. The shamanist symbol of fire, for example, both destroys and creates at the same time. The socially pathological become the stuff of sacred social drama. The extraordinary dangers portrayed by the shaman in his psycho-physiological adventure become at first bearable and then ultimately heroic.

In the process of becoming a shaman, the initiate separates from the ordinary, undergoes trials, sacrifice, and even self-sacrifice or “dismemberment” in his “sickness.” Unafraid, the shaman experiences “death” in encounters with evil spirits often in forms of snakes, horses with men’s heads, and burning fires, according to the descriptions of a shaman of the Yarlalde tribe of Australia, in order to gain control of the elements and the world of the untamed and uncontrollable. The withdrawal into solitude through sickness opens the way for the inner initiation to take place. In this case, myth evolves as a language and as a vision from the diseased body-mind.<sup>lx</sup>

However, not all of Pollock’s work is purely shamanist. He uses other ritual references, particularly to those of Southwest sand painting. Sand painting is a curing rite intended to restore a patient to “harmony” after distress and illness, both physical and mental. Sand paintings are symbolic representations of Southwest mythologies. Although Navaho sand painting is the most elaborated, most groups of the Southwest use it. Indeed, these groups or tribes borrow from each other’s ceremonials and share many legends and myths. In keeping with making composites, however, Pollock mixed sand

painting with shamanist mythologizing. In certain ways, Indian ritual is similar to the rites of psychoanalysis and the culture of therapy, and it is similar to the Grail quest, that famous symbolism and early archaizing classicism that influenced Eliot and thus others. And it similar to Campbell's influential late monomyth that summaries the process.

However personal the shamanist journey is, he has a social rather than a personal reason for opening the psyche, as he or she is concerned with the community and its well-being; sacred action, then, is directed towards the creation of order out of chaos. Actually, rather than "community" which implies social structures, differentiation, functions, and status, Pollock's work addresses what Victor Turner has famously called "communitas." That is, after "liminal" events in which a period or group engages in change which breaks down structure, communitas is sought. Communitas is spontaneous, immediate and concrete, representing "the 'quick' of human interrelatedness."<sup>lxi</sup> Turner argues that it has no fixed structure and is open-ended, much like Bergson's "open morality," his "élan vital." For Turner, communitas generates metaphors and parodies art and religion, not legal and political structures. Communitas does not emerge from the release of instinct from cultural constraint (the Freudian approach) but from volition and "memory." Liminality and communitas give rise to myths, rituals, and symbolic magico-religious systems that "reclassify" "reality and man's relationship to society, nature and culture." Eventually liminality (which is likened to death, darkness, and the wilderness of self)<sup>lxii</sup> and communitas reenter society, stabilizing and

establishing themselves and then becoming structures (in modernity even “bureaucratic” and “mass”) against which the new marginal and liminal protest in a never ending cycle.<sup>lxiii</sup> The thirties, Pollock himself, and his use of “primitivism,” in whatever form, are all expressions of these “rites of passage.” As a personality, he was inherently separate and marginal -- the perfect conditions for attaining ritual liminality.

Power from tribal forces in ritual thus was what Pollock (and Still and Bearden) saw and sought in the irrational of the unconscious, not the modernist generalization of largely uninterpretable, irrational, anxious, unconscious, personal fantasies for their own sake or for the sake of expressing personal anguish alone. The modern Freudian psychological approach describes these events as mostly pathological but Jung’s psychology and that of ritual shamanism does not. These are two related yet ultimately different conceptions of the unconscious and it is the confusion therein that has complicated the study of Pollock. Further, Pollock’s idea of ritual is not just any ritual but a general one: those of the Native Americans. As Kadish noted, the idea that Native American art represented the unconscious was “*absolutely a widely-held idea in the 1940s.*”<sup>lxiv</sup> *The unconscious was Native American ritual, and vice versa. Ritual and shamanism are the terms of Pollock’s idea of the unconscious.*

And what was that power in ritual that Pollock and other so-called primitivists sought? It was transformative or “creative” power. The fundamental definition of the new and creative for Pollock and many of his generation was

what his major mentor, John Graham, wrote. Pollock met Graham in the late 1930s, and it was under his strong influence, replacing that of Thomas Hart Benton and Jose Clemente Orozco, that he matured. It was he who led Pollock to the nexus of the unconscious/primitive/modern. As is well known, Graham was extremely sophisticated about modern art and in touch with its key ideas. Pollock, who had read Graham's famous article "Primitive Art and Picasso" (1937),<sup>lxv</sup> immediately sought Graham out and became a close friend. Years later, when asked who best understood his work, his answer was neither Harold Rosenberg nor Clement Greenberg, as art history has had it, but "John Graham."<sup>lxvi</sup>

Graham's article on Picasso argued that the quintessential modern artist was innovative because he drew on a unique resource -- the unconscious and its contents -- in other words, the individual and collective wisdom of the past. Significantly, he defined these in Jungian terms as the "primitive" past of humankind found in non-Western cultures and not the 1950s of the unconscious as the everyday autobiographical, pathological, or site of spontaneous improvisation. In his book dating from the late 1930s, *Systems and Dialectics of Art*, to which Graham was to add Pollock's name as a leading American artist, Graham expressed his notion of modern creativity in the following words:

Creation is the production of new authentic values by delving into the memories of immemorial past and expressing them in terms of



pure form (in space and matter) in order to project them into the clarities of the future. Creative images are circumscribed by the ability to evoke the experiences of primordial past, by physical limitations, and the extent of one's consciousness.<sup>lxvii</sup>

Creation for the future through “memories” of the past is Graham's definition of creative art and life. This conception was to be further reinforced by the nascent American idea of automatism or drawing from the unconscious as described by the artist Edward Renouf in 1942. New creativity for Graham, for Pollock, and for others of his generation thus suggested the continued power and vitality of the past and of tradition. It was close to what was described as “living tradition” at the “Indian Art of the United States” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. The flight from civilization had led “back” to a mythic, not historical time, in Clifford's words. It is “archaeological,”<sup>lxviii</sup> although at the “Indian Art of the United States” exhibition at MoMA in 1941, there was recognition of a “living tradition.”

Creating the future by renewing the past was, ultimately, a traditional idea that had been reborn in 1930s America and Mexico through which was sought “a ground to stand on.” In this way, at that time constructing something new meant (without automatism and the unconscious) digging out, reconstructing, and revivifying the successful heritage and traditions of other generations, for those traditions had worked as opposed to those of today (the Depression era of the 1930s). For Pollock, it would mean “archeologically” digging out the

traditions and powers of other peoples, particularly Native Americans who represented in their non-technological, anti-industrial, and anti-modern way a past he considered exemplary. While not very Native American, the painting *Something of the Past* of 1946 makes clear the importance of the past for Pollock and for the interwar generation.

Other Abstract Expressionists used other examples, both Western and non-Western, to repudiate mass, rational modernity. Pollock would create his future and that of his time by recreating and emulating the powers of other cultures and times. As Paul Klee noted, “the more readily he can extend his view from the present to the past, the more deeply he is impressed by the one essential image of creation itself, as Genesis . . . stretching from past to the future. Genesis’s eternal!”<sup>lxix</sup>

Pollock’s images define a genesis that is not really obscure and irrational. But what is being generated? Not thirties materialism and not thirties transformative science but what he always was interested in and what he and the world needed more than ever -- the new spiritual that has characterized much of modern times from Theosophy and Krishnamurti to Symbolism to the séance craze of World War One to Eliot’s Fisher King and Upanishads to surrealism as well. Mass man would be “defeated” by the modern spiritual because he lacks spiritual grounding.

Pollock’s primitivism relates to that of his generation in terms of significant knowledge and selected emphases such as shamanism, ritual

symbol, and the sacred. His primitivism joined with conceptions of the mid-century from the Mexicans to the “Anglo-Saxons” of Pound, Eliot and Joyce and to surrealism, modern man and others from which he could and did select. His thought is typical of the culture of the day and by no means merely from the irrational unconscious itself. Pollock’s art is thus a cultural art with cultural solutions for himself and his peers.

Certainly, Pollock’s work is “irrational” but that is a negative way of stating a positive. While twentieth century urbanism sought to center it, America has long had a spiritual tradition that began with the Puritans and has long underlay the culture. It underlies the Northern Romantic tradition noted by art historian Robert Rosenblum. From the late eighteenth century onward, the Northern Romantic Tradition extended from Northern Europe to America and consisted of a searching and form of spiritual questing typical of the North of Europe, including America.

For the Northern Romantic Tradition a great invention of the twentieth century was the archaic. It was the touchstone of modern culture and its spiritual quests echoed how *Laocoon* was for Michelangelo and many others. In one way, pre-Socratic Heraclitus meant more to the first half of the twentieth century than Plato, and as such that was a truly radical redoing of the West. Twentieth century artists looked back to a deeper past in many ways than ever before and it was thus natural that some version of that deep past would be created. They, for example, Rothko as well, even referred to geologic time. The

primal stages of formation were the vogue of the modern in the first half of the twentieth century. To be sure, we cannot capture the real “archaic” but we could have a greater sense of it than ever before because we were the first to see it.

Pollock’s “primitive,” as with much of the modern’s “primitive,” was not simply failed anthropological analysis, then. Before we condemn him, one must remember that most artists are not professional anthropologists, that knowledge takes time, and that it takes trial and error. One must remember that much of the primitivist conception was also presented by professionals and that the American Museum of Natural History still uses labels to this day about “magic” and “rites” and shamanism in its North West Coast display cases that Pollock studied assiduously. One cannot and should not expect artists to be scholastic anthropologists. And indeed, there was often so much that even professionals could not know. For example, within cultures there are many divisions, so not all members can know what other members or societies are doing and how their artifacts or rituals were or are used. Furthermore, while secret societies do exist, knowledge is not necessarily always passed on from one generation to another. Things simply are lost. To expect artists to “know” what is truly the culture of non-Western peoples is not possible. No one does. Pollock, then, like most modern artists, could never overcome the limitations inherent in knowing the “Other,” whether man, woman, time and space, or culture. His understandings will never overcome his cultural and psychological

conditioning. He has his restraints and his cultural beliefs just as any human or cultural product does.

Pollock's "primitive" was a personal and cultural vision quest. It was a part of the first half of the century's search for revitalization, for the revivification of the civilization's youth, that is, the primal. It was a quest for the formative stages of culture. It was a quest for reawakening and reformation. For the twentieth century, the modern had to become the archaic again, first seen as Lascaux and Altamira in the twentieth century. The path to the new was the old in the cycle highlighted by Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* in which the journey of civilization ends up right back at the beginning. In the modern world, where the human spirit has faltered and lost its way, plunged itself into hell and death, in Davenport's words the "ungrowing,"<sup>lxx</sup> a culture of Persephone became the way out -- not the upward linear of the nineteenth but the renewal of the better part of the cycle of life. The regeneration of the world was a process of reawakening the archaic. It coincided with the process of the influential culture of women of Molly Bloom and Anna Livia Plurabelle and Pollock's women, symbols of Demeter and Persephone. The regeneration of the spirit was a female process. The modern is the archaic and the archaic is the way to recover beginnings and first energies. Pollock's subjects were clothed as psychological obsessions.

Of course, none of this is politically correct today, from “primitivism” to the natural and regenerative archetype of women, but these fictions discussed above join the other fictions discussed earlier. Art is one fiction among many.

To be sure, Pollock’s ideas contributed to the modern recognition of other cultures, to a kind of cultural internationalism, a decentering of the human species, an anti-modern respect for the past, an expansion of consciousness, and an affirmation of change. These are all positive ideals, and this early twentieth century idealism gave rise to internationalism, environmentalism, youth movements and liberalism, even eventually the League of Nations. All in all, like most things, his thought was a mixed bag. Nevertheless, it emphasized creative force as a means to defeat the “ungrowing” of himself and humanity.

Pollock’s art is about fortitude and resourcefulness in a vocabulary of drama, struggle and heroic endeavor. It also masks his own anxieties, uncertainties, and conflicts. With the world around him also engaged in heroic endeavors, Pollock sought to empower himself, resolve his and other’s difficulties, and create new possibilities that had been denied by Western history. Thus with his troubled biography, Pollock aligned himself with the tropes of cultural struggle and the renewal of his day.+



## *Illustrations*

Fig. 1. Jean Arp, *Growth*, 1938/60. Art Institute of Chicago. White Marble, 43 x 17 ½ x 11 in. Grant J. Pick Purchase Fund, 1965.

Fig. 2. *Man, Bull, Bird*, 1938-41. Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 in. Private Collection, Paris.

Fig. 3. Inuit Carving, *Man, Bear*, Smithsonian Institution, *Eighteenth Annual Report*, Bureau of Ethnology (1896-7)\

Fig. 4. *Wounded Animal*, 1943. Oil and plaster on canvas, 38 x 30 in. Location Unknown.

Fig. 5. Franz Boas, *Primitive Art*, (New York: Dover) 1955 (1927) fig. 238.

Fig. 6. *Bird*, 1938-41, oil and sand on canvas, 27 ¾ x 24 ¼ in., The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Lee Krasner.



## Endnotes

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i Smith was well-known for his anti-capitalist *Medals of Dishonor* of the late 1930s. According to Clement Greenberg, he was probably a “communist” although years later, when I spoke to Greenberg in the 1990s, he was still

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cautious in admitting that. Smith never joined the Communist Party of the United States but his wife Dorothy Dehner may have done so. Motherwell, of course, praised the involvement of many in the Spanish Civil War because it reflected his epicurean liberal idealism. However, he dismissed the fight of the Second World War as “more like a sequence in the continuing European drama of forming empires,” joining Schapiro and others in the abject failure to live in the real world and overcome ideology. See Motherwell, conversation with E.A. Carmean, October 28, 1977, cited in Carmean “Elegies to the Spanish Republic” in Carmean and Eliza Rathbone, *American Art at Mid-Century* (Washington: The National Gallery of Art, 1978), 100.

In the fall of 1939, John Dewey, William Carlos Williams, Meyer Schapiro and others wrote in the *Partisan Review* that “the last war showed only too clearly that we can have no faith in imperialist crusades to bring freedom to any people. Our entry into the war, under the slogan of ‘Stop Hitler!’ would actually result in the immediate introduction of totalitarianism over here. . . . The American masses can best help [the German people] by fighting at home to keep their own liberties.” Far too many intellectuals left the fighting to those “masses.”

ii The humanism of Abstract Expressionism shared feelings with mountain women, businessmen, priests and so many others. See Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

iii Beginning with the American Civil War and climaxing with World War One, the industrial suppression of the individual and the triumph of the machine were recognized. Between 1918 and 1939, one can say that it was not only the Age of Machines but the Age of Rationalization with Henry Ford’s awesome and frightening assembly line serving as the symbol of the times. Specialization and ideals of mass production with strict order and control in which the individual was anonymous and invisible if not disposable were the ideals that brought resistance and ridicule from anti-business culture such as surrealism to Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*.

iv See previous chapter.

v Marianna Torgovick, *Gone Primitive Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 249-50, note 2.

vi Ibid.

vii Sidra Stich, *Anxious Visions: Surrealist Art* (Berkeley: University Art Museum and New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), 11.

viii Ibid., 11-15.

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<sup>ix</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>x</sup> See Bataille in Ibid., 42, note 22.

<sup>xi</sup> Carolyn Lanchner, "Andre Masson: Origins and Development," in Lanchner and William Rubin, *Andre Masson* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 85-86.

<sup>xii</sup> Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 164-65.

<sup>xiii</sup> Edward Renouf, "On Certain Functions of Modern Painting," *Dyn* 2 (July/August 1942), 22.

<sup>xiv</sup> See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 93.

<sup>xv</sup> See James Clyfford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 117-151.

<sup>xvi</sup> Guy Davenport, "The Symbol of the Archaic," *The Geography of the Imagination* (Boston: NonPareil Books/ David R. Godine, 1997), 20.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., *in passim*.

<sup>xviii</sup> For Pollock's wealth of knowledge of Indian art and culture, see W. Jackson Rushing, "Ritual and Myth: Native American Culture and Abstract Expressionism," in Maurice Tuchman *The Spiritual in Art*, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1985), 273 -295. See also W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant Garde* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

<sup>xix</sup> Quoted in Stephen Polcari, "Reuben Kadish Oral History Interview," transcript, April 15, 1992, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, 11.

<sup>xx</sup> See Stephen Polcari, Interview with Harold Lehman, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art (Summer 1996-7), transcript, 21.

<sup>xxi</sup> Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989), 281.

<sup>xxii</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

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xxiii See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 389, note 12.

xxiv Quoted by Stanley Kunitz, renowned poet and Rothko's close friend, personal communication, March 21, 1978.

xxv See Donald E. Gordon, "Pollock's *Bird*, or 'How Jung Did Not Offer Much Help in Myth-Making,'" *Art in America* 68 (October 1980): 53, n. 50.

xxvi Kadish, in Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1985), 88.

xxvii Cited in Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 196.

xxviii *Eighteenth Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology, 346.

xxix Joan Halifax, *Shaman the Wounded Healer*, (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1982), 73.

xxx See Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1928; Dover reprint, 1955), 233, fig. 238.

xxxi Stich, "Anxious Visions," 44.

xxxii Ibid, 62.

xxxiii Halifax, *Shaman*, 86.

xxxiv Ibid., 87. See also Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism* Bollingen Series 76 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), *in passim*.

xxxv The figure is elongated and that may be result of other influences, such as Inuit masks exhibited at the American Museum of Natural History; the catalogue of the "Indian Art of the United States," 31; and Dall, "On Masks" *Third Annual Report* (1884) Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology. See also Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 183.

xxxvi See Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001),

xxxvii See Stephen Polcari, "Pollock and America, Too," in Joan Marter ed. *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007: 182-195.

xxxviii Quoted in Douglas Newton, *Masterpieces of Primitive Art*, 1978, cited in Ibid., 37.

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xxxix Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko with Barnett Newman, letter to Edward Alden Jewell, *The New York Times*, June 7, 1943, on file at the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation Archive.

xl Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 55.

xli Cited in Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive. Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*, 8.

xlili See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 93.

xliv See Carl G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of His Soul*.

xlv Stich, *Anxious Visions*, 43.

xlv For a discussion of the widespread interest in the seer, magus, magician, and the shaman of the period, see Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 96.

xlvi Armand J. Labbe, *Guardians of the Life Stream* (Bowers Museum of Cultural Art: Cultural Arts Press, 1995), 69-70.

xlvi William Jackson Rushing, "The Influence of American Indian Art on Jackson Pollock and the Early New York School," (Master's thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1984), 37. Rushing wrote that Pollock spoke of shamanism with Bultman and was aware of the "whole shamanistic dream culture of Indians." See also Ellen Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abrams, 1989), 58.

xlvi See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 91-116.

xlvi Eliade, *Shamanism*, 18.

<sup>1</sup> Clyfford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 147.

li Jean Houston, "The Mind and Soul of the Shaman," foreword to *Shamanism: An Expanded View of Reality*, ed. Shirley Nicholson (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books/Theosophical Publishing House), 1987, vii.

lii Ibid., viii.

lii *First Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology (1879-80).

liv Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Information Respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, Bureau of Indian Affairs, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1853) vol. 5, part I, 428.

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- <sup>lv</sup> See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 93-110.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Houston, "The Mind and Soul of the Shaman," foreword to *Shamanism: An Expanded View of Reality*, vii-viii.
- <sup>lvii</sup> Romare Bearden, quoted in Myron Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden: His Life and Art* (New York: Abrams, 1990), 244-248.
- <sup>lviii</sup> Halifax, *Shaman*, 72.
- <sup>lix</sup> Ibid., 10-14. For Still, see Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 116 and note 80.
- <sup>lx</sup> Halifax, *Shaman*, 19-21
- <sup>lxi</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969), 127.
- <sup>lxii</sup> Ibid., 95.
- <sup>lxiii</sup> Ibid., 125-130.
- <sup>lxiv</sup> Kadish, personal communication in Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avante-Garde*, 229, n. 35.
- <sup>lxv</sup> John Graham, "Primitive Art and Picasso," *Magazine of Art* 30 (April 1937).
- <sup>lxvi</sup> Pollock, quoted by Nicolas Carrone in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, 183.
- <sup>lxvii</sup> *John Graham's Systems and Dialectics of Art*, ed. and introd. by Marcia Epstein Allentuck (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1971), 102-3.
- <sup>lxviii</sup> Clyfford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 207.
- <sup>lxix</sup> In Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 153.
- <sup>lxx</sup> Davenport, *The Symbol of the Archaic*, 25.

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## **Growing Vision**

Jackson Pollock's "abstractions" fulfilled streams of American thought, experience, and the art of the 1930s and 1940s. As it is an expression of the larger concerns of the modernity of his time, his work is a fusion of those two decades and the culmination of many visions. Pollock's webs combine the impulse toward and against modernity as it was then conceived. Imbued with conflicts of regionalist, American Scene, and to an extent American Mexican and Jungian archaism warring with both urban industrial modernization and nineteenth century traditionalism, many cultures and conceptions in American and European life sought cultural and personal renewal in varying ways, more urgently to find a way out of the catastrophe of seemingly mass-induced continuous war. Indeed, Pollock renewed himself as a creative dynamic personality bordering on but not losing control over such impulses within. The result was a most dramatic presentation of "riding" the forces considered significant in his era through his abstractions. Pollock's art represents his aesthetic and conceptual mode of growing. This growth took place through the era's search for a new culture and its new and adjusted inner personality, now called the psyche. For Pollock, this search mediated between the past and present, between the individual and the group, and between creativity and dislocation. Pollock's "new" (because archaic) psyche/personality provided for his and his culture's future as it countered the rootless, uncreative,



regimented, and destructive personality and history of modern “Mass Society” and “Mass Man” unleashed in contemporary life.

As with the art of all Abstract Expressionists, Pollock’s “abstract” work was a new way to express his complete, lifetime ideas. In other words, *it was not a complete break with his previous work -- a transformation -- but a new variant and development* in idea, expression and form. One does not have to look only to the late 1940s for an immediate explanation of his paintings as though they were simply topical works suddenly conceived and begun in the new postwar conceptual fashion such as existential alienation and a sense of “freedom for” rather than “against life” which the 1950s precipitated. Instead of the American fifties romance of bohemian and social squalor and the exclusive importance of that decade’s issues, the “abstractions” express Pollock’s deep sociality -- his deep, long-standing concerns for his future and that of his world which included the concerns of his time but did not originate with him. His new paintings compressed and merged idea, method, form, and history so well that Pollock’s sociality and concerns -- his subject matter and that of many of his time -- are barely recognizable in his abstractions. Inspired by the famous photographs and films of Hans Namuth and their initial critical interpretations, the view that Pollock simply began with a blank canvas and covered it with irrational, subjective impulses without structure (the famous idea of “when I am in my paintings . . .”) or then, as interpreted in the sixties, a purely European modernist order, is misleading. *Pollock’s “abstractions” are a personal mass society critique that dispensed with some -- but by no means all --*

*of the symbolic imagery of his earlier work, yet emerged from his life-long ideational foundation.* The “abstractions” both contrast with and clarify his previous work.

In these new paintings, Pollock continued to adhere to a common critique of his culture -- the idea that the personality and psyche as well as common society itself comprised of modern mass men was characterized by mediocre conformity, by vulgar sensibility, by rootless living, by tendencies toward barbarism, and by the absence of a past. Because mass man allegedly lacked a substantiated self and community and opposed culture both old and new, widespread mass society criticism asserted the need to newly reaffirm a creative culture and the creative self as a social good in and of itself. In Pollock's time of threatening industrial massification and the fulfillment of those threats in World War II, as evinced by fascism and communism, a new, harmonious, and healthy man thus needed to find a creative culture and selfhood that neutralized unharnessed irrationality. As with many intellectuals of his generation, Pollock rejected what contemporary society thought to be a process of the fragmentation as well as “undifferentiated homogeneity” that were the result of modernization. As with other times in twentieth century history, Pollock applied the commonplace thought of his day to confront that which his generation believed to be terminated in authoritarian politics and its attendant oppressions and cataclysms. To this end, Pollock did the body as newly important, did the gendered other as newly important, and did the “primitive” as important and alternatively different. So was Pollock a good or

bad person in his thinking? It is not that easy to decide. Pollock's project sought take charge of the relentless metamorphoses of modern life, imbue them with depth and substance, and reorganize and transform them as the inner rhythms of a new yet old and individual and group culture of creativity and spiritual life.

Pollock's life was one of turmoil for which he sought help in psychology. Similarly, until the mid-century modern society was thought to be in a crisis of consciousness as well as of socio-political change. Pollock combined these crises in his mind and his subjective psychological difficulties became a form of creative illness that forced him to confront and counter both his own difficulties and those of his contemporary socio-cultural psychology and its historical effects. That is, his micro social psyche engaged with and resolved the macro social of history and culture. Pollock's introspection reconceived and reorganized the formerly dislocated individual self, his waning, if not devastated, culture and his subjective consciousness as the psyche of his world. As the inner life of "man" became his subject and that of his generation, as with his Abstract Expressionist colleagues, indeed, most of his entire generation, Pollock's inner life took on a prophetic role as a representation of change.

As such, Pollock sought to eliminate that which limited if not completely harmed his and humanity's active strivings. He thus sought to take command of the contemporary "hieroglyph of motion" which originated in the 1930s to apply it to his understanding of his and his culture's needs. Resistant to the

internalizations that caused his psychological distress, he sought to balance and integrate his inner worlds anew, thus sharing a community with the past and future within and not simply take up the socially conventional and instrumentally regimented or oppressive exterior present. Pollock sought a way beyond the Charybdis of the Depression and the world wars and the Scylla of destructive industrial modernism and its subsequent machine aesthetic to cultivate and offer a solution to true “irrationality,” that of the masses, which was feared in the late 1930s as an integral part of the dilemma. He tried to balance, integrate and create a new spiritual self that actually would be substantial and self-determined. Pollock would thus be the *psychological man* of the newly integrated consciousness of a new self and society, and of rationalist modernity and traditional and collective representations of the spiritual life that originated in the past. What has long been regarded as Pollock’s simply personal neurosis was to him neurosis on a world scale that he situated within the unconscious. His new modern psychological man would fill emptiness, parry doubt, establish satisfactory values, and counter the suffocating conventionality of modernity. And it would renew and revivify man rent asunder by the First World War and the fifty million dead of the Second. Pollock and the new psychological inwardness of this generation would demonstrate an exemplary new consciousness that would reconstitute the world as dynamic and creative, and not, despite appearances, truly destructive, chaotic and irrational. (This is not to say that Pollock fully understood the full verbal implications of his concepts and forms. Rather, he had glimpses of them

or intuited them and their direction, as I argue. Pollock was not a literary, verbal intellectual but rather, as noted before, an *au courant* or literate man shaped by the interwar period and a war-time mentality).

Pollock's so-called abstractions realized the commonplace historical and cultural ideas of many of the intellectuals of his time in forms which fused European and American idealisms. The result was something new that attracted attention from its very beginnings, even if explanations about it have widely varied. Pollock's main achievement was that he invented original modernist forms that addressed and resolved conflicts of inwardness, including his own. Some of the politics of that time regarding political intellectuals -- in terms of class struggle, forms of government, and differences in foreign policy and economic systems -- mattered little to Pollock, the psychologically poetic artist. It is no wonder that the term "human condition," which was so popular in the forties and fifties, largely disappeared in the renewal of the political era of the sixties. And it is no wonder that the radical, postmodern politicized intellectuals of today have scorned modern art, including Pollock and Abstract Expressionism, for not being socio-politically critical on their terms since they rebirthed thirties' politics. But ultimately he was critical and hopeful in his own terms, as we shall see, as a powerful and formative figure in American life.

Pollock represented that hope first in his symbolic work of the late 1930s and early 1940s and then in the seemingly inevitable dynamic forces of the transitional *Shimmering Substance* and *Eyes in the Heat* of 1946. This

became all the more notable when he developed his signature form and technique, the linear “abstractions.” However, this does not seem as simple as it once did. Indeed, it may seem not possible at all but it is -- the rooting of the human transformative force appears to lie in human form.

To create the future, one had to renew the past, and that, ultimately, was a traditional idea that was newly emphasized in 1930s America. Constructing something new thus meant, from the Mexicans to Jung, digging out, reconstructing, and revivifying the successful heritage, pathways, and traditions of other generations, for those traditions had worked, as opposed to those of the day. For Pollock, it would mean digging out the traditions and powers of other peoples, particularly Native Americans, as they represented in their non-industrial technological and anti-modern ways the exemplary past according to the illusions of primitivism. Other Abstract Expressionists used other examples, as much Western as non-Western. Pollock would create a future for himself and his time by recasting his inwardness through recreating and emulating the powers of other cultures and the self of the “other.”

Pollock’s Jungian conception of the unconscious and its processes best explains the fertility and creativity of the psyche, for as we saw Jung, unlike Freud, considered the unconscious to be a *transformative* force. In a key definition, as noted before, Jung wrote that the unconscious was a dynamic representation of the “deposit of all human experience right back to remotest beginnings . . . not a dead deposit but a living system of reactions . . . that

determine the individual's life" [and encompass the entire] heritage of man's evolution.<sup>i</sup> Jung thus defined the unconscious as a referent (or archetype) of all of human experience and its heritage. It is a referent that connects each human being to human beginnings, past and present, in a "living" system or network that affirmatively shapes the individual's life. The visual articulation of that "living" connected system would make Pollock famous.

Pollock's principle of creativity thus needed the creativity of the past and for Pollock that was largely the "mythic method" conceived by T. S. Eliot, who was so influential in the United States between the wars. As noted, Eliot's method recommended, citing James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the fusing of psychology, ethnology, and the mythological material of *The Golden Bough* to *give order and shape to the panorama of history*. That is, by coming face to face with the "futility and anarchy" of contemporary life and history (for Eliot, World War One and its Aftermath), art and culture should draw on the past to find what is significant and produce images that organize contemporary history. For Eliot and many in the interwar generation, "history" was an archaeological tradition whose key recurrences could be represented by ritual and myth. With Pollock, as with his colleagues such as Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and others, "history" took the form of a transitional phase or mythic event in his work. He alluded, as they did, obliquely to history and culture through forms and ideas of classical Western and so-called primitive peoples. For Pollock, as for them, contemporary art eliminated the merely contemporary for relations with other cultures and peoples in space and time that generated "a usable past" as the

thirties had done. And it is this relationship that would salvage and redeem the present. More than simply a disturbed individual working out fantasies, he and they allegedly used an archaic past to point to the future.

To render history's patterns and changes as myth in the early 1940s, Pollock, like his colleagues, transformed his language. His work had been fairly representational even after his Regionalist period. Now it began to fall under the impact of the cultures of Native American peoples and, most probably, surrealism, as with the pictographic style of Joan Miro, who had a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (which ran from November 18, 1941 to January 11, 1942) following the "Indian Art of the United States" show of January 22 to April 27, 1941. (Interestingly, Pollock disliked Paul Klee's work which was also on posthumous exhibition in 1941.) Miro's language of thin, stick-like figures was partially based on the new "primitivism" of the 1920s – a fascination with forms that resembled prehistoric figures found on stones, pebbles, and walls.<sup>ii</sup> Pollock seems to have absorbed this idea, as did most of his colleagues.

There are many examples in Pollock's drawings at this time consisting of more simplistic black lines and shapes. A prime example of this new pictographic language can be seen in the figure or figures of the painting *Burning Landscape* of 1943 (fig. 1).





At first this painting appears to consist of areas and lines of red and yellow exploding into splatters of paint. However, a circle at the top of the composition suggests the eye of a barely-formed person, a horizontal oval suggests another, and the shape as a whole resembles the chained head in Jose Clemente Orozco's *Dive Bomber and Tank*. Pollock watched Orozco paint that portable mural in 1940 at the Museum of Modern Art. There is also perhaps a full, upside-down u-shaped torso, while a strong vertical line at the right implies the spine or vertebrae of another being. This pair may be copulating, as an outlined red phallus penetrates the "u." Many of Pollock's paintings depict sexual activity as we shall see. The two bodies are thus presented as stripped-down personages, suggesting Pollock's

new direction of condensed yet expressive form.



While the pictographic was not a new idea in the twentieth century -- witness Ezra Pound's trumpeting of the Chinese ideogram -- it was between 1941 and 1944 that most Abstract Expressionists similarly moved from full to pictographic forms. For example, Rothko's works of this period, from *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia* of 1942 to the *Rites of Lilith* of 1945 (fig. 2), exemplify this



tendency. So do Adolph Gottlieb's *Pictographs* such as *Pictograph # 4* of 1943 to *Letter to a Friend* of 1948. Barnett Newman did likewise in the show he curated in 1947, "The Ideographic Picture." Newman defined the "ideographic" as "representing ideas directly and not through the medium of their names; applied specifically to that mode of . . . symbols, figures or hieroglyphs."<sup>iii</sup> And Richard Pousette-Dart often used and referred to the ideal of the pictograph in his work such as *Hieroglyph of Light* of 1966-67. Pollock called his creations in this new vein

“stenographic” in his *Stenographic Figure* of 1942. This change to “stenographic” forms suggests that Pollock and his colleagues understood the conception of the pictographic, which is the compressed, simplified, and direct depiction of an idea without the intermediary stage of full representational form. The Egyptian hieroglyph is the best-known popular example of this type of image.

Pollock’s work of the early forties and later represent ideas, not the visual itself. For Pollock and Abstract Expressionism in general, the result was an original early style and a pathway to abstraction, for their later “abstractions” would be as ideographic as, if not more than, these earlier works. Mature Abstract Expressionism was an art of *ideas*, not, as has so often been said, of spontaneous feeling for its own sake. In the early forties, such ideas were expressed mostly semi-figuratively; later they would be rendered mostly through pictorial means alone. *Significantly for us, they are mostly the same ideas.*

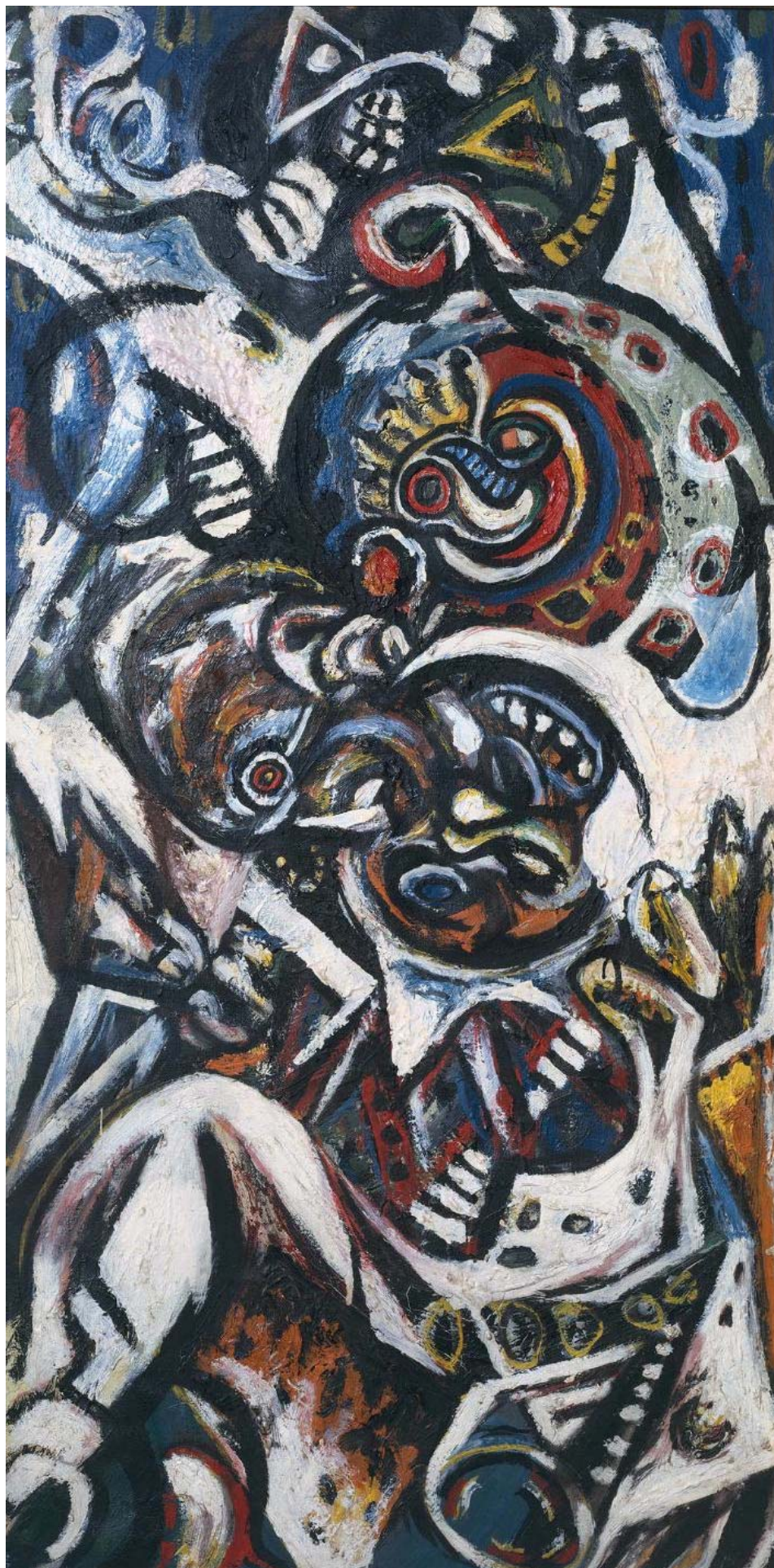
Thus, despite their new visual language, Pollock and his colleagues remained *symbolic* artists.<sup>iv</sup> They all constructed paintings of meaningful images and references. For example, if we look at a work by Rothko painted close in time to *Burning Landscape, Untitled* of 1941-2 (see fig. 2 introduction), we see, as in Pollock’s painting, not simply irrational surrealist fantasy, but a carefully thought-through painting of an ancient Greek grave stele with multiple heads, sexes, and mortuary acanthus leaves, typical of Rothko’s war-

related “tragic” inventions. Pollock, Rothko, and others created symbolic paintings in the early 1940s and throughout the decade. This does not make them intense, literal iconographers, but rather mature artists who made deliberate, meaningful images whatever the depredations of the “unconscious.” Some critics portrayed Pollock’s painting as tight, piece-by-piece programmatic narrative. I see it as consisting of loosely federated, images that add up to *sense*, and not simply modernist unconscious fantasies or “private myths,”

In the early 1940s, Pollock mostly cycled his emergent themes in and through the thought and forms of Native American peoples. He expressed his obsessions through so-called primitivism, myth, European modernism, and indeed the entire culture of his period, believing that he was articulating his unconscious. Of course, it was these sources that told him what was to be “found” in that unconscious. Otherwise, how would he have known what he imagined is the “unconscious”? Period concepts told him that just as the period concepts of the 1990s, particularly those of Lacan and Kristeva, achieved similar popularity in defining the unconscious and its processes for that generation. Furthermore, as we shall see, Pollock invented a primitivizing style characterized by roughness and lack of finish with loose edges that symbolized the “rustic,” “raw” “honesty” of the primitivist illusion.

The emergence of Pollock’s full-blown primitivism, with the faults as well as the strengths of his dialogue, can be seen virtually immediately in *Birth of* the 1938-41 period, probably 1941





(fig. 4). In *Birth*, Pollock created one of the central illusions of his primitivism with a fictitious form suggesting an “Indian totem pole,” a montage of forms, functions, and expressions in the construction of an “Indian” expression that did not exist. His image is an eclectic conflation of different artifacts of Native Americans, some in and some out of context. *Birth* is constructed through signs, markers, and fragments that Pollock intended as harbingers of the “spirit” of the primitive. Indeed, not only is *Birth* an eclectic composite of the forms of Native American peoples, it is a powerful and completely original fusion of those forms with those of the West with which he was familiar, and they were in the service of a theme that established once and for all the goal of renewal or (re)birth for him, his art, and man as we saw him develop through the Mexicans. In this painting, Pollock attempted to fuse form and image to evoke his subject. Pollock’s primitivism was means of situating himself as being in touch with ideas “outside” of modern, urban civilization while continuing dialogue with it. Thus, his personal idiom of magical flowing or curving new life and lines of power, expressed mostly through the symbols, forms, and ideas of Native American cultures, was further developed when these sources were expanded, and when Picasso’s influence was added to the mix.

*Birth* consists of a tall, narrow “figure” with a dark, round head or mask on top, swirling masks -- some circular, some angular for the body -- and claw legs spread at the bottom. The figure displays a vertical dynamism and turbulent motion rooted in, on the one hand, Benton’s theories of curvilinear forces circling around an imaginary axis or pole, and on the other, stacked, interlocking mythic



forms and animals derived from the totem poles of the Northwest that he saw in the American Museum of Natural History.

In addition to winding snakes, symbols of rebirth, one of which makes up the figure's mouth (drawn from a Pre-Contact monumental head to the right in Siqueiros's *Tropical America*),<sup>v</sup> the head consists of glowering Northwest Coast-stylized angular eye sockets or ovoids. Below and to the right is a head quoted from Picasso's *Girl with a Cock* of 1938, at that time in the Peggy Guggenheim collection. Pollock transformed it into his frequently used aggressive bird form, the "eagle." In Pueblo Indian mythology, because the eagle soars into the sky, it is associated with the power of the sun. It also is involved in curing rites and its plumage is an essential part of masked dances. Its fluffy feathers, here yellow in the diamond sun circle, represent the "breath of life."<sup>vi</sup> To its left, upside down, is another curvilinear head, this one derived from similarly compressed, "bug-eyed" rattlesnake shell ornaments (fig. 5).

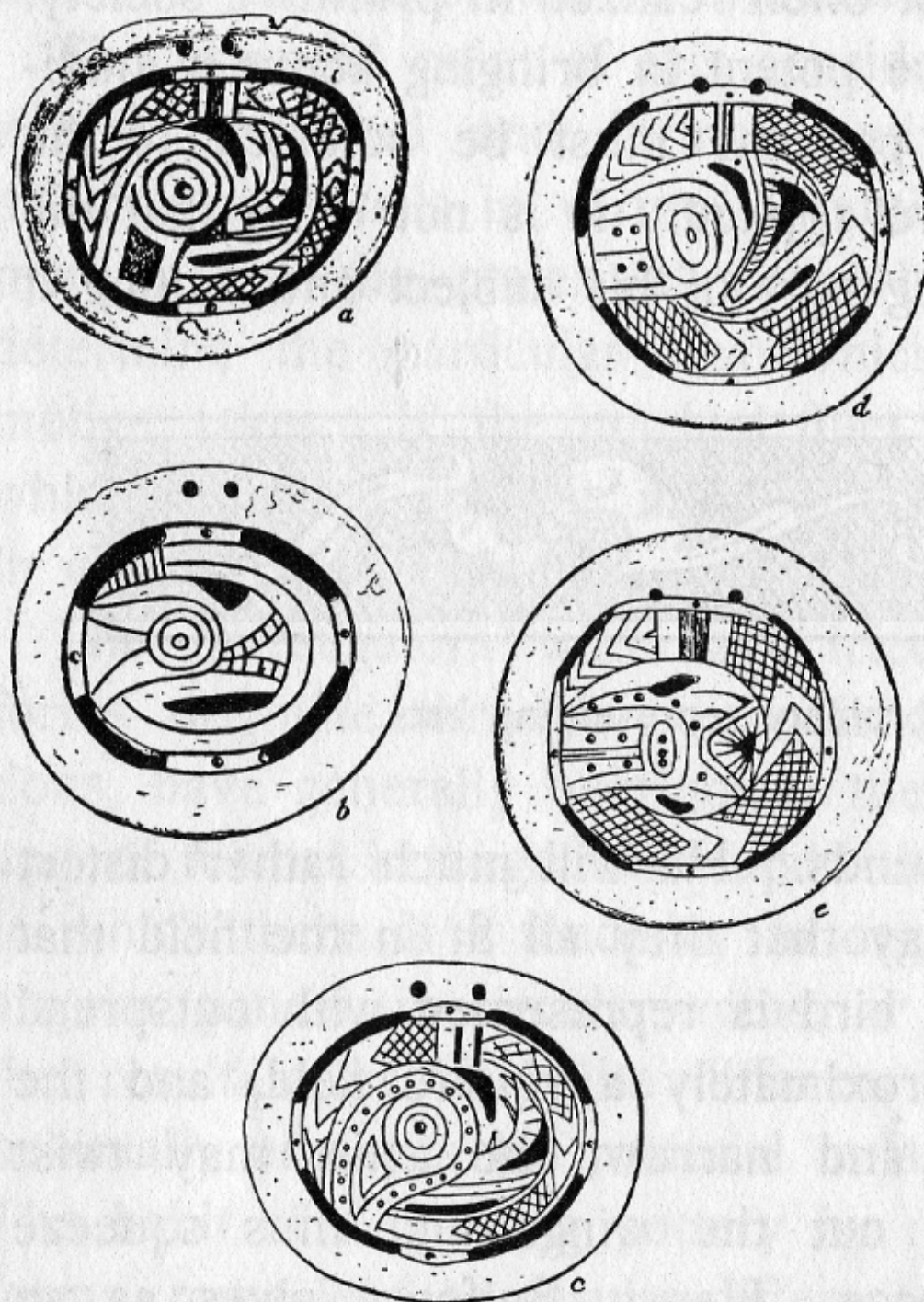


Fig. 131. Shell with representation of rattle snake.

These ornaments could be seen in the American Museum of Natural History, the Heye Foundation, the Annual Reports of the Smithsonian (*Second*, pl. LXV; *Twelfth*, fig. 213), the catalogue of “The Indian Art of the United States” (p. 71), and the pages of Franz Boaz’s *Primitive Art* (fig. 131)<sup>vii</sup> with which, as we saw, he was familiar.

Next to the shell form is a swirling, upside down-mask, an echo of masks from Inuit cultures, as is well-known.<sup>viii</sup> One cheek also twists into a snake-like shape as above. There are two narrow, triangular toothy heads drawn from Picasso, reminiscent of the drawings for *Guernica*. (The top one completes the surrealist vagina dentate form.) A direct, frontal claw lies at the midlevel left (drawn from a stone totem pole in the exhibition of the “Indian Art of the United States” -- see figure 13 in the catalogue),<sup>ix</sup> and there are Northwest Coast claw head joints below. Significantly, a triangle and right angle form also at the left highlight the composition. These may be images borrowed from Jose Clemente Orozco. Such forms representing human fecundity, creativity, and constructive potential can be found in Orozco’s Dartmouth and New School for Social Research murals. Clinching the composition is a wave of shapeless, orange colored “fire” near the bottom.

The ability to combine disparate elements is one of Pollock's distinctive traits. Indeed, he made it his life-long theme. Unifying elements which might seem to be polar opposites was both Pollock's creative method and his creative theme. As with cubism and surrealism, and even writers such as Virginia Wolfe, Abstract Expressionist art testifies to the early modern preoccupation with fragmentation. The Abstract Expressionist body is not a continuous whole but a set of symbols and concepts that ultimately attempt to revitalize through the imaginative restructuring of its fragments. Unlike surrealism, however, Pollock and his Abstract Expressionist colleagues emphasized conjunction, not disunity for its own sake. In other words, they sought integral, not disparate, reality and they rendered that in the tension of a constant state of the merging of opposites. As we look at Pollock's paintings, we feel that, in typical shamanic fashion, everything is alive and all things are interconnected.<sup>x</sup>

Pollock's style and form give coherence to symbols interpreted as magical, totemic shamanic, and fecund or sexual. These images become a story of birth, spring, or "coming into life" again, a major theme in the work of other Abstract Expressionists, for example, Rothko's Persephone paradigm, Hans Hofmann's *Coming Into Life*, 1946, Gottlieb's *Omens of Spring* of 1950, and Rothko and Still's mythic breasted (fertile) *pietas*. It can even be found in the 1930s, for example, in the novels of Thomas Wolfe. Sharing a distinguishing accomplishment of the twentieth century in terms of knowing more about the prehistoric, archaic and non-Western than in any other

century, Pollock's primitivism, exemplified in *Birth*, may even have seen the archaic past as being more alive than his own time.

Pollock thus assembled a swirling, curvilinear totem of several cultures held together by heavy outlines of Northwest Coast artifacts. Towering up before the observer is a compressed swirl of flowing masks and forms signaling in their dynamism the symbolic act of new birth, creativity, and renewal, which by that time were common themes for Pollock and the era. For Pollock, the expressive movement counted as much, if not more, than symbolic allusion. The composite of forms from several different cultures fused to represent the "human" in expressive lines of transformative force, motion, and power. The "shaman" in Siberian lore, one of the most important sites of shamanism, can be defined as he who jumps for joy and agitates. In short, this is the experience of "ecstasy," an essential aspect of shamanism; it was Pollock's key mode of primitivism, for the neophyte shaman awakens himself to other orders of reality and opens up a visionary realm by drawing on powers greater than himself. In parallel, Jung remarked that "there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life."<sup>xi</sup>

(It will be useful to point out that just as the "Indian" was an illusion of "primitivism" in which Pollock believed, "shamanism," too, was an illusion. It was a period concept that existed between the wars of unified religious (ritual) beliefs allegedly shared by many peoples, but in fact there was no such unity.

As with primitivism, ritual beliefs were different. For example, Navaho medicine men are technically not shamans. Nevertheless, if early anthropology overemphasized similarities of time and place as opposed to today's stress on difference, it did take note of those traditions and try to accord them respect, and Pollock was interested in and devoted to using those ideas rather than others.)

In *Birth*, movement courses through and swallows up Pollock's forms, as it did in his earlier, short-lived abstractions. Perhaps soon after painting *Birth*, he intensified and extended this approach in two new paintings, [*Composition with Masked Forms*] (fig. 6)



and (*White Horizontal*) (although the surfaces may have been repainted later). In these works, Pollock strung the expressive and symbolic movement along a horizontal rather than a vertical axis. The masks, several identifiably of the Northwest Coast, are symbols of transformative powers that enable the wearer to become someone or something else, most often a mythic magical animal

spirit power. They bob and weave in compositional and painterly turbulence, expressing the subterranean power and force of the “unconscious” and its alleged contents, pre- and anti-modern traditions, which they symbolize and conjure.

We can also feel the impact of surrealism’s “mutability and uncertainty as integral parts of the [growing] evolutionary/survival process that undermines belief in an orderly developmental schema; in stable, static nature; or in an absolutist, circumscribed conception of species” and of man.<sup>xii</sup> Here we have both the surrealist anatomic hybrid of disorder, deformation, and diversification but as Pollock’s powerful, personal conception of that mutable hybrid: shamanist vitality. *The difference that sets Pollock and all Abstract Expressionists apart from surrealism is that surrealism sought to undermine everyday reality -- surREALITY -- while Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists began from the first with the archetypal mythic and ritualistic that repudiates the everyday.* (As we shall see, regrettably the fifties revived the everyday as the subject of artists who were seen at the time as being personal and subjective.)

Such old but new power and life, more alive than anything found in the “Wasteland” of the “mass” West, is also evident in another contemporaneous work, [*Circle*] of 1938-41 (fig. 7). This is a circular composition filled with what seems to be marine life and other life forms -- eels, shellfish, octopuses, and again, snakes, symbols of rebirth. Pollock obviously wanted to identify his



image with a theme of life.

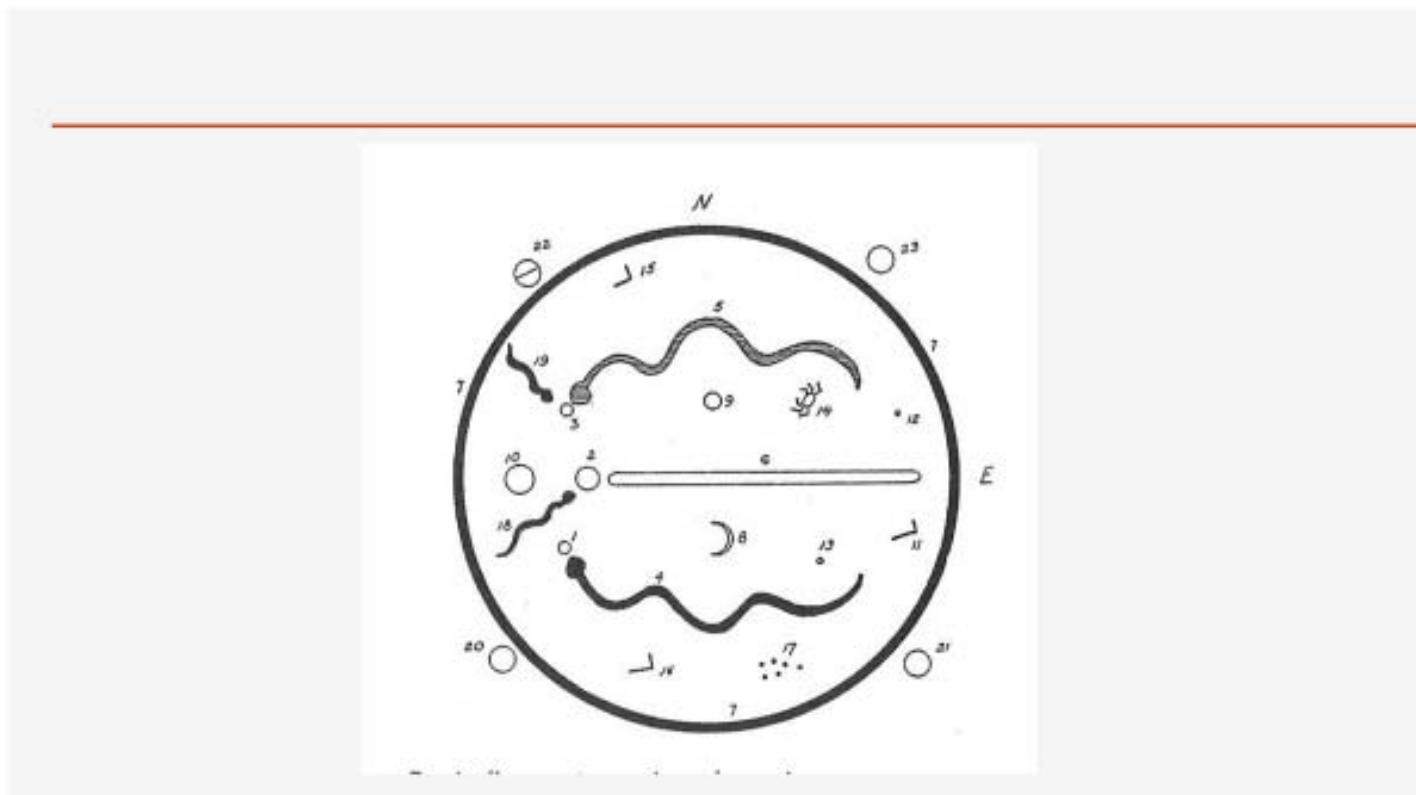


On the one hand, Pollock's sources were readily at hand in American culture. A similar image created by Rivera for the Rockefeller Center mural may have been an inspiration for Pollock, despite the difference in form. Rivera's fresco contains two crisscrossing ellipses of cosmic and earthy life forms behind Jupiter's fist and these parallel the lightning bolts that the god carries



and turns into the roots of life. It should be noted that marine life was a frequent motif in the early 1940s in the work of Pollock's colleagues, as attested to in works by Pousette-Dart, Rothko, and Gottlieb. Water, the source of all life, is a standard mythic symbol of renewal and rebirth, a concept that is archetypal to most of the world's religions if not cultures. The role of the ubiquitous Navajo "Water Creature" similarly inspired rivers to flow, bringing fertility. The image of Pollock's *Water Figure* of 1945 represents this Navajo spirit which was often portrayed in sand painting.

On the other hand, in [*Circle*] Pollock has further evoked the dynamic flow of fertility by imitating the compositions and forms of Southwest Indian sand or "ground" painting, as this illustration indicates (fig. 8).



It, too, is a condensed pictographic swirl of new life forms, a sort of procreative, curvilinear flow. For Pollock, delving into the unconscious was a way to seek and revive symbols and ideas of new life and vitality that he needed in order to revivify his personal life, and the West needed to revive a dying and destructive civilization. The fructive earth of Pollock's sand painting suggests his chthonic view of nature. [*Circle*] becomes a cosmic map of the world with creatures from the sea, the earth and even the sky which are revealed in the process of shaman trances and soul journeys.<sup>xiii</sup> (Once again, Southwest Native American ritual is not shamanic but Pollock used it as such in his concept of the "primitive.")

With *Birth* and [*Circle*], Pollock moved toward renewal. Thus, once again a theme from the thirties found new expression: the generative land of the famous "Good Earth" and of 1930s America became the germinating strata of existence. Pollock's [*Circle*] suggests again that his primordial impulse is one of fructive creativity and human development, not sexuality, not drunken excess, not autobiography, and not the subjective unconscious alone.

Pollock's *Birth* extends the theme of inward germination. It, however, represents the middle part of that process. The first part, of course, is copulation. Pollock renders its instruments most obviously in *Male and Female* of 1942 (fig. 9) which we shall discuss presently.







Here two figures have breasts, one frontally and one in profile. The figure at the left, however, has an erect phallus and the figure at the right, a triangular pubis. These are the instruments that will produce a “birth.” A second painting of copulation is *Pasiphae* of 1943 (fig. 10), in which a stick-figure pictographic form based on some of his drawings “rides” what seems to be a more fully fleshed and breasted “bull,” the result of which in mythology generates the minotaur, which is half human, half animal.

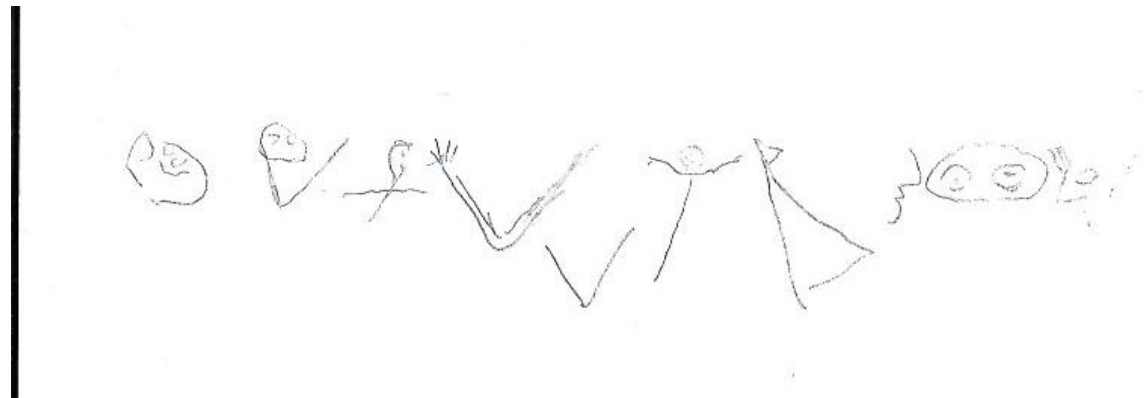


In this painting, the Minoan queen Pasiphae sits astride the bull. While she is a pictographic, zig-zag stick figure, her head seems to have become a bursting sun flower as the result of her intercourse with the animal. Her black figure seems to penetrate the bull below, as one of her appendages holds onto or enters his bulbous form. Interestingly, she too seems to be mounted by a

looping snake-like red and yellow line (made with a tube of paint?) which would be appropriate in Pollock's mythology of serpent rebirth. A crowd oot the top cheers the act, an idea taken from Siqueiros (fig. 11).



Siqueiros, Street Meeting, 1932

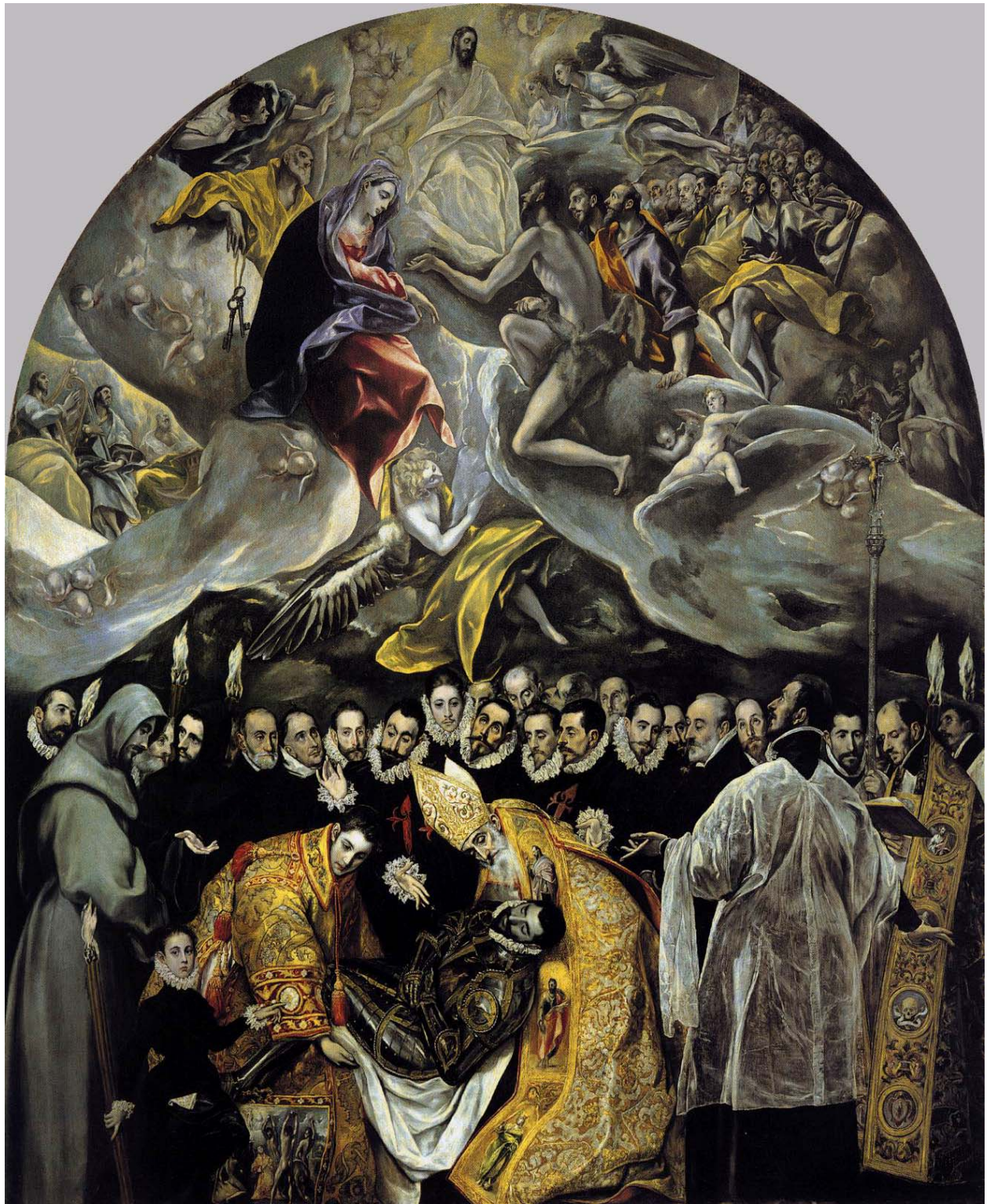


The act of penetration is thus the next step in the birth process of two partners joining together. In other words, the shaman emphasized the dynamic *fertilizing* nature of male-female interactions, and thus is not the modernist Freudian sexual.<sup>xiv</sup> While *Pasiphae* is a grand form and composition, it was

likely partially inspired by old master compositions, such as El Greco's similarly composed circular central ritual event in the midst of a side vested, vertical and horizontal crowd in *The Burial of Count Orgaz*, 1586 (fig.12) (reproduced as a detail in M. Legendre and A. Hartmann's *Domenikos*



*Theotokopoulus Called El Greco*, Paris: Editions Hyperion, 1937).





A subtler and now more pictographic representation of the sex act is evident in *Totem Lesson One* of 1944 (fig. 13), one of many Pollock paintings

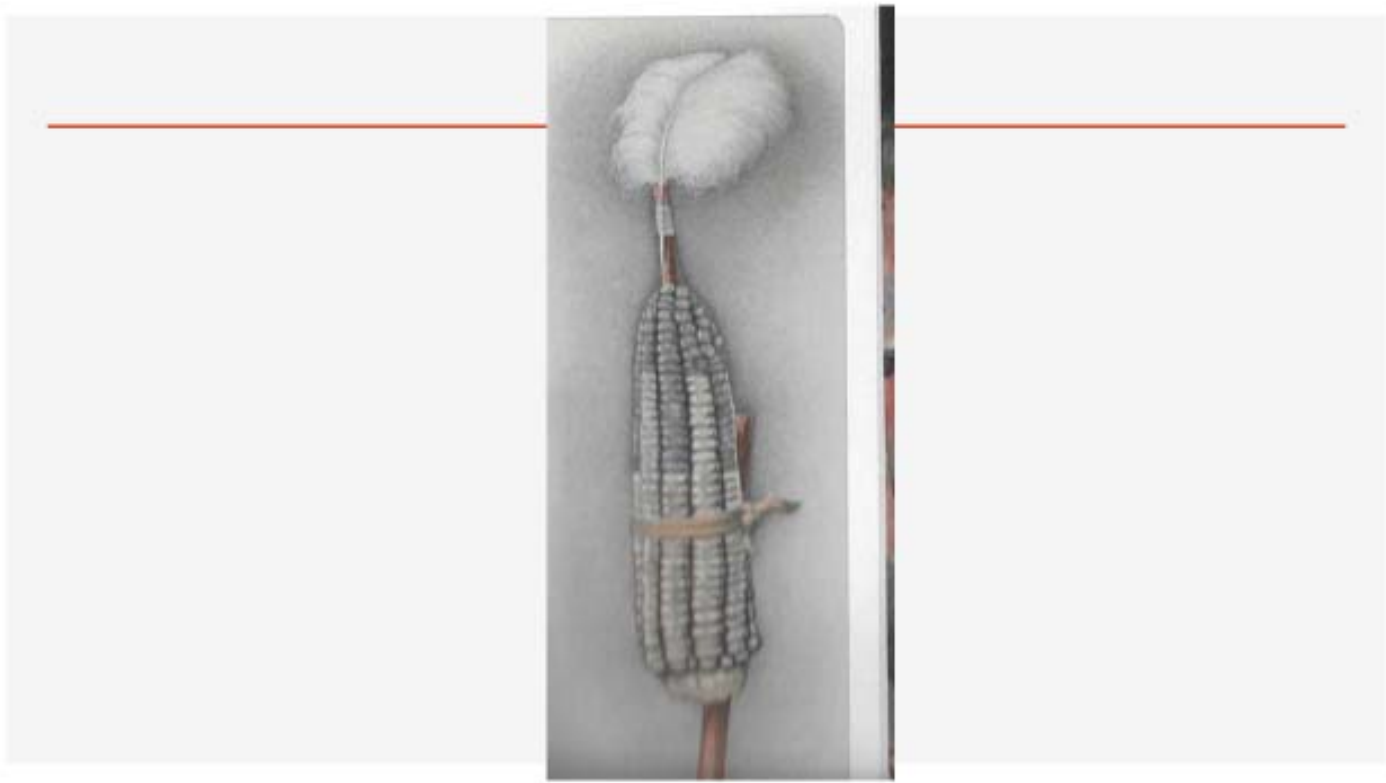


with a singular personage or giant, an idea that he perhaps drew from Orozco.



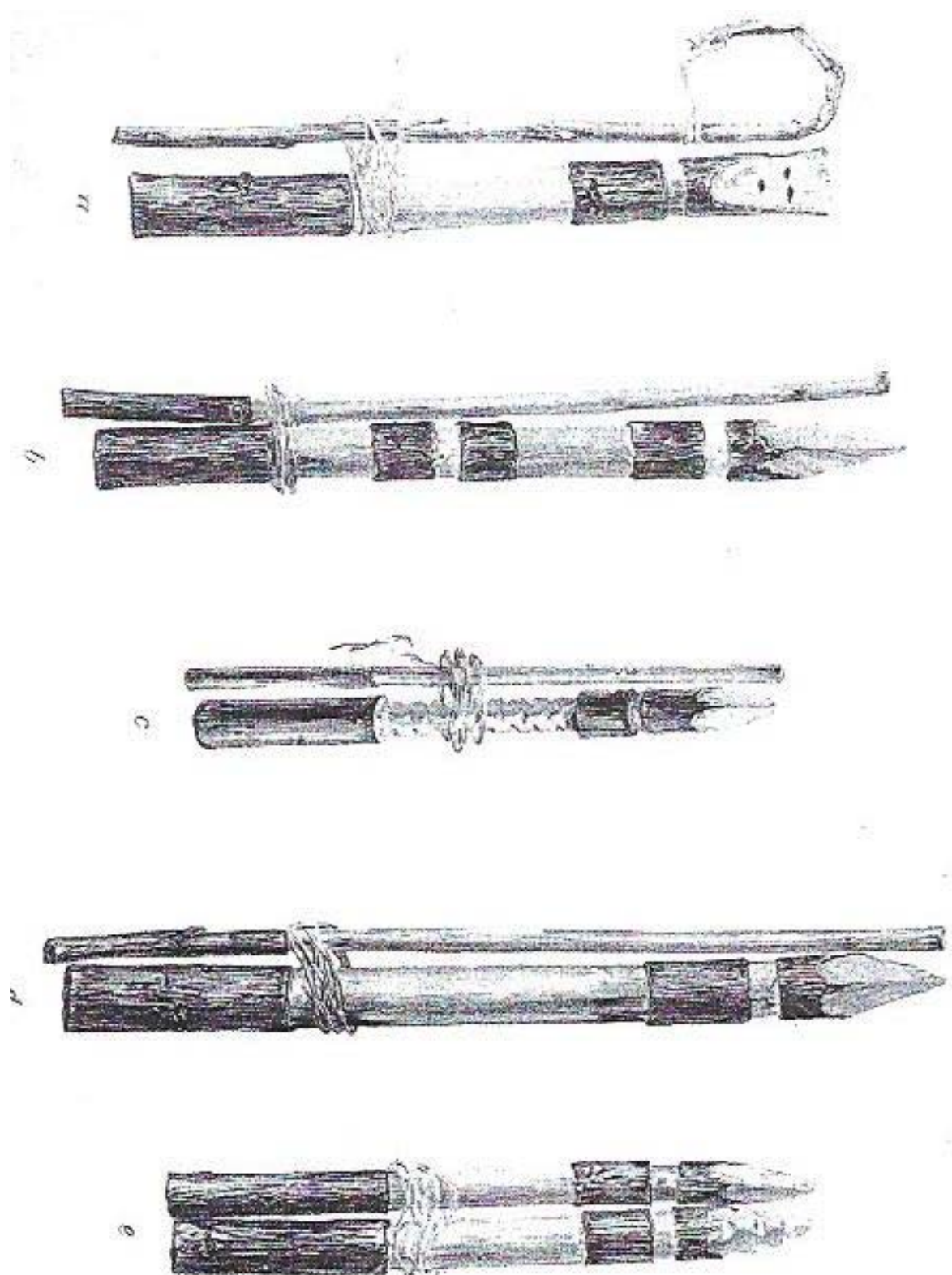
In the center of this painting, Pollock conflates several emblems of fecundity around the key image of a linear phallus-like form penetrating a triangular pubis; that is, the instruments of *Male and Female* are now engaged in that for which they are made. Pollock further underlines this concept with additional symbols, for the linear phallus combines two artifacts of Native

American peoples found on the pages of the publications of the Bureau of Ethnology. One is a “Mother Corn” image of the Pawnee (fig.14) which was explained in the BAE *Twenty-Second Annual Report* (pp. 44) as representing a “supernatural power that dwells in H’Uraru, the earth which brings forth the food that sustains life; . . . [W]e speak of the ear of corn as h’Atira, mother breathing forth life.”<sup>xv</sup>



This image is fused with another from the BAE *Eleventh Annual Report* of 1888-90 (fig. 15), consisting of parallel sticks and looping cornstalks from the (Z)Sia

culture of the Southwest.



According to Matilda Coxe Stevenson, the author of the article for which the image was reproduced, ritual notched prayer sticks are used in theurgistic rites to exhort anthropomorphic and zoomorphic beings to intervene with the cloud people to water the earth. The cloud people use mystic powers to water “mother earth so that she may become pregnant and bear to the people . . . the fruits of her being.”<sup>xvi</sup> These forms suggest the cooperation of all forces, natural and supernatural, in religious ceremonies used to cultivate and propagate corn, the life-sustaining staple of the American Southwest. In Pollock’s painting, in response to their union, a familiar small branch emerges from the bottom of the pubis.

Matching the black-outlined, pink tone of the triangle in *Totem Lesson One* is a semicircular head at the right. In shamanic ritual terms, it is being “held” in the arm of the totemic spirit, demonstrating the shamanist principle of a “covenant” between spirit and man to grow to a higher order.



43 This image is typical in shamanist

cultures from Late Classic Maya (here) to Native American Tlingit (fig. 16).

Significantly, from this embraced head (seemingly formally drawn from Thomas Hart Benton's diagrams as is, loosely, the entire figure) emerges a rightangle line which would suggest a straight-line pipe, another form and symbol of the union of nature and culture. In the words of Lame Deer, a Lakota medicine-man, "For us Indians there is just the pipe, the earth we sit on and the open sky . . . . That smoke from the peace pipe, it goes straight up to the spirit world. But this is a two-way thing. Power flows down to us through that smoke,

through the pipe stem. You feel that power as you hold your pipe: it moves from the pipe right into your body . . . . [I]t is alive.”<sup>xvii</sup>

The pipe is the “tool of tools,” the most sacred and cherished gift of Plains Indians, used as both a ceremonial object of spiritual communion and a tool of self-realization in a Vision Quest. It makes breath visible and shares it with all, although Pollock does that elsewhere and not in *Totem Lesson One*. Furthermore, it fuses male and female in the symbolism of the straight pipe stem and round bowl.<sup>xviii</sup>

Elaborating further in *Totem Lesson One*, Pollock then may have developed another very stripped-down pictographic symbol for penetration: simply a line through a triangle. He used this symbol often. For example, *Pasiphae* contains a yellow triangle and a penetrating, red linear “phallus” at the left at the bottom of a tilting rectilinear box. This symbol of the process of life not only reinforces the central act of *Pasiphae* but it also suggests future acts. It might have been inspired by an image in Joan Miro’s *Spanish Dancer* of 1930 (fig.17) which was in the Miro exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art.





The lower body of the *Spanish Dancer* consists solely of a triangle with a straight cork projecting out from it or into it as a penetrating erection inspired by the dancer's erotic movements. The cork casts a linear shadow making a triangle with a line through it, as in Pollock's painting.

Furthermore, in the box in which it lies there is a stick figure with an arm reaching outside the box. This image echoes one with which Pollock was very familiar and which was also thematically relevant: Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* which was displayed at the Museum of Modern art. Picasso's painting is an investigation of the multiple natures of woman and her reproductive capacities and consciousness, and it includes her anatomy, her womb, her fertility and her fruitfulness. The box is thus a condensed pictograph of fertility and copulation, that is, the generation of life. Below, glyph-like forms with sunflower eyes constitute a gesticulating crowd, as does the crowd form at the top of the canvas, and the two areas roughly form parallel planes.

Other examples of the copulation triangle signifying fecundity include the second eye of the totemic figure of *Birth*. It is joined by symbols of other procreative acts in *Night Mist* of 1944-45 in which a long linear triangle aims at a stout triangle, *Troubled Queen* of 1945 in which a brown phallus penetrates a yellow-green pubis in the center below a zig-zag lightning fertility symbol, and *Two* of 1943-45 in which the act of copulation from the rear centers the canvas. *Yellow Triangle* of 1946 (fig. 18) accentuates the pubis which is penetrated by a star-like phallus from below and seems to become a protagonist in itself because of an eye at its top.



Lastly, *The Child Proceeds* of 1946 (fig. 19) reiterates the sex act with two figures, one of which is in the process of developing protoplasm signifying the emergence of life, while the other carries a pictographic version of a baby on its





back. (Pollock's colleague Barnett Newman had also used the metaphor of expanding protoplasm to suggest mythic fecundity in his painting *Pagan Void* of 1944.)<sup>xix</sup> White branches complete this composition.

Pollock's imagery of copulation suggests the interaction of male and female principles that create and govern the dynamism and order of the world.

In shamanic binaries, “male forms of energy invest, impregnate, extend, and move outward. Female forces receive and transform male energies, converting them into new forms.”<sup>xx</sup> Conception is thus a moment of unified dual divinity.

The final act in the generation of life is the appearance of the baby, (a symbol often used by Rivera, too). We have already seen it appear in *Bird* and in *Night Sounds*, where the humpbacked, curvilinear still-born child often seen in Orozco and Pollock’s drawings has been transformed into a form in a bowl from the Mimbres culture of ca. 1375 according to the catalogue of the MoMA exhibition. The Mimbres bowl is distinguished by the appearance outside the perimeter of the planar, figurative form of small hands and feet (although not in Orozco’s work). The hands appear in later Pollock works such as *Night Sounds* of 1944, while both hands and feet are attached to further the appearance of the baby at the top of *The Guardians of the Secret* of 1943 (fig. 20).<sup>xxi</sup>



In

that work, the child rises to the top register of the canvas next to a fragmented red “rooster” and outlined form that may represent a mask of Northwest peoples. Eventually, the curvilinear, humpbacked baby takes on the appearance of a simple spiral, as in *She-Wolf* of 1943, above and below the central Zuni-derived arrow at the left in red, black, and white. The multiple registers of the *Guardians* may have been partly inspired by a similar mural by Siqueiros and had its supportive Bloc of Painters, *Mitin obrero*, painted on cement on the exterior of the Chouinard School of Art in Los Angeles in 1932 near *Tropical America*. The top register of *Mitin obrero*, with its overhanging figures, also seems to echo Jacobo Tintoretto’s *Massacre of the Innocents* which Pollock had copied from a reproduction in his youth.

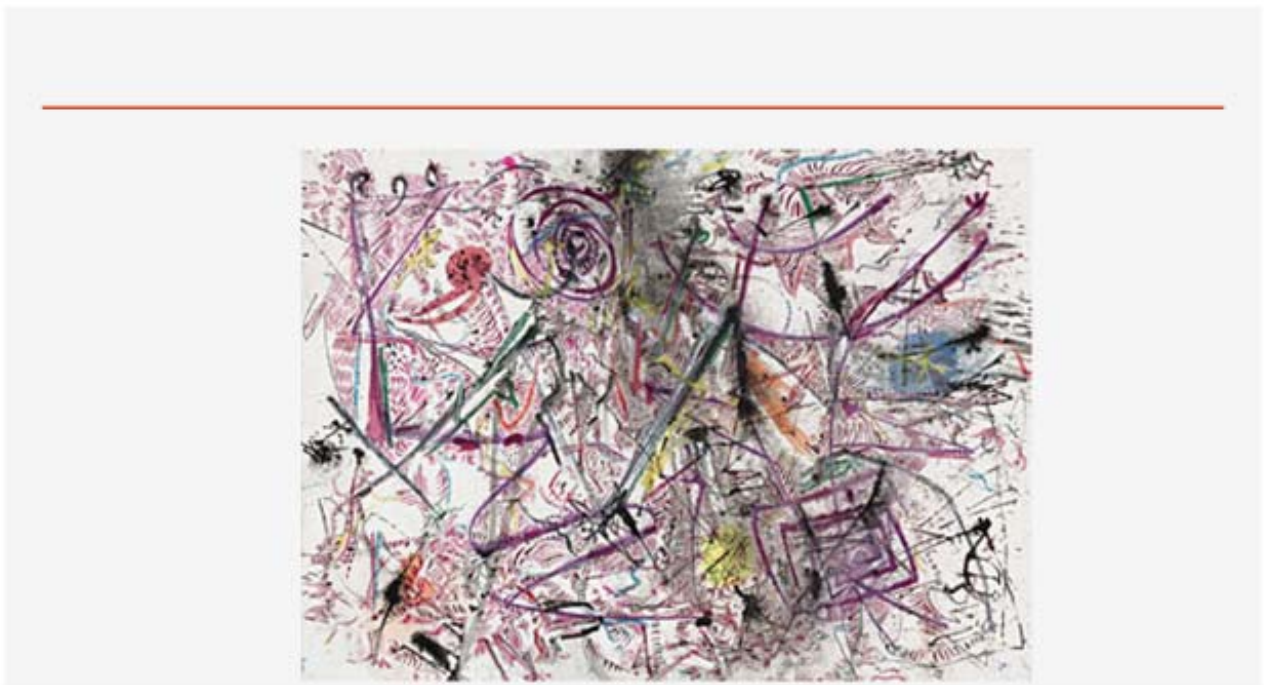


The spiral was a common image and symbol in the 1940s. Richard Pousette-Dart, whom Pollock admired, often employed it, for example, in *Composition Number 1*, 1941-43. (*Symphony #1, The Transcendental* of 1941-42 employs Mimbres-like spirals.) For Pousette-Dart, the spiral was a symbol of growth. The symbolic spiral form also appeared often in Adolph Gottlieb's Pictographs of the 1940s such as *Composition* of 1945. (fig. 21).



Those may originally have been drawn from a Hohokam vase of ca. 1000 in the "Indian Art of the United States" exhibition and catalogue (p. 85). Like the Mimbres, the Hohokam was an ancient people of the southwest that has been

argued to be the forerunner of the Pueblo peoples. Gottlieb may have also evolved the spiral into a representation of a maze or labyrinth, thus making a dualistic image that could be positive or negative. For Pollock, the image of the spiral or scroll labyrinths may suggest a pathway to the mysteries, a shamanic symbol as in *Untitled [Drawing with Spirals]* (fig. 22), a mixed media work of 1946,



or in an animal spirit as in *[Blue, White, and Orange Composition]* of 1944, sometimes referred to as “Purple Horse.”

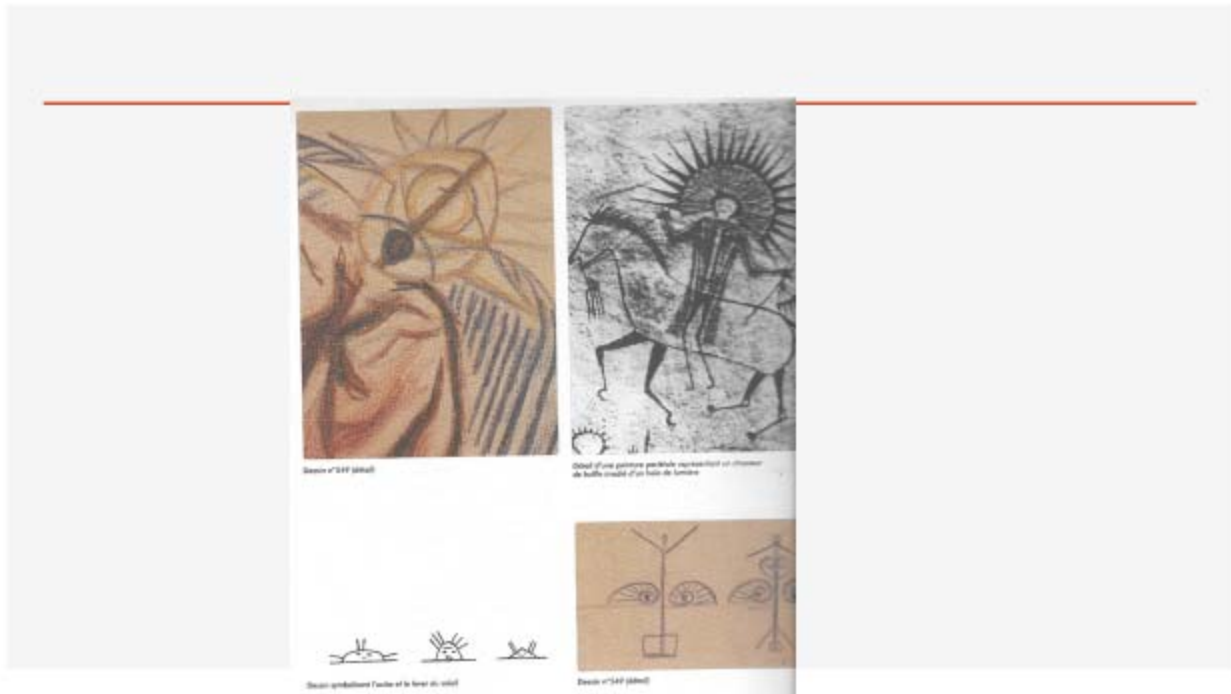
Whatever the source, Pollock’s spiral, formerly the humpbacked baby, represented growth, and ultimately we see hints of it throughout his work in the early forties. It appears as a set of spiral “9” images as at the bottom of the bull in *Pasiphae* within an encompassing and significant mandala. (As noted

above, they may be glyph-like forms, too.) Its specificity may be diminished but its implications are not. (A common image of new wholeness in many cultures, the mandala in Jungian thought meant formative as transformation.) And if we get ahead of ourselves a bit, the important paintings *Eyes in the Heat* and *Shimmering Substance* from the 1946 series “Sounds in the Grass” seem to be nothing but painted and troweled, curvilinear spirals, the latter painting more abstract than the former, but both paintings seemingly burst with fecund growth. Quite clearly then, Pollock completed the creative/procreative process, tying all these paintings together with an ancient symbol that was needed in the modern day, and this binds his work together.

*The Key* of 1946 appears amid something rare in Pollock’s work, a landscape, specifically, a gray- blue body of water from which looping water creatures rise to a central mountain image.<sup>xxii</sup> In his journey through the world, the soul of the shaman dreamer traverses rivers, mountains, sacred centers, and portals in the web of the Other World.<sup>xxiii</sup> The shamanic mountain in particular is known as the “Cosmic Mountain,” for it allows the dreamer to see all around, a capacity represented in his shamanist images by multiple red dot “eyes.”<sup>xxiv</sup> The cosmic mountain is not only the highest point on the earth but the contact point between heaven and earth. Pollock’s “mountain” is dotted in red too, the dots then being picked up by the looping figure. This movement is reinforced by the lines of power emanating from the head of another figure on the left. This figure seems to be ritually “dead” and it has a closed eye that can “see” into hidden things. The nimbus of the lines of power (like the halo in

the Western Christian tradition) is a visual expression of intellectual energy in its mystic aspects or of sacred powers. The sun itself is such a shamanic symbol representing the heroic principle of all-seeing and all-knowing, and the indwelling fire of life. Such “solarization” “represents the highest spiritual manifestation.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Pollock depicted an emerging solarized figure in a puzzling drawing, number 549 (fig. 3, introduction), in which a branching, winged half-figure with claw hands (?) emerges to take flight from another figure in front of two celebrating pictographic male and female souls developed from images of the sun and dawn. The solarized figure is embraced by a half moon and a rimmed sun, the latter typical of Southwestern sand painting in which a thin lip around a circle signals the emergence of dawn. Barnett Newman may have expressed this concept in his magnificent *Day One*, suggesting the dawn of the new postwar era. His painting consists of a large, red plane emerging from a thin, orange edge and lip. The bony head of a horse, echoing the sacrificed animal of [*Composition with Ritual Scene*], appears as a shadow cast on the ground in Pollock’s work. In Pollock’s drawing, then, and in shamanic solarization (fig. 23),



the “physical” head of the figure seems to be disappearing and a great sun-like disc that manifests energy takes its place. This “Dreamtime” figure represents the oft-seen magical relationship between the primitive and the solar complex,<sup>xxvi</sup> as the solarized shaman with a nimbus manifests the cosmic center.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Interestingly, “solarizations” were a surrealist theme but again, for them, in contrast with Pollock, they involved the revision of the everyday visual as with photographs of the body.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Interestingly, too, besides his thematic implication of shamanic spiritual manifestation, as we saw, the “key” in *The Key* suggests a central theosophical concept, the quest for spiritual life. This idea became entwined with another



nineteenth-century preoccupation: the search for a single key that would solve the mysteries of the universe (see chapter one for more on this).

*The White Angel* of 1945 (fig. 24) consists of a sand painting quadrangle below two male/female figures.



**The White Angel, 1945**

The rectangle, which echoes Southwestern sand painting and consists of two copulating pictographic stick figures on whose center Pollock painted his birth spiral “9,” from which in this case a white branch rises further indicating that it is a symbol of fertility. A corona of spots encircles one head, suggesting a nimbus or halo and their implications of sacralization. Two of the lines also end in Pollock’s “breath of life” symbol (see below).

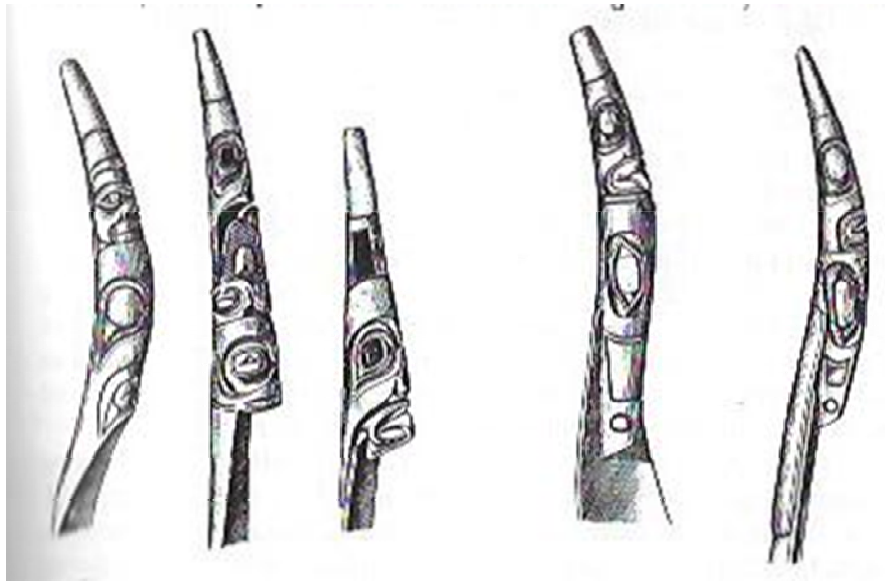
One last representation of a child that is suggestive of the humpbacked child and, although not completely, a spiraling Orozco-like form can be seen at the opposite end of *Totem Lesson Two* (fig. 25), a painting portraying shamanic death and rebirth.



The

background is mostly gray and the forms mostly black, but the combined

humpbacked and Mimbres-fingered image can be seen in negative outline at the left. Not accidentally, this figure lies below a sharp, knife-like object that has a face on it. This decoration echoes that of the Haida bone spoon-handles that Pollock might have seen in Boas' *Primitive Art* (fig. 26) (p. 201).



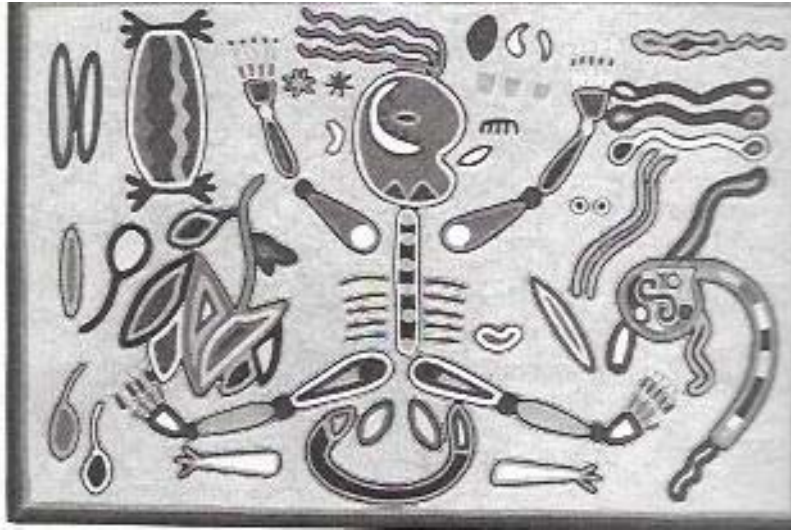
Like the spoon

handles, the knife seems almost to have a face in profile, but the use of a knife suggests a ritual sacrifice that leads to new life. *Totem Lesson Two* shares features with a carving made in 1972 by Karoo Ashevak (fig. 27), a Spence Bay Eskimo; the carving depicts a spirit wielding such a knife of dismemberment.<sup>xxix</sup>



Ultimately, *Totem Lesson Two* was drawn from the shamanic legging of a figure surrounded by forms in the American Museum of Natural History in New York . The painting presented an elongated, headed figure with arm up, heads one of which became the baby, and scattered forms. Indeed, on the one hand, *Totem Lesson Two* seems to be a later version of *Untitled [Naked Man]* with its ritual scattering of body parts. (In some shamanic depictions, the body parts are transformed into new plant life directly after dismemberment [see fig. 28],<sup>xxx</sup> for in the dispersal of self-sacrifice, the protagonist may be continuously





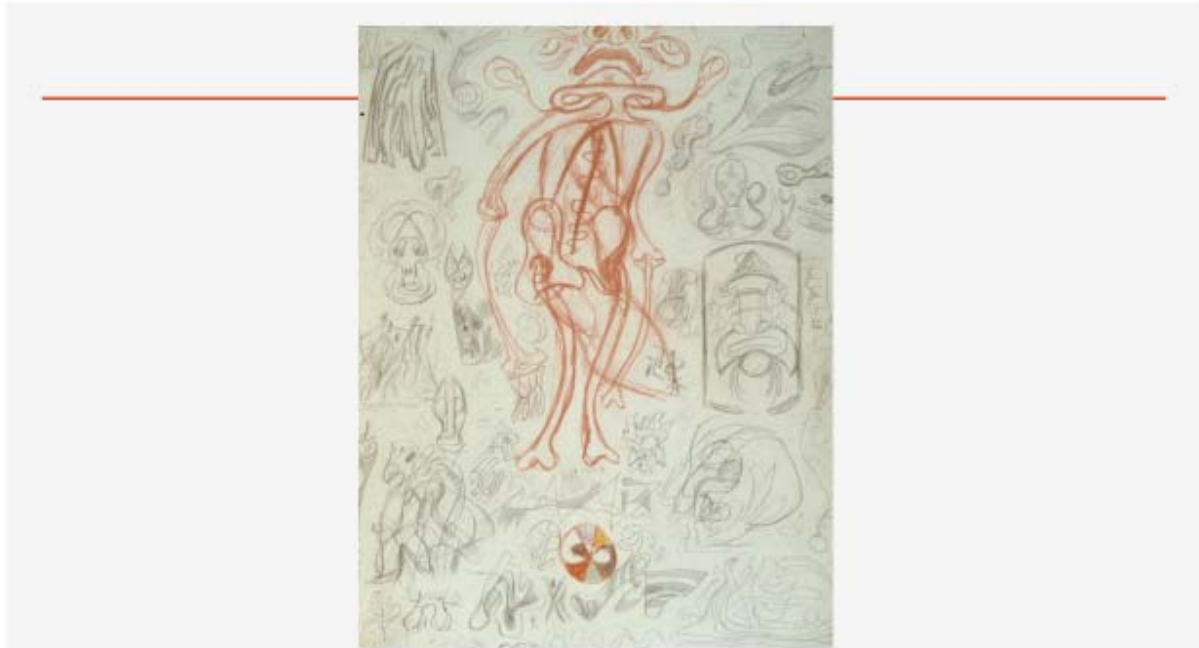
resurrected.<sup>xxxi</sup>

A

comparable theme was represented again by Pollock's colleague Newman in his drawing *The Slaying of Osiris* (1944-45), an Egyptian version of the same idea, indicative of what was "in the air" in the mid-1940s.) On the other hand, Pollock's painting resembles [*Bald Woman with Skeleton*], a scene of similar sacrifice leading to the emergence of a baby from between the legs of a skeleton, much like the panel at Dartmouth College from which it was taken. A final signifier of the generative quality of the painting is the appearance of the Mimbres spiral in the upper chest area of the main black figure. (A less legible but still meaningful spiral lies in the same place in *Totem Lesson One*.) In shamanism, the spirit that attacks and "destroys" the prospective shaman can also become an instructor, ally, and helper after his trials and ordeals. That which is raw and untamed is released in this act of dismemberment. The shaman's experience of death and rebirth, through a symbolic process of lethal self-wounding, is thus fulfilled in representations of rebirth. Shamanic "chaos"

or “death” is necessary in the attainment of vision, understanding, wisdom and power.<sup>xxxii</sup>

A further representation of shamanic “death” is the actual portrayal of skeletons as in Pollock’s drawing number III: 527 (fig. 29).



“Death and dismemberment” is called “chaos” in shamanic terms. “The skeletonized shaman figure is the personification of death. At the same time, like the seed of the fruit after the flesh has rotted away, his or her bones represent the potential for rebirth. The shaman-neophyte must die to finitude in order to attain knowledge of the immortal.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> To represent death is to represent the beginnings of new life, for all shamans know that death, e.g. animal food, furnishes all with life. Figure 30 is a shamanic image of a skeleton holding the sacrificial knife in its hand.



As noted above,

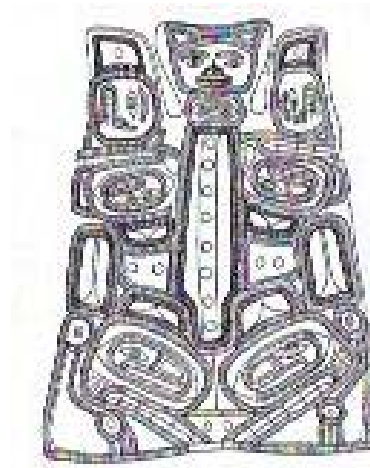
bone shoulders (“boneseed”) can also be found in Still’s shamanic images.<sup>xxxiv</sup> There they, too, rise to signal rebirth. (All of this, by the way, is in contrast with surrealist works in which images of bones were reminders of human violence although there was some recognition of the vital force conserved after death in bodily form as endowed with magical power.<sup>xxxv</sup>)

Pollock furthers his subject visually with an additional invention -- scumbling -- that is, he depicts the “chaos” that leads to new life with an area of unformed marks as we see in *Totem Lesson Two* just below the Mimbres fetus. One of the marks may be his penetrated triangle, here elongated, but otherwise there is no form. We find a similar image in the upper right of *The White Angel*, where it covers an orange sun. We also see it most vividly in the central panel of *The Guardians of the Secret*. Ultimately, the image seems to be a mass or clump of inchoate, unformed bits and pieces that are left after dismemberment before reassembly into a new form and life. A later drip painting is entitled *Unformed*. Indeed, “chaotic” messiness became a context and support system for much of Pollock’s paintings and drawings from the early forties onward.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

To finalize the ritual primitivistic quality of *Totem Lesson Two*, we can take up the ultimate, explicit source for this work: a Haida embroidered legging from the American Museum of Natural History, where it is still on display, although upside-down in relation to its depiction in Pollock’s work. The correct orientation and a clearer depiction of this image which represents a “sea-



monster with a bear's head and body of the killer" can be seen in Boas' *Primitive Art* (p. 228) (fig 31), an image from the American Museum of Natural



History that Pollock undoubtedly saw.

Pollock's

changes are instructive: he lifted the central crowning element at the top of the main figure and kept signs of but eliminated much of the side figures; he also transformed the bottom head on the left into a humpbacked baby. Then he painted out much of his source, squaring and changing it into a very different image, leaving only hints of a bird, eyes, and an animal (fox?) skin jostling in the field, all of which remind one, shamanically, that man's common ancestry is with animals. *Totem Lesson Two* is an example of Pollock's primitivism and his use of it for an ideology of death, rebirth, and growth. Thus, when Pollock commented in 1944 that "People find references to American Indian art and calligraphy in parts of my paintings. That wasn't intentional; [it] probably was the result of early enthusiasms and memories"<sup>xxxvii</sup> he was most probably being disingenuous as an artist downplaying his sources (much like he famously did in the case of Benton, too.) Pollock had to have been aware of his shamanic and Native American sources (W. Jackson Rushing argues the same).

The shamanic ideology in Pollock's paintings puts to rest the long-standing "certainty" that his work was strictly negative, the deciphering of a "private myth," and the "spontaneous." Pollock represented the unconscious by using a repertoire of shamanic and personal symbols drawn from a variety of primarily Native American sources. The cultures of "Native American" peoples were the "unconscious" for Pollock, and because of this, as with his Mexican sources earlier, we can more than begin to decipher it. And we can take up the language that Pollock was developing: it is symbolic, conceptual, and pictographic, not irrational fantasy. It is quite deliberate. That is not to say that Pollock was a programmatic iconographer. Rather, he created meaning on his own terms -- as do most artists -- by collecting relationships. The paintings do not create a tight narrative, but a loose one, with a subject, meaning, and expression.

The life process which gives birth to the new, that is, renewal, rebirth, and germination, is Pollock's central thrust. This emphasis on life, which employs cultural as well as personal symbols, can be seen in several responses



to the destructiveness of mass man and World War II. It is no accident that the baby became a symbol of the new era to come.



Paul Fussell, the

acclaimed literary cultural historian of the world wars, noted that the theme of new life was treated in the popular press as well. He cites an advertisement for Carnation milk which declared: IT'S A BOY AND HE'S THRIVING ON CARNATION . . . . Could any news be better? New Life . . . coming into a new world we're fighting to make ready."<sup>xxxviii</sup> Such new life was personally attested to by the men of the war era. For example, it is well known that Heiner Friedrich, born in Germany in 1938, noted that the destruction of those mass men, the Nazis, in contrast, led him personally to a desire to create things in

his life that would last forever. He then helped found the DIA Foundation, which is dedicated to new art, in this vein. Daniel Cohn-Bendit -- “Danny the Red” of the German Red Guard of fame or infamy -- reinforced the need to create the new by describing the circumstances of his own birth. He was known to say that at the end of the war his parents felt hope for the first time, and baby Cohn-Bendit followed.

While at first it may appear to be a straight, vertical, and stable canvas, *Male and Female* consists of two interlocked male and female-like figures. The figures both have breasts, one frontally and one in profile, and as we saw, the figure at the left has an erect phallus and the figure at the right has a triangular pubis. Pollock has mixed the sexes and in this he reveals a major underlying theme of necessary inwardness: the fusion of male and female principles. On the one hand, this is a frequent idea of shamanism. The primitivizing writer D. H. Lawrence, for example, similarly sought a primitive state of “cosmic oneness, a state beyond subject and object, through the perfect balancing of opposites -- male and female, sun and moon, primitive and modern.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Marianna Torgovick argues that such a state is impossible because, in Western “primitivism” the primitive self is not independent and separate but merely reduced to playing a part of the Western “self.” She argues that in his writing Lawrence invokes a state that transcends mere individualism, as in the polarities of the “sun and star,” and male and female, which will largely although not completely merge.<sup>xl</sup> In Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent*, a novel about pre-Contact rituals, such a semifusion is part of making

an oceanic world in which the boundaries of self and other, subject and object, human and animal, human and nature, human and cosmos dissolve in a feeling of “totality, oneness, and unity.”<sup>xli</sup> For Lawrence, the polarities of male and female do not mean specific, gendered selves but collective principles.

Pollock seems to have shared such ideas. We have already seen and will see more of the merging of polarities such as sun and moon, nature and man, and the like in his work from his shamanist symbols to the act of copulation and from there to the “recognition” of nature and the primitive within our Western selves. As we have seen, that integrated oneness was an ideal in interwar thinking from theosophy to Jung and to the architecture of Long Island City. Modern man authors argued for it as well. Pollock’s painting *One (Number 31, 1950)* attests to this.

But such integration is more than primitivist, or rather, one should say that such unity was taken over as a psychological principle by Joyce and Jung. As regards Joyce, Harold Lehman relates that in his and Pollock’s youth, probably for his reading group, he acquired -- “grabbed” -- excerpts from Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* from the Stanley Rose bookshop in Hollywood. With T.S. Eliot as editor, “one of them was ‘Anna Livia Plurabelle and the second was ‘Having Children Everywhere.’ One represented the female principle, and the other, the male principal.”<sup>xlii</sup> In terms of the need to merge the male and female parts of oneself, the gendered “other” is one of his key ideas. Pollock was undoubtedly aware of Jung as well. Indeed, even today Jung is contrasted with

Freud for his valuing of sexual opposites and his psychology is held up by some feminists as part of the discussion concerning a solution to the “problems” of sexual difference. Ultimately, Pollock’s *Male and Female* anticipates some aspects of the desire for a new sexuality. As Jessica Benjamin writes, “The capacity to enter into states in which distinctness and union are reconciled . . . [is desirable]. In erotic union we can experience that form of mutual recognition in which both partners lose themselves without loss of awareness.”<sup>xliii</sup>

*Male and Female* makes it clear that Pollock is not interested in women as women. Women only exist in his universe of painting and drawing if they are part of the life process and the general scheme of things. Pollock does not paint individual women and their lives per se. Instead, they matter only because they give life or suggest an alternative principle. It has generally been taken for granted that Pollock used women to support Freud’s idea of repressed sexuality, fantasies, and dreams for their own sake. On the one hand, the psychoanalytic approach conveniently explains Pollock’s work personally, not mythologically. The modern West is a Freudian world that calls on sexuality as a primary explanation for men addressing women and vice versa. On the other hand, numerous images of women and perhaps of sex may be seen as the typical colonialist exploitation of women, of the “other.” But Pollock was not interested primarily in their eroticism but simply in their fertility. Aside from being part of the cycle of life, women do not matter in Pollock’s work just as they do not in most Abstract Expressionist schemes. Aside for a few unusual

works by Gottlieb representing the theme of a “man looking at woman,” de Kooning is the only exception. For Pollock, as with his heritage -- the thirties -- individuals as a whole count only as an example of the typical. Some feminists may complain that Pollock only used women as symbols of fecundity, but those were his central images. That women give life is a fact of nature, not an expression of sexual politics.

Besides male and female principles, we have seen other examples of opposites and their integration, harmony, and mutuality in Pollock's work: the balancing of human faculties of reason and emotion in his Jungian scheme of things; the equilibrium of movement and power in the four directions; the balancing of sun and moon; the Yin and Yang drawings of male and female; the juxtaposition of animal and man in *Man (Woman)*, *Bull*, *Bird*, and in *Pasiphae* and *She-Wolf*; the dying that becomes the living; the destructive that becomes the constructive; and the threatening unconscious and primitive that become the psychic and ritual transformative. The earlier duo that he favored, the horse and/or bull, also appear in the mid-1940s. All of these images are part of the idea of reinventing the human, changing his profile, and producing a new man, one more grounded and not as narrow as mass man, rational man, or even exclusively male man. All of these suggest the ideal of integrating or unifying anew. To further this idea, as he did in several early drawings, Pollock reinforced his figures and fragments with a mandala as in *Pasiphae*. In that painting, encompassing the pictographic figure astride the bull on top and the “birth” or growth spirals below is a mandala, the symbol of newly integrated



union in Eastern ritual. Thus Pollock suggests that from opposites merging, from the fragmented figures created in the era of Western fragmentation that dominated the early twentieth century, from cubism, from conceptions of primitivist fullness, from T. S. Eliot, from Schwitters and surrealism, with all their chaos and confusion, comes a new and ideal wholeness: the harmony and balance of opposites.

In many of Pollock's drawings from ca. 1938 onward, dazzling eyes with glowing, radiating long lashes were prominent. This motif originated in Picasso's drawings of weeping women for *Guernica*. Pollock reversed the implication of suffering to suggest something else, as we can see when we turn to *Male and Female*. The heads of the two figures display starry eyes that indicate, in Pollock's idiom, magical change, inward transformation, and vision.

The eyes on the left figure are paisley-like ovals in yellow and red. The head on the right -- the yellow part of which is taken from Picasso while its moon-shaped white curve is derived from the moon, a symbol of female fertility in numerous Native American cultures -- is crowned with radiating red touches, another motif typical of Pollock's drawings.<sup>xliv</sup> A red jawbone completes that head.

In the center are Pollock's frequently occurring intensely red, circular sun and three large diamond shapes on a bright field. Smaller diamonds appeared in spiraling form in the upper right of *Birth*. The figure on the left contains a combination of contrasting profile and frontal shapes similar to

Picasso's work. Below the figure lies a form Pollock used to symbolize the gestating fetus -- the 9-like shape. The form is located next to a pronounced swelling curve that suggests not only the femininity of that figure but her possible pregnancy. (The female may represent Mother Earth and the male, Father Sky.<sup>xlv</sup>) The central flat planes of *Male and Female*'s further echo Picasso's *The Studio* of 1928, while a half-bust-like head at the lower right in the border of blue may be a glyph spectator. Pollock would echo this glyphic form at the bottom of *Pasiphae*, as we saw, just below the abstract spiral symbols. Pre-Contact glyphs were a frequent topic of the publications of the Smithsonian Bureau of Ethnography.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Additionally, the figure at the right incorporates numbers the significance of which has heretofore gone unnoted. They probably relate to a numerological calculation, one of the many mystical interests of the period, such as the alchemy and Tarot cards of the surrealists and Jung. Pollock used numerical signs several times in his drawings and paintings of the late 1930s and early 1940s. In general, they are a means of divination, the mystical reading of signs of pre-modern, pre-industrial cultures, and consciousness that foretells the future, much like subjects of the unconscious and aspects of "primitive" or folk religion such as omens, amulets, and pictographic prophecy that appeared in his colleagues' works. Lastly, the figures have head/feet joints just like those of Northwest Coast artifacts even if one seems more Picasso-esque than Indian in form. These joints appear in many works by Pollock.

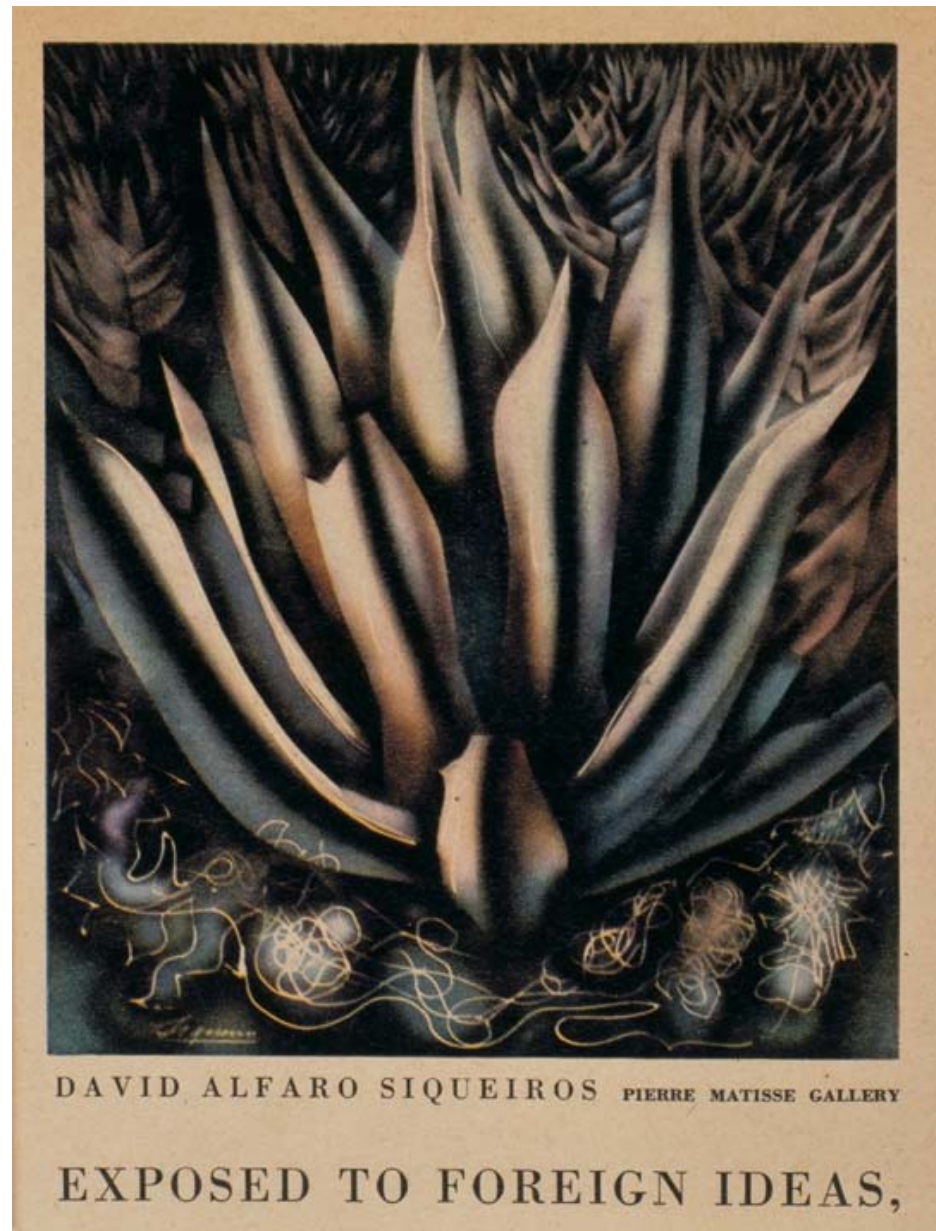
At first, with its rectilinear structure *Male and Female* may seem to be a very static work in comparison to other of his works. However, *Male and Female* is not completely static because it contains something new -- swirling, often exploding paint in the lower center and at the edges. Here automatism may have made one of its first appearances in Pollock's paintings. While from the beginning of his maturity as a painter around 1938, Pollock had indicated that he felt the unconscious was the source of art, he made no definitive indication that he had begun to use automatist invention at that time, although many scholars have assumed he did. But is all inventiveness necessarily automatist? In the past, has not knowledge and invention without a model simply been termed "imagination"? As we have seen, Pollock's work from the early 1940s is well thought out, and rhythmic flow is a conceptual idea in the paintings, not evidence, if at all, of automatist invention or an uncontrolled personality. It has often been argued that his drawings, including the so-called "psychoanalytic drawings" created while he was in Jungian psychotherapy beginning in 1939 suggest the use of automatism because they consist of anti-realist images and because there are obvious fantastic embellishments, often on Picasso, and also because Pollock actually said that his art came from the unconscious.

However, it is only in 1940-41 that we have definite evidence that Pollock began to seriously take up automatism. It was in that year that his well-known meetings with the Surrealist Matta Eschuarrean, Gerome Kamrowski, William Bazoties and Robert Motherwell took place in which Pollock and the others

experimented with automatist spilling and moving paint. Figure 32 (*Untitled*, 1940) is a work on which Bazziotes, Kamrowski, and Pollock worked.



It contains suggestive, even figurative, shapes with linear dripping and scumbling. *Male and Female* is one of the first results of those experiments and it is indicative of how the experiments proceeded, for here, as in the experiments, Pollock dripped and poured paint in a freehand manner. However, in 1939, Siqueiros painted a canvas (also made into a poster of a maguey plant



(fig. 33), *Maguey*).

At its bottom is a perfect example of one of his experiments: the dripped line. In the Laboratory Workshop of 1936 in New York, where Pollock worked under Siqueiros, Siqueiros experimented with duco enamel, spray guns and other instruments. As has been noted, it is known that Siqueiros taught Pollock to drip and work on the floor but there have are not many significant extant examples of Siqueiros's dripping. His painting and the poster made after it do

contain such an example, which consists of lines and scumbled forms, the very first forms of Pollock's own dripping, at the bottom of the image. We see these same lines and forms in the painting *Untitled*, from 1940-41. In 1943, he followed up with *Composition with Pouring I* and particularly *II* which are Pollock's true first elaborations of drippings in mature paintings. He would repeat these intermittently until the final maturation of the technique in 1947-50.

(Pollock's prolific drawings display more automatism, or sheer invention, than his paintings. There are many more of them and they often consist of even more differentiated sections of invention. Nevertheless, the drawings consist of "riffs" or doodlings of Pollock's fundamental subjects, forms, and images. For all of their variety, most can be grasped through recognition of their subjects such as crowds, the horse and bull contest, or ritual sacrifice. It is here that Pablo Picasso -- particularly through his *Guernica* drawings -- made his greatest impact as a source of forms.)

The explosive center and borders in *Male and Female* are not only the record of automatism's first appearance in Pollock's painting, but expressive areas in themselves. They represent, much as do his characteristic radiating eyes and bright diamonds, as well as the flowing power-webs abutting the figure in [*Composition with Woman*], the explosive process of magical transformation. In other words, the poured and dripped sections assumed the role of representing a dynamic, outward flow that was expressed by curvilinear

motion and linear lines of force in his previous work. Here the curves and outpourings are automatist outbursts (with the lower center outburst possibly revealing a physical, that is, an ejaculatory flow). *Male and Female* thus combines two new extremes: static form and painterly, abstract motion. The earlier form-curving was condensed into outpourings that surround the interlocking male and female figures and principals. Such interlocking implies that balance and equilibrium have been sought and perhaps achieved, a very shamanist desire. And this implies mastery, for in the realm of “chaos,” the *limen*, the cosmos is disorderly and the net of power moves freely, undifferentiated and untransformed. The beginnings of mastery of that power are exemplified by new balance and equilibrium and those beginnings can be ecstatic, beyond the boundaries of human action and interaction.<sup>xlvi</sup> In *Male and Female*, Pollock renewed and rebirthed himself and his culture’s psyche. In its own way, the painting is a sacred marriage, a coming together of the opposites.

Interestingly, this explosive scumbling seems to be Pollock’s further evocation and transformation of another work, one of his earlier major influences. In Jose Clemente Orozco’s *Omniscience*, a fresco painted in 1925 in Mexico City, male and female figures join in the acceptance of radiating light given to man by God. Such radiant force leads to new life and bounty, represented visually above the main section of the work as a *newborn child*. In its way, the child suggests a variation on an earlier previous abstract image of new vitality in Pollock’s work -- the radiating squares in the ceiling in his

*Prometheus* that we know Pollock exploited. In its sources, references, and union, then, *Male and Female* alludes to what is now *the* common theme in Pollock's maturing work -- birth or new life, that is, generation, rebirth, and renewal expressed both in abstract forms and its symbols, much as Orozco had done.

Most importantly, Siqueiros taught Pollock linear scumbling, a technique that would develop into his drips. We can see an example of the linear scumbling at the bottom of Siqueiros's poster *Exposed to Foreign Ideas* (*Maguey*) of 1932, eventually exhibited at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York. It forms the basis of the experimental painting of Pollock and his colleagues, of Pollock's first drip *Composition with Pouring II* of 1943 and his mature technique.<sup>xlvi</sup>

The device of using "exploding" paint to represent magic, fertility, force, and transformation was soon exploited in several paintings after *Male and Female*. Pollock described *Burning Landscape* of 1943 to his close friend Reuben Kadish as a "breakthrough" work for him. According to Kadish, Pollock told him that it "opens roads for him . . . [A] vision opened up".<sup>xlix</sup> It is easy to see why. As noted above, the painting enlarges, elaborates upon, and intensifies the automatist, explosive, and expressive areas of *Male and Female* into the suggestion of a vertical, now utterly fragmentary pictographic linear figure or figures whose curving forms evoke what Pollock adopted as his title, although that does not necessarily have to be the case. While the title may have



evoked the war that was going on, the forceful fragmentation of this painting must have brought back to him his earlier experiments with splattered and thrown paint with Siqueiros in 1936. *Burning Landscape*, then, is an image in which its figures' anatomies have been dissolved into explosive paint and dynamic, magical, "automatist" force. One familiar symbol in the work makes its meaning explicit: the striations around the lower center create density and thus substance, and perhaps are a variation of the lines of magical power rays at the lower left inscribed over a red patch, again from [*Composition with Woman*]. *Burning Landscape*, thus suggests explosive yet positive force, even if the title contradicts this. (Unless we think of a burning flame as another dualist symbol of purgation and new beginnings.)

Pollock seems to have adopted the idea of explosive force in the form of scumbling for many of his next works, sometimes combining that form with others such as the diamonds, as, for example, the lower left form by the border of *The Moon: Woman Cuts the Circle* of 1943 or *The Water Bull*. In the latter, intense scumbling combined with diamonds, stars, and looping forms follows the painting of a fragmented bull force. As we have seen, fragmentary, linear scumbling seems to fuse with Pollock's baby in the upper right of *The White Angel*, and is reinforced by an orange circle. In *Two*, below and to the right of two copulating figures lies a paisley scumble. And in the gouache *Painting of* 1944 (fig. 34) an abstract scumble explodes at the lower right, below a germinating female figure with baby and branches. Is this, too, another variant

of Pollock's symbol?



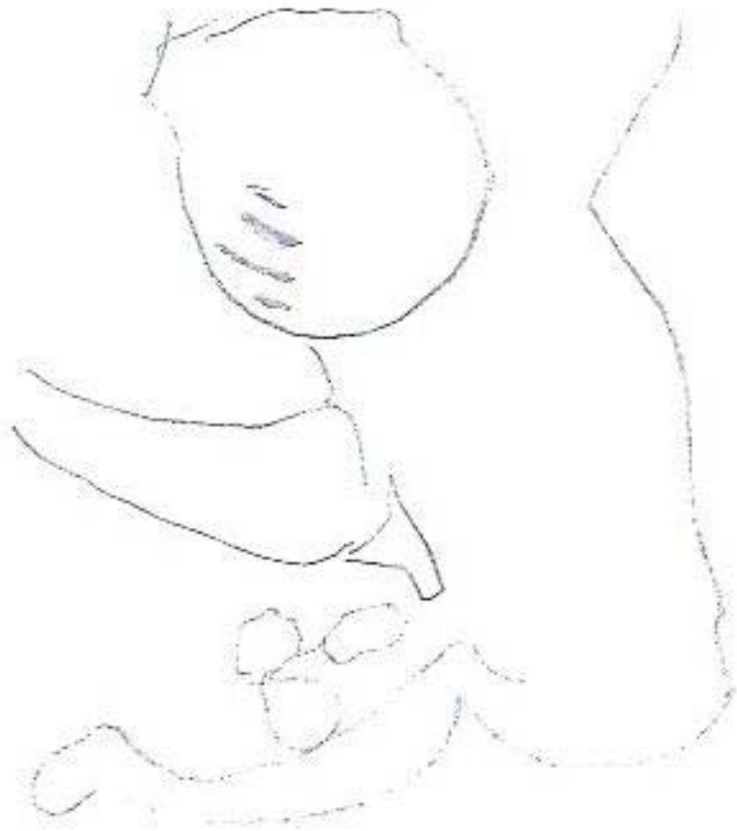
The first instances of Pollock's taking this form to a newer level appear when he began to pour and drip paint with the technique that he learned from Siqueiros in 1936. These scumbled bursts appeared immediately in several drip compositions. In [*Composition with Pouring II*] of 1943 (fig. 35), pouring and dripping quite intentionally suggest abstract curvilinear power, with only



the barest hint of a figure.

The

poured paint evokes a possible seated figure facing left with a round head with parallel striations typical of the Pollock head (see below), several “fingers” on a brown plane, an extended black outlined leg and foot, and a short curved torso at the bottom.



A more fully articulated version of this form, especially the bottom parts, appears in *The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle* of the same year and *Echo* of 1950. It should be familiar to students of Pollock because this sideways form is a restatement of the same motif originating in his old master studies (Signorelli) and the bottom of the Thomas Hart Benton compositions. Pollock accented the planes with thin, poured, overlapping *dripped* lines that were drawn from the Siqueros *Maguey* poster and painting as noted above. These, of course, were the basis of his classic drippings of 1947-50. Thus, with increasing abstractness he was able to render his expression of magical, ritual, and

transformative power. Indeed, (*Untitled [Composition with Pouring II]*) may seem completely abstract to most observers.

This loosening of the solidarity of form became the basis of several works from 1943 including *Pasiphae* and *She-Wolf*. This loosening was not necessarily automatist but could simply have been explosive.



*She-Wolf* (fig. 36), a portrayal of perhaps the best-known archetype of the nurturing power of nature in Western mythology (and an alchemic symbol of wild, animal, energy), is especially fragmentary, as Pollock seemingly painted the ground first and then “excavated” shapes out of it in the form of a nursing wolf with distinct teats, a skeletal, pictographic child in front of it, and an Indian “heart-line” arrow. A close examination reveals rough marks all over the surface that are still visible. While not dripped, the form is still very fragmentary. *She-Wolf* is roughed-out, then, from a formless surface, a

technique that Pollock learned from Siqueiros and used on his own. He did this in several drawings, too, such as numbers CRIII: 977 and 978 as well as in other paintings such as *Man and Woman in Search of a Symbol* and *Two*.

Interestingly, *She-Wolf* is a mythic but familiar subject to us even though it has been described as an oddity in Pollock's work by commentators who view his paintings as the expressions of personal psychological introspection. In fact, *She-Wolf* represents the dualism of the forces of life and death. The painting refers to the myth of the animal that suckled the human children Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome. She is thus an archetypal Pollock duality, a life-threatening beast who also sustains life. She is animal, but human and nurturing, dangerous and "negative," but affirmative, much like Prometheus who challenged the gods with his foundational gift, and much like Jung in terms of the unconscious and shamanism's animal instinct which challenges reason after suffering "death." The wolf has triangular teats and its head seems to be a skeletal structure, as though its flesh has been penetrated and examined from within, an example of the idea of the shamanist "x-ray." Pollock used x-ray skeletalization often, for example for the guardian figures of *Pasiphae*, *There Were Seven in Eight*, *Guardians of the Secret* and *Two*, among the many others. While Pollock's pictorial sources for some of his figures may include Picasso for some of his figures, the idea is shamanist. Clyfford Still also used the Columbia Plateau peoples' x-ray idea in his work of the late 1930s and early 1940s. The wolf's white skull contains burgeoning organic life in the form of the symbolic flowers in its mouth, and it lies within what seems to be a



darkly outlined horned bull's head.



Pollock thus has fused the myth of the life-givers of Rome and ultimately Western civilization with his bull-force. At the top, he also adds (*perhaps*) a flying bird spirit to his spiral “9” form, the symbol of life and growth. The horned bull head reappears as the other end of the wolf.

Most significantly, in front of the creature and her nurturing teats, and by the vertical snake at the left, is another Pollock archetype, his pictograph humpbacked child, that is, the stillborn, the Orozco life-in-death and death-in-life symbol, the infant.



Pollock's she-wolf thus gives suck to the child of the myth. *She-Wolf* then is a symbol of fecundity in the Pollock manner. Indeed, he reinforces the implications of the inner site of this fertile if dangerous growth by the inclusion, across the center, of an arrow inspired by Zuni Pueblo pottery. In Zuni lore, the arrow passes though the mouth, that is, from the outside to the inside as a symbol of life, and from the entrance to the inner spirit of the animal. *She-Wolf* is a symbolic work as much as it is a vital and explosive one. Form and symbol are one; they are of yet another stage of the life process.

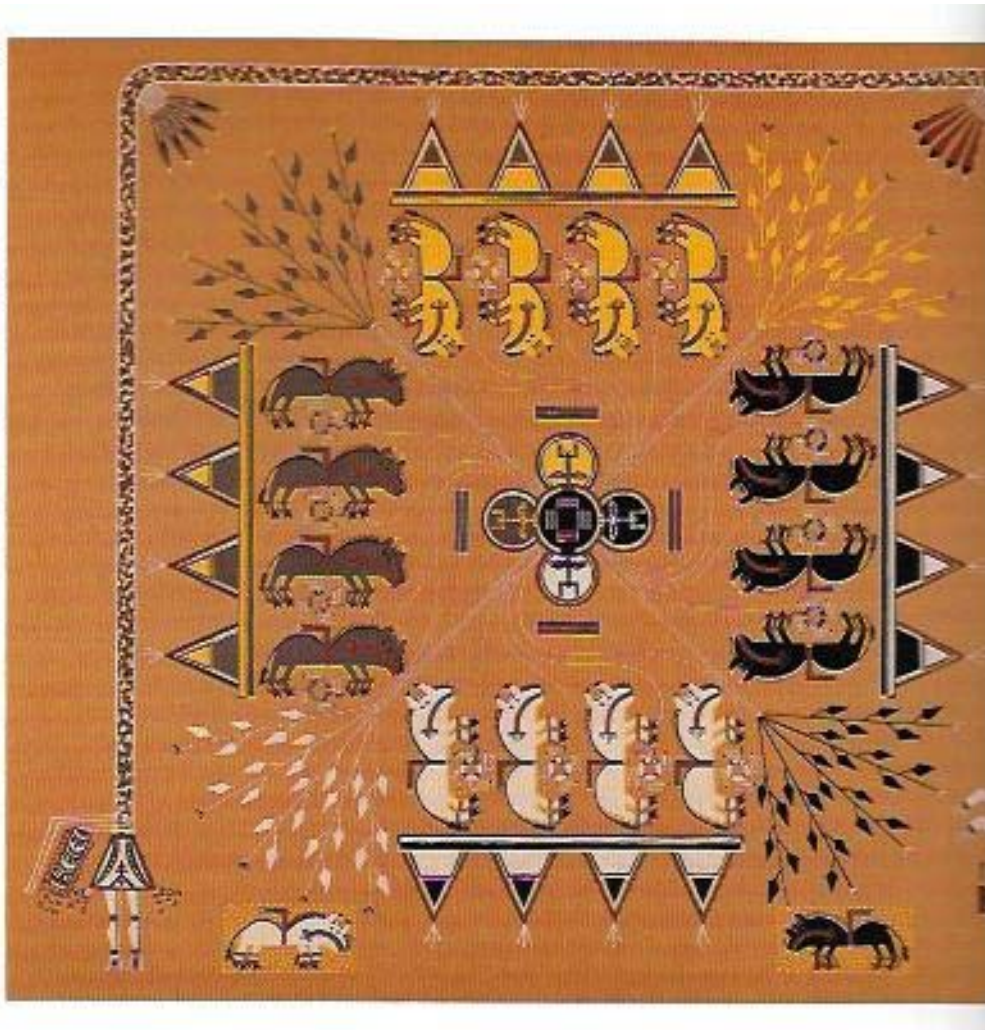
Vital and fragmentary, too, is *Pasiphae*, another version of Pollock's themes chosen from Greek mythology. Whatever its origin and development as "Moby Dick," the painting involves one of Pollock's classic subjects, as we saw, the struggle against and union with our animal selves. The novel *Moby Dick* is tale of a man's seemingly mad pursuit of an all-powerful white whale that had



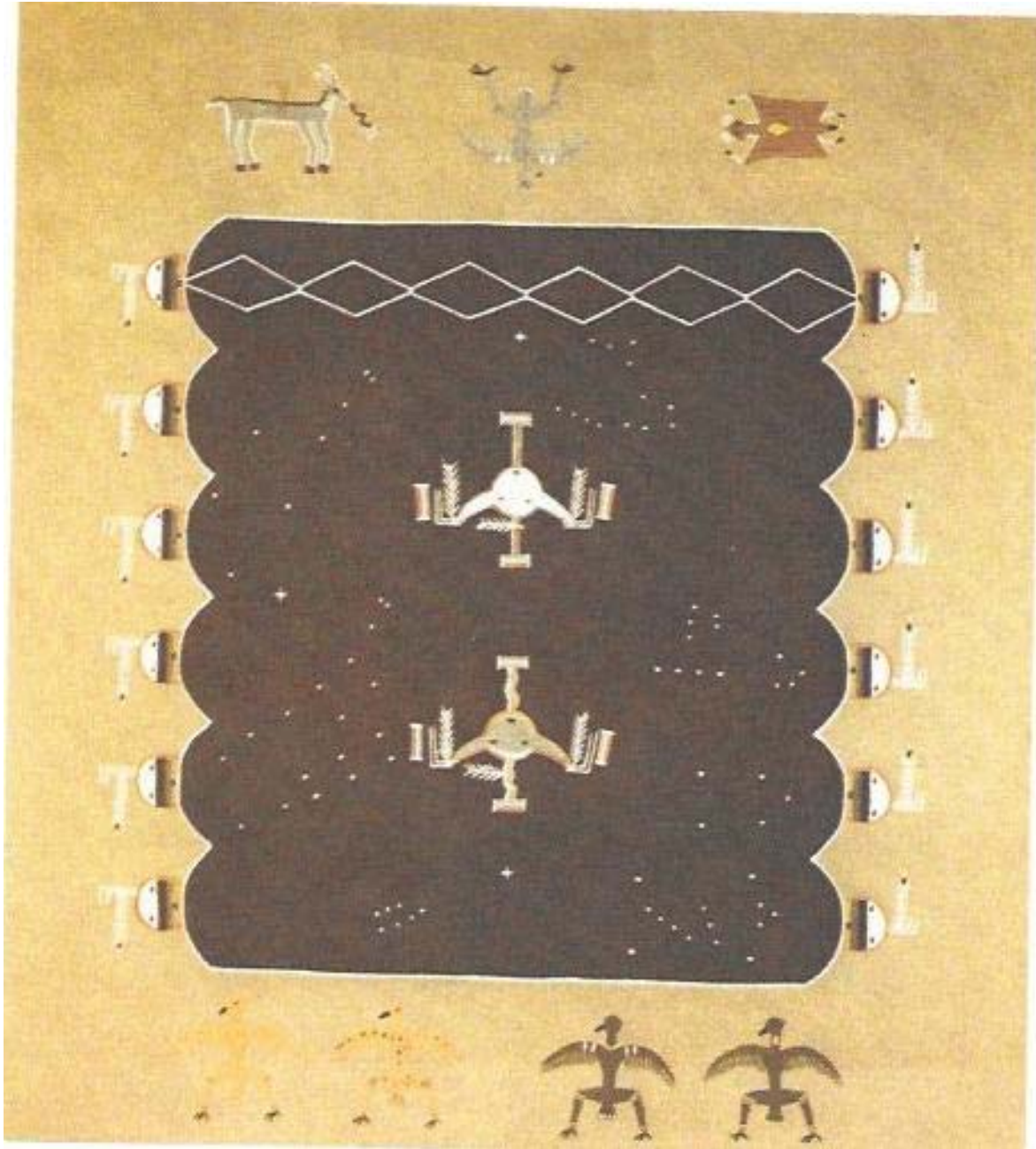
taken his leg. Thus, although the creature is a menace to the protagonist, he relentlessly pursues it even though his pursuit of that power will kill him. In the end, Ahab is destroyed and bound to the whale. This tale of the relationship of man and animal is taken up in the myth of Pasiphae, where it becomes slightly more positive. Pasiphae, the queen of Crete, mates with a bull to produce the minotaur, that is, a half -human, half-animal monster. In both tales, the human rides the animal. Pollock renders both subjects through the use of a pictographic, zig-zag stick figure, who sits astride the bull in the center of the canvas. The stick figure, which has no female characteristics, is depicted through the blossoming of a sunflower at its head and an intersection (“penetration”) of the Native American “breath of life” form in its middle. This latter intersection is typical of buffalo and deer in Navaho sand painting (fig. 37)| where such a linear intersection symbolizes “the fact that they (the buffalo

‘people’) have been brought back to life.”<sup>1</sup>

Shooting Chart: Buffalo Group by Fred Geary. Photograph by Gene Balzer



In another sand painting top left, the back of a deer is intersected by a rainbow bar that enlarges its power; a flow of its increased “breath of life” in the form of a dark line emanates from its mouth.



(Breath to the Zuni is the sacred wind of life while in the Hako ceremony of the Pawnee, discussed in the *Twenty-Second Annual Report*, part II, the drum which accompanies the ceremony, as it does ceremonies of many Native American cultures, is considered to be the “breathing mouth of wood.”<sup>li</sup> In Nahuatl myth, Quetzalcoatl plays the role of the mythic “Breath of Life” uniting

the male and female principles in a cosmic duality. And interestingly, in theosophy, “creation is a process of divine inhalation and exhalation.”<sup>lii</sup>) In *Pasiphae*, at the right of the composition stands a bearded Greek in armor with a lower half of shamanic x-rayed bone. He is matched by a more animal-like guardian on the opposite side.

The union of *Pasiphae*, the union of man, woman, and beast, is one ever familiar to us with its symbols as well as its subject. That union and its alternation of human destiny are celebrated by many small marks and multiple “busy” forms. The intense event taking place is expressed here by symbolic, vital fragmentation, as well as being rendered symbolically. Indeed, vitalist explosiveness -- again a Pollock metaphor for shamanist “chaos” -- nearly envelops the canvas.

Explosiveness itself takes over Pollock’s painting. *Mural* of 1943 (fig. 38) literally extends it almost twenty feet in length and eight feet in height. The painting consists of overwhelming Baroque rhythms that are partially





based on Benton's idea of extending large-scale horizontal compositions through figural verticals and composites, as evident in Benton's diagrams and swirling curvilinear and straight forms, large and small. *Mural* also looks like the vertical "backbone" of *Burning Landscape* multiplied innumerable times, yet it contains few scattered paint marks, drips, or roughed-out forms. Is this image of dynamic forces and power automatist? Is automatism even necessary in our conceptualization of the painting? In one way, the painting is reminiscent of Pollock/Baziotes/Kamrowski's upright, curvilinear forms with large-scale linear webs. What was barely incipient in their automatist sketch has been more fully developed here.

Indeed, *Mural* has more fully realized forms, figures, and perhaps symbols than these earlier works. The painting is imbued with complexity and new meaning, one of which has been suggested by Jack Rushing. For him,

*Mural* consists of multiple variants of a figure that can be found on Hohokam pottery from the Southwest and had appeared in the “Indian Art of the United States” exhibition in 1941 and its catalogue. The figures are described simply in the catalogue as “amusing painted figures of men and animals” executed with a “broad, free-flowing line quite unlike the rather stiff draughtsmanship of the Pueblo painters.” They are often “repeated in long rows.” But Rushing identifies them as humpbacked flute-players, figures that are symbolic phallic deities called Kokopelli. (Interestingly, the humpbacked *Yei-B’ganaskiddy* is the Navajo God of Plenty.) Kokopelli figures frequently have pregnant women around them and Rushing compares them to other minor Pollock works as well as *Mural*. Given what we have seen in Pollock’s work, this interpretation is very tempting -- humpbacked, mytho-ritualistic figures suggesting fecundity and often repeated in long rows. Very tempting, but visually, this author is uncertain. Pollock’s forms do generally resemble the Hohokam pottery figures but that is just it -- only generally. Curvilinear, biomorphic figures and lines are common in Pollock’s work and the art of his era. It was the style.

Nevertheless, the figures of *Mural* are more than just biomorphic lines. That explanation is sufficient for modernist, formalist criticism, but it is inadequate for us. One can see rows of heads above -- some resembling our looping form, some a spiral, and some a scumbled outburst -- and feet-joint heads below. Some “heads” also seem to be scattered throughout the canvas. A close examination reveals further that the white “ground” figures are significant. They seem to be elongated but sharply curved, resembling

cartouches. Indeed, closer examination suggests those white, curved forms swell almost into spiral volutes. The white forms suggest *pregnancy*, that ever-familiar form and subject in Pollock's works. *Mural* is full of them. Some also suggest erect phalluses. A second look at the dark spines makes one realize that they are actually extended spirals, too. *Mural* is full of elongated and fat, swelling and thin spirals, and elongated "9s", in other words, Pollock's symbols for pregnancy, the child, and growth itself. (Are these "9s" ultimately suggested by the looping quality of Picasso's relevant work, *Girl Before a Mirror?*) *Mural* is a field of fecundity, much like *Pasiphae*, *She-Wolf* and vaginal drawings 463 and 479. *Mural* is alive with new life, a theme fully in keeping with all of Pollock's work. The explosiveness we have been following, sometimes seemingly scumbled and often mixed in with symbols such as sexual triangles and stars, has now extended to almost twenty feet in length and eight feet in height.

Interestingly, for all the busy-work above, below, and especially at the center, lie a series of horizontal lines that sustain the curves as in the bottom of Pollock's first "abstraction," *Untitled* of 1938-4. And more interestingly, *Mural* has long been thought of as a painting that Pollock did in one night. As legend, supported by Lee Krasner, has it, Pollock had a commission from Peggy Guggenheim for the foyer of her townhouse on 61st Street. Pollock procrastinated, and then heroically painted the very large painting in one night.<sup>liii</sup> Through such a story Pollock reiterated his conventional persona: the volcanic artist whose art bursts forth with little study and deliberation. Rushing compares this burst to a shamanist trance.<sup>liv</sup>

Voices have been raised, however, that question that account. Harold Lehman, Pollock's long-time friend, has specifically challenged this one-night story, declaring that Pollock actually worked on the painting over time. He says he saw it in Pollock's studio before it was installed.<sup>lv</sup> This question can be resolved, however, by conservators. They need to examine the paint to gauge the drying times of the oil paints. Since the colors do not bleed into one another, that is, they ride over the ridges and lines of earlier paint layers without any blurring of them, could this painting technically have been done in one night? If some colors take more than a few minutes or even a few hours, days, or weeks to dry, it would be unlikely that *Mural* was done in one evening, as the running, bleeding and puddling of the paint would be visible if that were the case.<sup>lvi</sup>





*There Were Seven in Eight* of 1945 recapitulates *Mural* in larger and more specific forms (fig. 39). Here Pollock has repeated his rows of figures but more robustly in an elongated echo of reproductions of Northwest Coast carved and painted boxes as well as Inuit figures and other masks and heads (fig. 40).



Pollock adopted a Jungian explanation for the work, as the title itself is Jungian.



The painting further contains a scroll-like, rectilinear labyrinth form at the upper left, which Pollock had used in his drawings, for example, with the spiral. The scroll labyrinth is a “Path to the Underworld.” In some shamanic cultures, the path of initiation is an invisible one. Scrolls, labyrinths, and trails of varying meaning denote the ‘orientation’ of the neophyte’s direction. Certain forms, such as the labyrinth, explicitly represent the experience of initiation: entry into the abyss of the protected sanctuary of the mysteries, a pilgrimage of this spirit. The journey is in fact an expression of the evolution of the human spirit out of worldly time and space.”<sup>lvii</sup>

Pollock achieved even greater structural integration and cohesion in his painting *Gothic* dating from 1944 (fig. 41).



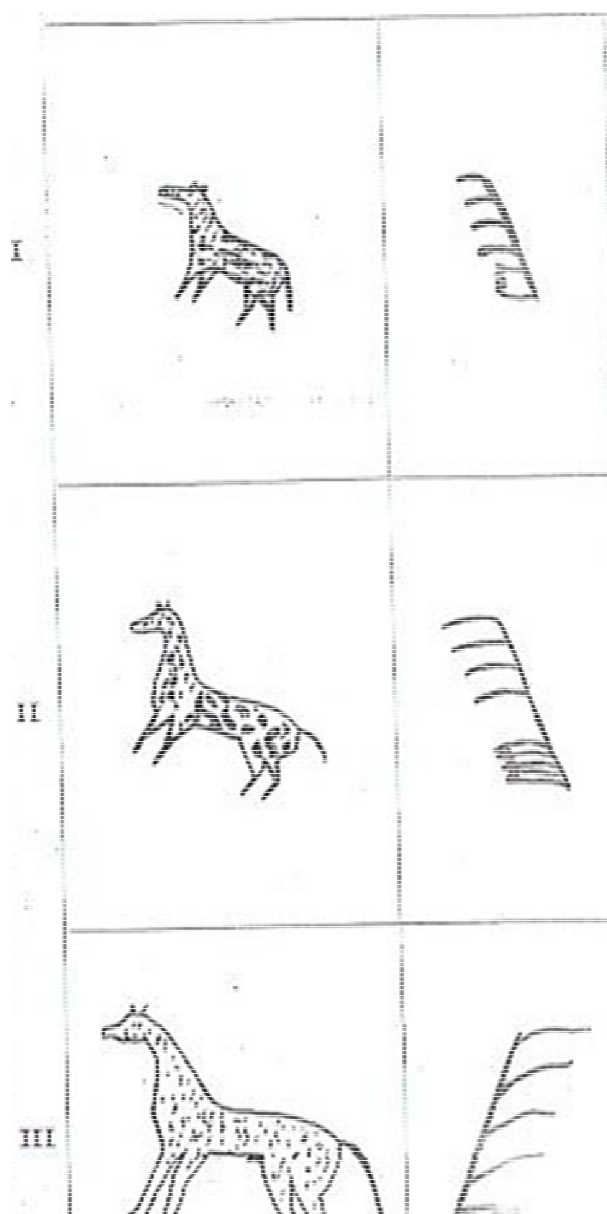




This was another momentary breakthrough, for it is a painting of a mythic figure or figures consisting solely of fully articulated interlocking curves and rhythms. For the integration of his figures, Pollock quite specifically drew from his training in abstract composition with Benton. *Gothic* is founded on one of Benton's structural diagrams of interlocking, curving, and straight lines, a sort of fret system to which Pollock added some abbreviated suggestions of heads throughout and fingered hands on the side. *Gothic* seems to be all curves. It does have, however, as did many of his paintings since [*Composition with Pourings I & II*], some dripped lines, but these are for accentuation. Pollock's drive to represent first symbolically and then pictorially the gestating, curving outpouring of mythic power is clearly realized in *Gothic*. Again, we have an original mode of dynamic, curvilinear structure that is "explosive" in its forcefulness but denies, indeed, one can say "explodes," the idea that automatism is a necessary component of Pollock's creativity and that Pollock created without thought or planning. On the contrary, the fact that he re-did Benton's structure as explosive force shows that he was a thinking artist just as in his earlier, all-over outline drawings.

Moreover, at the top of *Gothic* we see a diagonal "v" shape line in white with several hatch marks in it, also in white. This form may seem harmless -- perhaps it is a mouth and teeth -- but it appears in several works, and I believe that its occurrence is significant. We see it again, for example, in *Totem Lesson I*, where the mouth of the totemic figures consists of a similar line with black and white hatchings. They could be "teeth" as well but I think that is not the

case, as it is a motif illustrated once again in Boas's *Primitive Art* and in the pages of the Bureau publications that Pollock used frequently in his own way



(fig. 42).<sup>lviii</sup>

Rather than abstract

anatomy, I believe it to be a Native American variant on an earlier image: the orange and yellow lines sprouting from the nose of the main *Stenographic Figure*.



Pollock's emphasis in this work, as in others, belies something more than anatomy. *Stenographic Figure* (fig. 43) suggests a solution: the sprouting lines and forms in *Gothic*, *Totem Lesson I* and elsewhere symbolize the mythic breath of life, which we have discussed above. The "mythic breath" comes from images such as those of a calumet pipe of the Dakotas, that is, a straight pipe stem decorated with feathers and streamers. (At the very left end of *She-Wolf*, on the spirals and next to what should be the nostrils of the x-ray head lies a red "elbow." It is appropriately placed as this "elbow" may be derived from another pipe, the so-called "elbow" pipe. Rising smoke from an elbow pipe bowl petitions the spirit world. It also may drive disease from the body.) All these

paintings reinforce their themes with this symbol of the force of life itself. To complete our examination, one needs to look at the pictographic, stick-figure woman in *Pasiphae*. As she copulates with the bull, the Native Americanized “breath” pipe form crosses her “body” to the body of the bull within the mandala. She gives “life,” communicates with nature, and flowers at her head.

Clearly, then, Pollock developed an image of expressive and explosive movement, flux, and flow as a symbol and a form expressing the life process. From *Gothic* of 1944 one may think that he continued this development, but he hesitated. Perhaps he thought that his painting was moving out of control because he seems to have refocused with several relatively more static works such as the *Totem Lessons* of 1944-45, *The White Angel*, and *The Child Proceeds* of 1945. These paintings are static in their retreat from rhythmic structure and evocative linearity and they render a more conventional, fully planar figure of symbols and references. The subject of the psyche/personality’s new birth or fecundity remained the same, but the images were less formally expressive of it.

Indeed, Pollock seems to have made such a move earlier, that is, he alternated between more dynamic and expressive forms and flatter, more distinctly planar canvases. This tendency to alternate in this way seems to be the most telling stylistic characteristic in his early work of the forties, in which there is little stylistic consistency from painting to painting. Pollock seems to be all over the place except for these two directions. For example, *Burning*



*Landscape* of 1943 consists of scattered paint and pictographic forms. So, too, does *Pasiphae* of 1943 which is very fragmented. Yet these were immediately preceded in 1942 by *Male and Female*, with its relatively static, rectilinear planarity. But [*Composition with Pouring II*] seems to be more planar than any dripped work, as it contains broader areas of fully flat shapes covered with lines. So, too, does *Mural* of 1943, with its linearity but equally with its planarity. Pollock achieved even greater structural integration and cohesion in an original mode of dynamic curvilinearity without planar forms or fragmentary marks in his *Gothic*. Then, after several works varying in rhythmic and planar construction and symbolic form, in 1946 he moved even further from, not closer to, his poured and dripped paintings with *The Child Proceeds* of 1945, a planar work rather limited in rhythmic expressiveness. There seems to be no consistency to Pollock's mode in the early forties as he moved from a canvas with strong verticality to one of strong planarity and then to mixing those directional thrusts. It seems that he wanted to fuse the two -- explosive and expressive vitality -- with a composition full of symbolic figures. He would only achieve that desire in 1947.

A further key image appeared in Pollock's work in the early 1940s; indeed, it was a constant since the late 1930s. That is the image of the "crowd as humanity." When we last discussed [*Bald (sic) Woman with Skeleton*] and [*Composition with Ritual Scene*] we saw that they were derived from Orozco's *Prometheus*, which Orozco had adopted from El Greco's *Christ in the Temple*, which Pollock copied. (Siqueiros did many crowd scenes as well.) From this

point, the crowd-as-humanity image continued in many of Pollock's drawings. As we saw, the crowd made its most important reappearance at the top of *Pasiphae*. Here the crowd acts as witness and support, applauding the transformative act of union. The crowd is pictographic. On the left, one half-figure significantly gestures toward the center while others spread their varicolored arms and gesticulate. Thus, the union of the bull and woman is clearly heralded by "humanity." *Pasiphae*, then, reenacts ritual action as a public event or "communitas," as much as Pollock's earlier paintings did. (Pollock's placement of a cheering crowd at the top register is ultimately derived from Siqueiros's *Street Meeting* at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles in which such a group watches and responds to the street from the top of the mural.)

The richest example of the pictographic crowd appears in *Portrait of H.M.* of 1945 (fig. 44).



While the “H.M” remains unidentified (Henry Matisse, unlikely; Herman Melville, more likely; and Long Island friend Herbert Matter, too early), there is no doubt that the painting consists of multiple stick pictographic figures bobbing and weaving in what seems to be a swirling sea (?) or more subtly, an implicit mandala form. The stick-figure crowd gesticulates again, their heads simply circled. Scattered among them are gray, mostly open triangles that may be skirts or separate heads. *Portrait of H. M.* is a portrait of the public welcoming and celebrating (no one seems to be fleeing) the dynamic irruption or ecstasy which is Pollock’s ultimate symbol. In shamanism, the temporal

experience of ecstasy opens communications with the supernatural, for the shaman is the mediator between the untamed forces of nature and the human community.<sup>lix</sup> In shamanism, the shaman initiate encounters raw images of the numinous. In Jung's view, the irruption of the numinosum, the personal-mystical spirit effects that rebalance and re-coordinate the psyche, would emerge from unconscious depths. For Jung, modern man's psychological quest is for numinostic symbols that can be lived intensely and naturally. They arise spontaneously from the unconscious in the form of archetypal images from which the "gods" of the new era will be formed.

To further define the public need of his concept, in a few works Pollock alluded to the most acute representation of a public crisis in his time, World War II. Pollock contributed to the war effort in 1942 when he worked on a window-display led by Lee Krasner for the WPA War Services. That year he also included *The Flame* in the first exhibition devoted to war art which was launched by the newly formed group *Artists for Victory* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1943. Neither *The Flame* nor his *Burning Landscape*, in which splatters and spreads accompany a pictographic figure, contain much that is directly illustrative of the war except in a general sense. (Harold Lehman related that he happened to have that painting, and that flames "projected" war, so he threw it in.<sup>lx</sup>) On the other hand, pen and ink drawings such as numbers CRIII: 724, CRIII: 726 (fig. 45),



and War of 1944/1947? (fig. 46)





and prints such as CRIV: 1080(P18), do evoke war. They consist of that new image of World War II, stacks of bodies and heads arranged as on a funeral pyre arrangement. If it were done in 1944, it would be prescient of the images of the stacks of corpses that flooded the West after the Nazi extermination camps were discovered and revealed. If the date is 1947 as it is inscribed, it forms an emblematic image of the Second War II both as a whole as well as the camps. (Allusions to war as the Holocaust as it became known were not as prevalent as they were to become later.) Whatever the date, Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists addressed the war as a comment on human needs and not on “winning” the war as was the common social and historical demand. As

Lehman said, “There was a whole national epic in the arts the essentially replaced the thirties’ social change and because of the depression. Now it’s ‘win the war!’”<sup>lxi</sup> Abstract Expressionist art was about winning peace.

(Again, interestingly, is *War*, Pollock’s forties version of Orozco’s looming transformative god of light and peace, Quetzalcoatl, who appeared in front of the gods of war, death, and storm in *Epic of Civilization*?)

The artistic image of *War* was partly inspired by Orozco’s work. This is obviously a negative statement but again, Pollock trumps the negative with a positive. He dots the pyre and the sky with his symbols of a bird, star, and branching half-moon; he also includes a transcendent female with a star hand and a bull with half-moon horns, magic breath, and a burgeoning branch tail as it radiates in the sky above the pyre, thus reenacting shamanic metaphysical, that is, transformative flight. On the other side, a totemic figure rises above a Miro-esque animal. While more concrete than the earlier paintings, *War* is a full display of Pollock’s visual language in which he meets the most terrible public crisis in recorded Western history on his own terms. His images respond in terms of mythic, shamanistic, psychic and formal regeneration.

What was this all for? Why did Pollock seek out a symbol? To teach us as well as himself what is necessary for significant change and the defeat of the personality and psyche of industrial, mechanical, rootless, and murderous mass man. And to teach us, Pollock told us that we can and must learn from

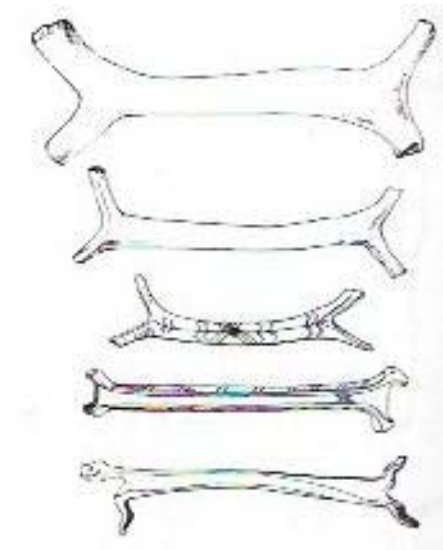
the example he provided, which led to the instructive works *Totem Lessons I & II*.

We have seen the “lessons” of *Totem Lesson II*. *Totem Lesson I* of 1944 consists of a standing mythic figure with a bird-like head. The figure can be understood as a totemic form not only because of the head, however, but because of its conjunction with an angular animal at the bottom of the canvas. Such a combination appears in images found on the baskets and blankets of several cultures (fig. 47)





The figure's totem animal is not derived from those examples (though they are not unrelated), however, but probably from Inuit caribou antler carvings of animals reproduced in Boas' *Primitive Art* (fig. 48) (p. 126) as well as various



*Smithsonian Annual Reports.* Pollock's form echoes

the same elongated torso and angular body parts of those animals. For a shaman, animals are personifications of the life power; he or she is "the channel for interspecies communication."<sup>lxii</sup> Moreover, the world of people and the world of nature and spirit are essentially reflections of each other. (For example, in a (Z) Sia ceremony, an appeal is made to animals to be present at a ceremonial of healing.<sup>lxiii</sup>) One side of Pollock's figure is also double-curved, a motif from Picasso's work of the early 1930s. As in other works, the top arm encloses a Northwest Coast-inspired head for a joint. But the painting as a whole is less a dynamic expression than a conflation of representations of plenitude from snakes to symbols of copulation to ears of corn and ritual prayer sticks. (The wedge-like forms surrounding the figure are drawn from a famous Picasso drawing, *Woman in an Armchair* of 1938, shown in the *Forty*

*Years of Picasso* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1939-40.

Motherwell and de Kooning also drew inspiration from this work.)

In short, while asserting a planar and more symbolic mode, *Totem Lesson I* expresses the past/future as Pollock understood it: cultural inheritances and powers of fertility, with non-Western forms energized, if only in a limited fashion, by curves and, one might add, fluid paint-handling and swiftly outlined forms. Pollock considered *Totem Lesson I* to be an appropriate title and message, then, and *Totem Lesson II* as well because the belief that totemic spirits -- usually shown frontally -- instruct or teach the correct ritual ways or “ceremonial knowledge” is a basic idea of totemism, shamanism, and Victor Turner’s famous discussion of liminal rituals.<sup>lxiv</sup> In shamanic rituals, the soul is open to instruction and ultimately transformation through such energized spirits, which can be either evil or helpful.<sup>lxv</sup> Some spirits tutor and others obstruct when one accesses the spirit world through a trance or altered states of consciousness. Often these tutelary or initiatory spirits take animal forms and speak through the voice and rites of the shaman: “Their presence is manifested by the shaman imitating animal cries or behavior.” Indeed, Pollock would give voice to animal cries in his *Sounds in the Grass* series of 1946 and later, e.g., in *Echo (Number 25, 1951)* (fig. 49).





In this way, he obeyed the higher natural order on the way to a relationship with the supernatural, for animal spirits instruct the shaman initiate in the way of animal wisdom and the journey that he must take.<sup>lxvi</sup>

One issue that should be taken into consideration is that communion between culture and nature first occurs in the world of the spirit. The shaman must die to the everyday world in rites in which underworld spirits have dismembered the initiatory or “neophyte” shaman. He is thus released to a higher order where, as an initiate, he is receptive to teachings from the spirit world. Animal spirit tutoring is part of the transformation process in which he participates. The exaggerated size and force of the spirit in *Totem Lesson I*, as well as in most of Pollock’s works, indicates that are “dream” paintings. Dreams are where shamanic initiations take place and whatever forms in them; they are but appearance, for there “is an inner essence, energy, or vital force common” to all of them.<sup>lxvii</sup>

Pollock’s early work thus consists of the form and symbols of new kinds of unions (whether with or without European automatism). Humanity wants, witnesses, and welcomes them. Pollock wanted to teach all, as it was taught to him how to find roots, inwardness, and a renovating spirit for the psyche/personality. But his stylistic search remained unfinished. As the struggle drives toward greater inward union, the artistic struggle shifts toward increased integrated form, the net of shamanic power..

### *Illustrations*

Fig. 1. *Burning Landscape*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 7/16 in. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Peggy Guggenheim.

Fig. 2. Mark Rothko, *Rites of Lilith*, 1945. Oil and charcoal on canvas, 82 x 106 5/8. Collection Kate Rothko Prizel.

Fig. 4. *Birth*, 1938-41. Oil on canvas mounted on plywood, 46 x 21 3/4 in. The Tate Gallery, London.

Fig. 5. Tennessee shell gorgets from Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (New York: Dover 1955 (1927)), (fig. 131), 142.

Fig. 6. [*Composition with Masked Forms*], 1938-41. Oil on canvas, 27 3/4 x 50 in. Private Collection.

Fig. 7. [*Circle*], 1938-41. Oil on composition board, 11 3/4 x 11 in. diameter. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Lee Krasner in memory of Jackson Pollock.

Fig. 8. Shamanist cosmic map or sand painting, from Waterman, 1910. Reprinted in Ruth Underhill, *Red Man's Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 278.

Fig. 9. *Male and Female*, ca. 1942. Oil on canvas, 73 x 49 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd.

Fig. 10. *Pasiphae*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 56 1/8 x 96 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Rogers, Fletcher and Harris Brisbane Dick Funds and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1982.

Fig. 11. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Street Meeting*, 1932.

Fig. 12. *The Burial of Count Orgaz*, 1586 (detail in M. Legendre and A. Hartmann's *Domenikos Theotokopoulos Called El Greco*, Paris: Editions Hyperion, 1937).

Fig. 13. *Totem Lesson I*, 1944. 70 x 44 in. Stanford Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Anderson Collection.

Fig. 14. "Mother Corn" from "Hako, Pawnee Ceremony," plate LXXXVIII, drawn by A. C. Fletcher. *Twenty-Second Annual Report* (1890-81), Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of Ethnology.

Fig. 15. Ha-Cha-Mo-Ni before Plume Offerings are attached, plate XI, drawn by Mary Irvin Wright. *Eleventh Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of Ethnology.

Fig. 16. Late Classical Maya, from Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico, 800 AD. Fired Clay.

Fig. 17. Joan Miro, *Spanish Dancer*, 1928. Chalk on flocked paper collaged with plaster et al., 41 3/4 x 26 5/8." The Morton G. Neumann Family Collection.

Fig. 18. *Yellow Triangle* (Accabonac Creek series) 1946. Oil on canvas 76.2 x 60.9 in. Private Collection, Los Angeles.

Fig. 19. *The Child Proceeds*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 43 x 22 in. Courtesy Jason McCoy Gallery.

Fig. 20. *Guardians of the Secret*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 48 3/8 x 75 3/8 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Albert M. Bender Collection, Albert M. Bender Bequest Fund Purchase.

Fig. 21. Adolph Gottlieb, *Composition*, 1945. Oil on canvas. Adolph and Ester Gottlieb Foundation.

Fig. 22. *Untitled [Drawing with Spirals]*, 1946. Brush, splatter, and black and color ink, pastel, gouache, and wash on paper. 22 1/2 x 31 in. Mr. and Mrs. Betram I. Wolstein Collection.

Fig. 23. Shamanic solarization, detail from painted buffalo hide, Sioux. Musee de l'Homme, Paris.

Fig. 24. *The White Angel*, 1946, Oil, enamel and sand. 43 5 x 29.6. Location unknown. Fig. 25. *Totem Lesson II*, 1945. 6 ft. x 60 in. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia.

Fig. 26. Haida spoons from Boas, *Primitive Art* (figs. 189-190).



Fig. 27. Carving, 1972, by Karoo Ashevak, a Spence Bay Eskimo.

Fig. 28. Yarn picture by Jose Benitez Sanchez, Mexico, 1972-80.

Fig. 29. Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonne of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) of *Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), III: 527, 1939-40. Pencil and colored pencil on paper, 14 x 11 in.

Fig. 30. Effigy Vessel, Mixtec, Zaachila, Oaxaca, Mexico, ca. 1400.

Fig. 31. Haida embroidered legging, "sea-monster with a bear's head and body of the killer," American Museum of Natural History, from Boas' *Primitive Art* (fig. 231).

Fig. 32. William Baziotes, Gerome Kamrowski, and Jackson Pollock, *Untitled*, 1940-41. Oil on canvas, 19 1/4 x 25 1/2 in. Collection Mary Jane Kamrowski.

Fig. 33. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Maguey*, 1939. Poster, Private collection.

Fig. 34. *Painting*, 1944. Gouache on plywood, 23 x 18 7/8 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Monroe Wheeler.

Fig. 35. *Composition with Pouring II*, 1943. Oil and enamel on canvas, 25 1/8" x 22 1/8 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966.

Fig. 36. *She-Wolf*, 1943. Oil, gouache and plaster on canvas. 41 7/8 x 60 in.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 37. Fred Geary, Shooting Chant: Buffalo Group; "Hail Way" sand painting.

Fig. 38. *Mural*, 1943. 8' 1 1/4 x 19'10 in. Oil on canvas. University of Iowa  
Museum of Art, Gift of Peggy Guggenheim.

Fig. 39. *There Were Seven in Eight*, 1945, oil on canvas. 43 in. x 8 ft. 6 in. The  
Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. Mr. and Mrs. Walter Bareiss  
Fund and purchase.

Fig. 40. Carved and painted Chilkat box. The American Museum of Natural  
History.

Fig. 41. *Gothic*, 1944. 7' 5/8 x 56 in. Oil and enamel on canvas. Collection,  
The Museum of Modern Art. Bequest of Lee Krasner.

Fig. 42. *Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of Ethnology.

Fig. 43. *Stenographic Figure*, 1942, Oil on linen. 40 x 56 in. Mr. and Mrs.  
Walter Bareiss Fund.

Fig. 44. *Portrait of H.M.*, 1945, Oil on canvas, 36 x 43 in. University of Iowa  
Museum of Art. Gift of Peggy Guggenheim.

Fig. 45. O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock*, CRIII: 726, 1945. 18 3/8 x 24 3/4  
in Black and colored ink, gouache, pastel and wash on paper.

Fig. 46. *War*, 1947. Brush, pen and black ink, and colored pencils on paper, 20  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 26 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Lee Krasner Pollock, in memory of Jackson Pollock, 1982.

47. Unknown Wasco artist, bag, late 1800s. Denver Art Museum Collection, Native Arts acquisition fund, 1938.1018. Fig. 8. Inuit caribou antler carvings of animals reproduced in Boas *Primitive Art* (p. 126).

Fig. 49. *Echo (Number 25, 1951)*. Enamel on canvas. 7 feet  $7\frac{7}{8}$  x 7 feet 2 in. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest and the Mr. and Mrs. David Rockefeller Fund.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Carl G. Jung, *The Structure of the Psyche*, 1927, 157.

<sup>ii</sup> See Sidra Stich, *Joan Miro: The Development of a Sign Language* (St. Louis: Washington University, 1980).

<sup>iii</sup> Barnett Newman, "The Ideographic Picture" January 20-February 8, 1947 Betty Parsons Gallery, cited in Mollie McNickle, *Barnett Newman Selected Writings and Interviews*, introd. by Richard Shiff (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), 107. It was McNickle who compiled this study and who should be given credit as the author.

<sup>iv</sup> *Sixteen Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology (1889-90) defined pictographs as symbolic.

<sup>v</sup> See also the Inuit ivory carving of a composite animal in "The Eskimo about

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Bering Strait,” Ibid., 446.

vi Tom Bahti, *Southwestern Indian Ceremonials*, (KC Publications, 1982, rev.), 24-25.

vii. Franz Boas, *Primitive Art*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), reprint (New York: Dover, 1955), 126.

viii John Graham’s article on “Picasso and the Unconscious” is the cited example for Pollock’s acquaintance with Inuit masks. However, they were on display at the American Museum of Natural History and discussed and illustrated in depth in the BAE *Eighteenth Annual Report*, 1896-97, pt. 1.

ix See Stephen Polcari, *Pollock et Le Chamanisme* (Paris: Pinacothèque de Paris, 2008), 35 for another illustration.

x Gary Doore, interview with Michael Harner, “The Ancient Wisdom in Shamanic Cultures,” in Shirley Nicholson, *Shamanism An Expanded View of Reality* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 1987), 5.

xi Jung, cited in *ibid.* 2.

xii Sidra Stich, “Anxious Visions” in Sidra Stich et al., *Anxious Visions Surrealist Art* (New York: Abbeville, 1990), 23.

xiii Mary Schmidt, “Crazy Wisdom: The Shaman as Mediator of Realities,” in Nicholson, *Shamanism*, 66. Circular diagrams suggesting the disk of the earth with the encircling sea and overarching sky in ground paintings were used in puberty ceremonies of Mission Indians. See Ruth Underhill, *Red Man’s America, A History of Indians in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) 276.

xiv Armand J. Labbe, *Guardians of the Life Stream* (Santa Ana, California: Bowers Museum of Cultural Art: Cultural Arts Press, 1995), 115.

xv See Polcari, *Pollock et Le Chamanisme*, 62.

xvi Matilda Coxe Stevenson, “The Sia,” *Eleventh Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology (1889-90), 73-74.

xvii Lame Deer and Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*, quoted in Joan Halifax, *Shaman The Wounded Healer* (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1982), 89. A “sacred pipe” in the initiation of a chief is discussed in the Smithsonian Institution *Eleventh Annual Report*, 359.

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xviii Joan Halifax, "Shamanism, Mind, and No-Self," in Nicholson, *Shamanism*, 206.

xix See also Jack Rushing, "Ritual and Myth: Native American Culture and Abstract Expressionism" in Maurice Tuchman, ed., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: Abbeville, 1986), 281-82. Rushing has pointed out a series of drawings and paintings of a copulating couple.

xx Labbe, *Guardians of the Life Stream*, 92.

xxi Rushing also believes that the form's source is the Mimbres pot. See W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 181.

xxii Halifax, *Shaman*, 84.

xxiii Ibid., 17.

xxiv For a discussion of Still's use of multiple "eyes" to indicate his shamanic and Nietzschean power, see Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 97-98, and note 20.

xxv Halifax, *Shaman*, 90.

xxvi Ibid., 61.

xxvii Ibid., 84.

xxviii See Sidra Stich, "Anxious Visions," 44-45.

xxix Ibid. 46-47.

xxx Yarn picture by Jose Benitez Sanchez, of Mexico of 1972-80, reproduced in Halifax, *Shaman*, 76. Sanchez notes that this image conveys the physical disintegration and material mutation that accompany the apotheosis of the spiritual essence of the Huichol's First Man who becomes a permanent energy for the cultivation of maize and squash. First Man survived a great flood with the help of the Great Grandmother Growth, and under her guidance, he laid the foundation of human life.

xxxi David MacLagan, *Creation Myths/Man's Introduction to the World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 26.

xxxii Halifax, *Shaman*, 46-49.

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xxxiii Ibid., 76.

xxxiv See Still, 1938-N - # 1, (*Totemic Fantasy*), (PH-206), reproduced in Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 102. See also Stephen Polcari,

xxxv Stich, "Anxious Visions," 74-79.

xxxvi See Ellen Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 95.

xxxvii Pollock, quoted in "Jackson Pollock," *Arts and Architecture* 61 (February 1944): 14.

xxxviii See Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 139.

xxxix Marianna Torgovick, *Gone Primitive Savage Intellectuals Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 170.

xl Ibid., 171.

xli Ibid., 165.

xliv See Stephen Polcari, interview with Harold Lehman, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, Summer, 1997, transcript, 17.

xlvi See Torgovick, *Gone Primitive*, 172.

xlv See Alice C. Fletcher, "The Hako: A Pawnee Ceremony," *Twenty-Second Annual Report*, Pt. 2 Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology (1904), 75, in which the moon is likened to the night and the feminine principle in ritual ceremony. The moon as woman occurs frequently in Native American ceremony although it is a common idea in the West, too.

xlv In the BAE *Eleventh Annual Report*, 124 in a description of Sia ceremony, the waters "impregnate our mother, the earth, that she may give to us the fruits of her being." Supplication is made to the "priestly rulers" of the cloud people of the cardinal points who "ascend" to the heavens. Pollock's *Male and Female* may reenact such a fertility rite.

xlvi See, for example, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology, *First Annual Report*, (1879-80); *Sixteenth Annual Report*, (1894-5); *Nineteen* (1897-98) pt. 2 and *Twenty-Second Annual Report*, (1900-01), pt. 1.



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xlvi Halifax, *Shaman*, 9.

xlvi See Stephen Polcari, "Jackson Pollock's Maguey Shorthand," *Source* XXXII # 3, Spring 2013. 30-36.

xlx Quoted in Stephen Polcari, "Reuben Kadish Oral History Interview," transcript, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, April 15, 1992, 19.

<sup>1</sup> Eugene Baatsoslanii Joe and Mark Bahti, *Navaho Sandpainting* (Tucson, Arizona: Treasure Chest Publications, 1978), 30.

li *Twenty- Second Annual Report*, part II, 1990-01, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology, 18, 28.

lii Peter Washington, *Madam Blavatsky's Baboon* (New York: Schoken, 1993), 19.

liii Francis O'Connor and Eugene Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonne of Paintings, Drawings and Other Works* (New Haven: Yale University, 1978) I: 94.

liv Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 177.

lv Harold Lehman, personal communication, summer, 1996.

lvi This has since been confirmed by the conservation, exhibition and catalogue of *Mural* at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles in Spring, 2014. Different layers of paint took much varied time to dry.

lvii Halifax, *Shaman*, 68.

lviii See, for example, Smithsonian Institution *Fourth Annual Report*, (1882-83), Garrick Mallery, "Pictographs of the North American Indians," 104-105, and "Winter Count on Buffalo Robe," pl vi.

lix Halifax, *Shaman*, 14.

lx Polcari, Interviews with Harold Lehman, transcript, 104.

lxi *Ibid.*, 86.

lxii Halifax, *Shaman*, 13.

lxiii *Eleventh Annual Report*, 126.

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<sup>lxiv</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-Structure* ((New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995), 12-13. See also Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, Bollingen Series 76 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 88. See also

<sup>lxvi</sup> Halifax, *Shaman*, 73-79.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Labbe, *Guardians of the Life Stream*, 110.

## Ritual Magic Power

In the mid-1940s, an event took place that altered Jackson Pollock's work and, eventually, the history of art. After some transitional works -- *Shimmering Substance*, *Eyes in the Heat I* and others that climaxed his symbol for explosive growth -- Pollock developed his overall poured and dripped paintings. They stood in decisive contrast to the static and dynamic paintings he had done before. But what led to this change? Some thing or event both reaffirmed for Pollock the appropriateness of an image of dynamic force and flow as a formal and expressive means of rendering his themes of magical force, ecstasy, fecundity, and the new birth of a new psyche/personality. Something also perhaps inspired the further development of that image.



In early 1946 the Museum of Modern Art held an exhibition titled "The Art of the South Seas" (fig. 1). It was one of the first major shows of Oceanic objects in America, and it is still admired today as a fine mix of anthropological information and ritual objects

that in the West are considered to be art as well as artifact. As the first important postwar exhibit of non-Western art, it attracted a great deal of attention. Most Abstract Expressionists saw it; Barnett Newman wrote a review of the exhibition, and Adolph Gottlieb and Richard Pousette-Dart incorporated references to the objects in their work.<sup>i</sup>

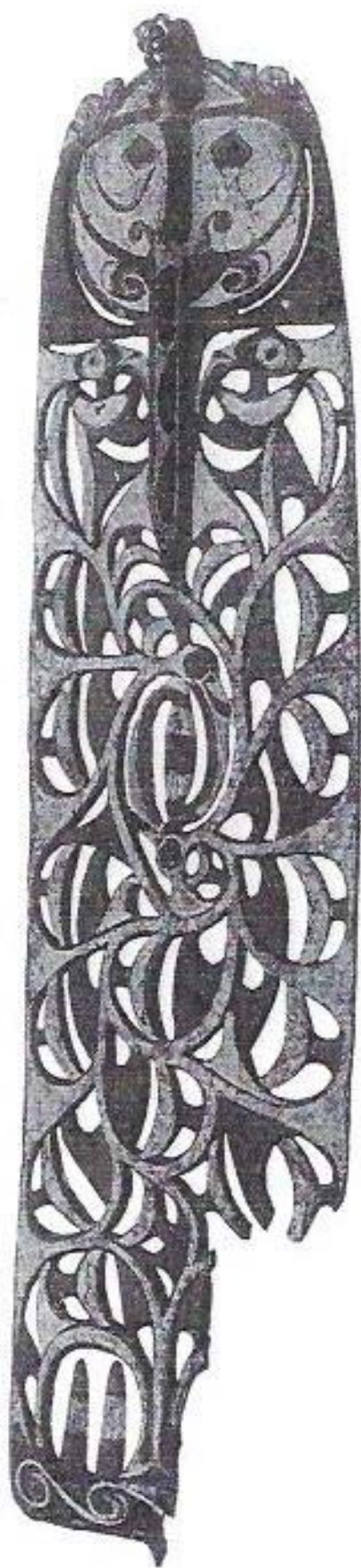
As noted above, Pollock had drawn considerable inspiration from the Indian Art show of 1941. He had attended it with his friends Fritz Bultman and John Graham, and with his Jungian analyst Violet de Laszlo; also, he had watched sand painters create and destroy paintings in one day at its entrance.<sup>ii</sup> That show had been crucial to the development of his goal of creating an art of ritual generative force and altered consciousness, and significantly as a result of seeing it he adopted forms from several different Native American cultures, some of which we have seen already.

By the time the Oceanic show arrived, Pollock's direction toward the expression of dynamic, magic, fecund power and personality had matured, even if he could not settle on one imagistic means. In his youth, Pollock had visited the Oceanic room of the American Museum of Natural History with his friend Reuben Kadish, and Brooklyn and the Museum of Natural History with his friend Harold Lehman, with whom he also visited the Modern show,<sup>iii</sup> but he developed a new admiration for Oceanic material. He testified to this new interest in a letter discovered by Paul Karlstrom in his work as Director of the West Coast Regional Center of the Archives of American Art. In it, Pollock wrote

to his friend Louis Bunce, “*The Pacific Islands show at the Museum of Modern Art . . . tops everything that has come this way in the past four years* (my emphasis),” that is, since the exhibition “Indian Art of the United States” held in 1941-42.<sup>iv</sup> Pollock thus regarded the Oceanic show as superior to the modernist exhibits of the intervening years. He also owned the catalogue.

Despite his admiration, Pollock seems to have borrowed from only one work; but that work may have been the proverbial “straw that broke the back,” codifying the direction he wanted to take. On a wall in a central gallery was a carved plank of tropical hardwood, 167 cm. long, that had been acquired by Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History during the Joseph N. Field

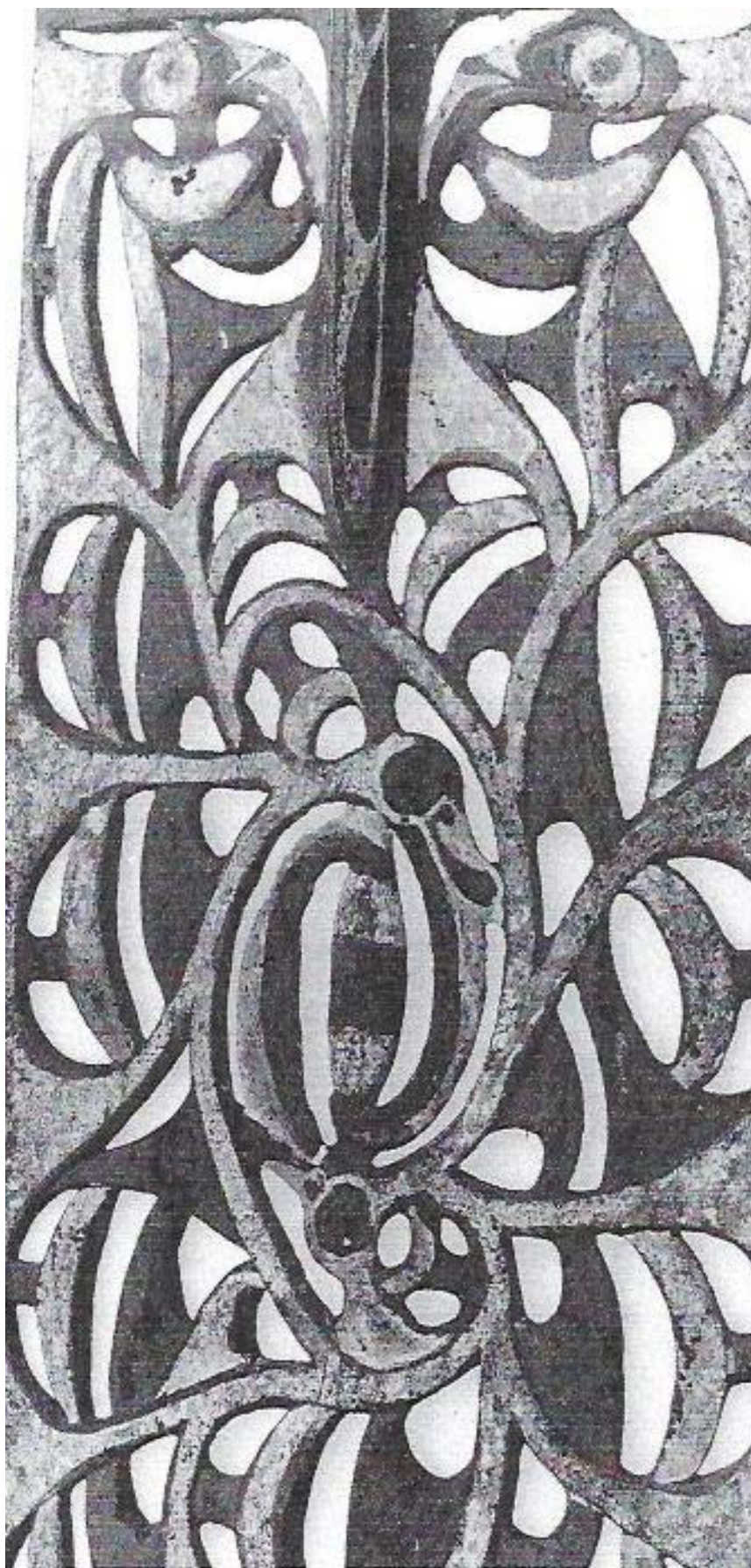
Expedition in 1913 to what was then German New Guinea (fig. 2).



It was from the Kaiserin Augusta River in Simar. The relief carving consists of tall, vertical open fretwork with a frontal head and an elongated, projecting beak on top. The head oversees crisscrossing, chalky white and burnt sienna (iron oxide), with slightly charred curves extending to the edges of the plan, that which were recently identified as a skull rack. In other words, beneath the head there are all-over curves and counter curves of earth tones with open intervals -- literally air itself -- in between. A face-like decorative arabesque, hard to see in reproduction, may sit at the bottom. The body of the carving consists of mostly abstract curves, except for two pairs of bird forms, one symmetrical, set next to the beak of the head and the other below the beak in a top/bottom oval swirl. The birds, especially the central



pair, have distinctive, button eyes that differ from the curvilinear lines and



planes (fig. 3).

Aside from the beak, the carving is in very low relief. The curves are long and short, thin and swelling, and the relief spaces are in a number of shapes, including comma space and leaf-like forms. The back is not painted. This Sepik River board thus seems to consist entirely of swelling, all-over, light and dark, tendril-like curves. Below the head, it is virtually a linear web. The plank clearly resembles Pollock's emerging new style much more than that of his works immediately before it such as *The Child Proceeds*.

The question must be raised about whether this Sepik River carved board may have inspired or played at least a major part in Pollock's radical stylistic shift in 1946. The plank matches his emerging style of pouring in every significant way, and the timing of its impact is important. So, too, is the relationship of the carving to Pollock's transitional works of 1946, the year in which he absorbed and worked through the ideas and possibilities suggested by it. No other previously noted influences match the carving in range and closeness to Pollock's drippings. They are all missing something in our terms of comparison.

These include noted examples of dripping by Hans Hofmann in *Spring* of the early 1940s, which is just that -- dripping. It may have helped Pollock crystallize his thinking, for his first major use of the drip appears in 1943 in *Water Bird* (for the Inuit, shamans were analogous with water birds<sup>v</sup>) and the [*Compositions with Pourings I & II*], but that is the extent of the possible impact. *Spring* does not include the images and figures that appear in Pollock's new

work of 1946. Brooklyn housewife Janet Sobel's delightful curlicue webs evocative of the cosmos were known to have been admired by Pollock.<sup>vi</sup> However, the curls turn in on one another and do not extend as Pollock's lines do. Despite years of denial by modernists, Pollock did admire Mark Tobey's "white writing" paintings, which made him a significant artist at the time. They are also suggestive and extend to the edges of his painting but they are finer and more delicate than Pollock's vigorous own markings. Andre Masson has Pollock's vigor in works of the early 1940s such as *Labyrinth* and they may also have provided exemplars, but none of these figures combine movement and subject matter directly in a way similar to Pollock's. Perhaps Joan Miro's new paintings, the *Constellation* series, shown in New York at Pierre Matisse's Gallery in 1945, were the closest to Pollock's. These works consist of a wiry line connecting figures and cosmic elements, making a field with figures imbedded in it. But again, the line is mostly unmodulated and lacks a life of its own. Pollock's line varies from wide to narrow and overlies other lines, which Miro's does not.

In 1945 Pollock had moved to Springs, Long Island from New York City after he married Lee Krasner. Before the near-maturity of his abstractions such as *Full Fathom Five* and *Cathedral* of 1947, Pollock completed two series of works called the *Accabonac Creek* and *Sounds in the Grass*. These series consisted of small canvases, the most famous of which were *Eyes in the Heat*

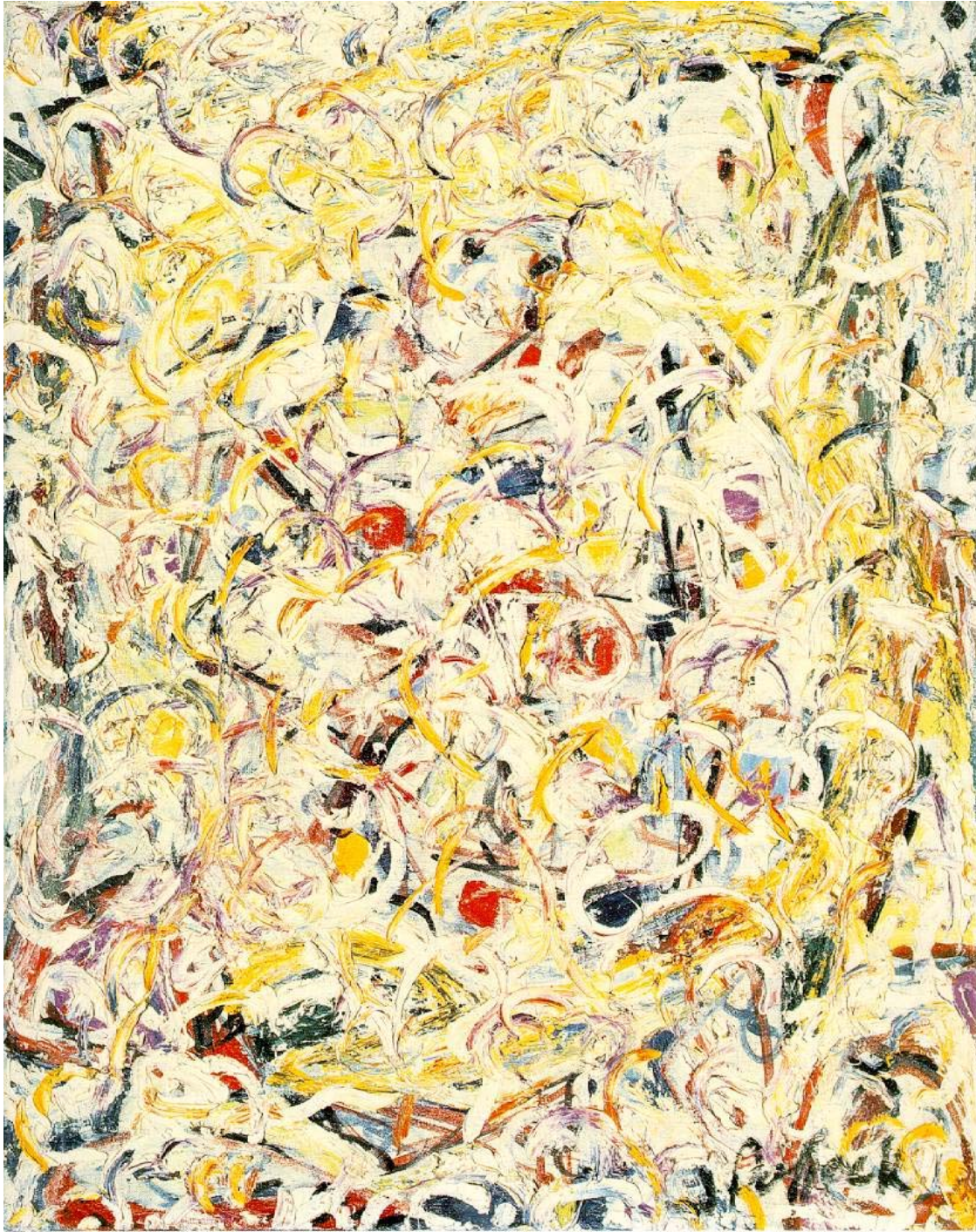




(fig. 4)

and *Shimmering Substance* (fig. 5)





, both

completed in 1946. *Eyes in the Heat* contains innumerable small thick strokes in concentric whirlwinds stretched to the edges of the canvas, echoing the basic form of the Sepik River carving. It obviously indicates a sharp break with

Pollock's immediate past, and a great intensification of his earlier curvilinear and most expressive designs. What is most striking, however, is the use of the imagery of eyes absorbed into the field. *Eyes in the Heat* matches the carving, in this detail, for the carving also consists of eyes amidst an all-over field, representing the eyes of the birds.

It is significant that "heat" joins fire in Pollock's work. Despite the Jungian title, *Eyes in the Heat* reflects shamanic ritual and ecstasy, for the relationship among friction, fire, heat, and light is an analogue to the sacred initiation process and its outcome. Copulation is a process of heating and releasing energy by means of the friction of intercourse (see *Male and Female*). Furthermore, the shamanic "Vedic term sram means 'to heat oneself.'"<sup>vii</sup> The shaman is the supreme master of fire and embodies a heat so fierce that its spiritual luminescence represents both purity and knowledge. The rousing of mystical heat in order to achieve fire-mastery is common to mystics all over the world.<sup>viii</sup> It is an agency of transmutation. As an Inuit shaman explained "Every real shaman has to feel an illumination in his body, in the inside of this head or in his brain, something that gleams like fire, that gives him the power to see with closed eyes [as in *The Key*] into the darkness, into hidden things or into the future, or into the secrets of another man."<sup>ix</sup> Perhaps one of the better known features of Indian life in America is the "sweat" lodge where the shaman prays and purifies himself for the greater community.

*Shimmering Substance* took nature and Pollock into abstraction. The eyes in *Eyes in the Heat* were mostly elliptical orbs, seemingly with eyelids closed or open, and thus did not resemble the eyes of the Sepik River carving. In *Shimmering Substance*, however, Pollock eliminated the eye images in his new small intensely swirling field of mostly comma-like strokes, and substituted flat button-like orbs of red, yellow, and blue, which undoubtedly resemble the flat, button-like eyes of the Sepik River piece more strongly. The brushstrokes in *Shimmering Substance* are more distinct and larger than those in *Eyes in the Heat* and closer in their crispness to the carving. There is a greater sense of crisscrossing and less of coagulation.

In *Shimmering Substance*, Pollock has rid his canvas of any natural reference and ventured the pure, expressive movement of rounded planes in a circular maelstrom. (A yellow substratum oval like a mandala, familiar from previous work, has often been noted in the painting). Intense and often curvilinear mythic animals and human animal-totem spirit beings, the established staples of Pollock's work, yielded to linear webs. In Pollock's other work in these series, he revived and suddenly concentrated on his pouring and dripping, techniques that were absent from these two canvases, as well as from *The Child Proceeds* and other works of 1946.

Besides the resemblance of the all-over curvilinear compositions of his transitional paintings to the Sepik River carving, Pollock's first poured paintings recall its elongated format. He had worked in a tall, vertical format



before, but so rarely that a recent study noted that *Full Fathom Five* was an “uncharacteristically vertical canvas.”<sup>x</sup>

The movement from square-ish canvases to both pronounced horizontal and more vertical shapes may be a direct reflection of the carving as comparisons to not only *Full Fathom Five* (fig. 6)



but *Number 13A: Arabesque* and *Summertime* (fig. 7) indicate.



At first, with the former work but even more clearly with the latter two, Pollock understood and developed the idea of a narrow, extended tensile field of curves as a rich format. The drip and pouring technique now came to the fore as a means of covering surface in large sweeps and swathes. To imitate the carving's vitality and breadth, the small impasto brushstroke would simply not do.

Additional stylistic parallels between the Sepik River carving and Pollock's new mode can be found if one compares these pourings to his earlier, most radical abstract paintings, in other words, to those that came closest to the idea of abstract, curvilinear fields before his drippings. As we noted, *Gothic* consists of a field of crisscrossing curves with mythic heads, that is, a figure or figures with curves. With the carving, Pollock found *Gothic* in Oceania, for it

also consists of a figure of curves. *Gothic* and the carving, although different, could be variants of one another in different media.

Yet the two works are different in illuminating ways. In contrast to the smooth curves of the poured and dripped *Full Fathom Five* or *Cathedral*, *Gothic*'s curves are thick and mixed with sharp angles. Apparently, the Sepik River carving helped persuade Pollock to loosen up, and provided him with a new paradigm for curvilinear action, as the curves of the poured painting, like the carving, are newly continuous and rounded in their overlapping with no sharp angles, as in the Benton diagram-inspired earlier piece, *Gothic*. Even when Pollock obviously emphasized the figure in some examples of his pourings and drippings such as *Out of the Web: Number 7, 1949*, in which figures are cut out of the masonite surface, the curving remained more rounded and looser than in *Gothic*. The drippings are thus much freer than in any earlier curvilinear design and have their own rationale. That rationale -- multiple, continuous curving -- seemed new in Pollock's work in 1946 and may have been suggested by the painted carving. It is as if Pollock took the curving forms of his earlier work and exploded them in movement and motion.

The continuous swirling webs and skeins of the carving and the pourings also share another key element: interstitial space or "air." In his earlier work, Pollock had, as noted above, often covered the surface of his canvases with marks and then imposed forms and planes on them. The surfaces of these paintings were choked with imagery. Even such dynamic works as *Gothic* and

*Full Fathom Five* had such overlays; they were completely covered. So did many later pourings such as *Number 27, 1950, One: Number 31, 1950*, and *Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950*, all of 1950, and *Ocean Greyness, Greyed Rainbow* of 1953, and *Scent* of 1955. The dense, coagulated, curvilinear field was an alternative for Pollock, one that he never entirely abandoned. It is a constant in Pollock's development and owes nothing to the carving.

et Pollock worked in an equally frequent mode in which the webs seemingly float on air and in empty space. This manner does seem to be derived from the Sepik River board. The carving consisted of tensile arching and curving with space in between, a veritable lattice. Pollock quickly adopted this idea not only in *Cathedral* of 1947, with its silvery, thinner, and even more vertical armatures, but also throughout his classic period of 1947 to 1950.

From *Enchanted Forest* of 1947 (fig. 8)





and *Number 13A*, 1948:

*Arabesque* to the great *Number 32*, 1950 and *Autumn Rhythm* of 1950, Pollock flooded canvases with brilliant linear webs that were airy and almost gossamer. They seem to be held up by their own strength and flow, much like the field of the wooden carving. The former button planes have been deliberately

integrated as spots and rough spatters: rounded, more concentrated planes in a whorl of larger curves.

Finally, one can find a later reference to the general shape and composition of the Sepik River board – Pollock's *Easter and the Totem* of 1953.



(fig. 9). The totem at the left echoes the board in that it is a tall, thin form with a head filling the top. Its shape and proportion thus references his earlier interest even



without the drip webs. And it has a vertical linear shadow cutting through the head that parallels the projecting wooden beak of the Sepik River carving.

In 1946 Pollock absorbed and worked through the ideas and stylistic alternatives suggested by the Sepik River painted wood carving. In 1947 he developed full control of this new mode and as his skill and understanding of the potential of movement itself as the image grew, his famous style emerged. With works such as *Alchemy* and *The Enchanted Forest* of 1947, Pollock established confidence and command. He had incorporated the carving's idiom into his style, thickening or thinning the paint, changing color combinations and canvas sizes, expanding, contracting, or combining different curves in the same composition. The button planes became one with the curvilinear, and both shared the same forcefulness and power. Thus, the spot planes and the carving's lines were woven into a new tapestry.

Yet Pollock's pourings and drippings were never simply formal, despite the popularity of formalist and explanations of them for a time. Pollock had an end in mind with his drippings, something to express. He had a theme. The catalogue discussion of the Sepik River carving tells us what that probably was (in early anthropological language with limited assumptions):

There are certain tendencies such as . . . the frequent use of organically curved surfaces, that appear in almost all Sepik carvings, but these are shared by other Melanesian styles. Sepik River art derives its unique character from its remarkable ability to

make plastic forms the carrier of strong emotions. It lacks to a great extent the traditional, formal restraints that give uniformity to other regional styles. Based on human and animal shapes that are often distorted or combined to produce grotesque and fantastic effects, this intense, sensual, magic art depends for its plastic impact almost entirely on the bold integration of its design elements. Imagination ordered but not restricted by feeling for form makes the art of the Sepik River an ideal instrument for its main purpose -- the release of magic power.<sup>xi</sup>

*“Magic Power.” Through it, both thematically as well as stylistically, the carving confirmed and completed Pollock’s development. Its swirling curves literally embody the familiar subject of Pollock’s work -- emotional force, magic flow, and explosive transformative emanation or ecstatic motion -- fused together now in the drippings for the ultimate “integration”: his all-over style. Pollock’s classic poured paintings are emblems of explosive, ecstatic lines of force expressing magic power, that is, transformation and spirituality -- as had his earlier more obviously figurative work. One could say that the drippings ultimately enlarge and enrich the idea and form of those flowing lines of power. One could also say that movement and flow made a new form of divine power of the Lord of the Wind -- the Breath of Life -- the undifferentiated energy hidden in all things according to shaman lore.<sup>xii</sup>*

Pollock's abstractions thus fully developed his search for an apt means of expressing the immaterial and intangible that he had only partly succeeded in evoking with symbols, totemic compositions, repetitions of designs from his schooling with Benton, and partially dynamic forms. When Pollock came across that carving at an exhibition of non-Western artifacts, a carving that depicted a figure whose body consisted of dynamic, curvilinear movement representing the transformative and creative force of magic power, he must have felt that the struggles, hesitations, and cul-de-sacs of his search had not been in vain. At the very least, the carving *confirmed* and *concentrated* Pollock's direction. At the moment he saw it, he must have recognized that he could represent that process and power by themselves, and that his earlier figures, combining symbols and rhythmic emanations of magical force, were too much of a compromise. He could, in a sense, go all the way. The Sepik River "artists" already had.

Interestingly, the carving must have also ratified for Pollock the idea that the unconscious was the expression of other cultures and that it was not to be found in ego consciousness. What he had seen in the Oceanic show was simply another version of what he had learned, imagined, and conjured "authentically" from the "unconscious," where the non-Western or its analogues he thought lay. Thus, although his classic paintings may have developed without the Sepik River source, at least in the time and in the form they did, the source was the final straw.

Pollock's drippings are thus not abstractions as they have been long described but imaginative images of what cannot be seen: sacred, intangible ecstatic powers and lines of force. We saw him arrive at the threshold of this idea earlier, but now he seemed to have crossed it. He thus was further in accord with the innumerable artists and styles of his time. Diego Rivera, for example, in a work that Pollock admired as a youth, filled the pictorial space of *Dia de Flores* of 1925 with lush, fertile flowers. We could also cite surrealist works such as Masson's *Portrait of Goethe* and his *Landscape of Wonders* of 1935 (fig.10).



The surrealists often painted the flow of the forces of the *marvelous* and *ecstatic* in their works. To paint the ecstatic was a constant from Max Ernst's *Couple Tightly Entwined before a Wall of Fire* (cf. Pollock's *The Flame*.) There is also a

painting by a friend of Pollock's, Wolfgang Paalen, who painted *Space Unbound* (1941), as well as works by Gordon Onslow-Ford and Matta. Other Abstract Expressionists also expressed the veritable rhythmic and "magical" emanation of the internal and external universe, indicating to what extent the idea was in the air. For example, Richard Pousette-Dart emulated the magic efflorescence of non-Western ceremonial objects in *Symphony # 1, The Transcendental* of 1942 as well as spiritual golden light in *Within the Temple* of 1945, *Presence, Cathedral Window* of 1955 and numerous other works. He also referred to magic emanation and flow in the mid-1940s in his *Undulation* works, while Theodore Stamos conjured the energies of the past in his painting *Ancestral Flow* of 1945. The "color" painters Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko self-consciously used the expansive flow of the sacred and ritual tradition of light (in its modern form, color) as the basis of their work. And other American artists, such as the Indian Space painter Steve Wheeler, painted magical eyes and transformative metamorphosis works such as *Behind the Cellar Door* of 1943.

Pollock thus painted the manifestation and materialization of magical, ancient force as conceived by his generation. In this regard, it is important to note that Reuben Kadish, Pollock's close friend, has said that he had received letters in the postwar period from Pollock indicating that his poured and dripped paintings were a kind of *image*.<sup>xiii</sup> Regrettably, those letters are lost, which is a great loss for American art history, but that comment seems to

confirm that Pollock's drippings represent not simply naturalistic mimesis, but an idea, possibly from his traditional subject.

The evocation of magical power (and not simply its semi-description and symbolization as before) of fecund flow and transformation, of ritual fulfillment in the new being evoked from within, is the magic of the world that Pollock and his time sought. In the midst of personal and historical devastation and destructiveness, inner renewal, the search for what Kandinsky earlier called the "Great Spiritual" as understood in his era, was the subject and source of Pollock's energy and his art. Pollock's pourings gave a visual shape to his shamanism -- to ritual, magical ecstatic transformation, the sacred myth, and the rite of his generation.

Thus what emerges from our examination is an artist and individual bent on a form of spiritual growth that he considered to be psycho-cultural. It was for himself and his world. In his own way, Pollock expressed the negativity that the art world loves about him, but he also worked his way out of it, which the art world mostly ignores. The shaman, for example, is a seer and visionary who, through the process of self-wounding, death, and rebirth, redoes himself and his world: "By dying in life, the shaman passes through the gates of fire to the realm of eternally awakened consciousness."<sup>xiv</sup> Through altering consciousness, he thus seeks to accumulate inner power to communicate with the forces of nature and the universe for the benefit of society -- in the West's case, suffering from mass man. The shaman has a social as much as a



personal reason for this suffering. The work is directed toward the benefit of the person and society in relation to the greater cosmos. It is about positive growth more than negative suffering.

We have been told that Pollock was a neurotic and his work that of a disturbed individual, but the “normal/abnormal” psychologizing bipolarity so common in our Freudian world, whether cocktail romantic or more clinical, pathologized Pollock. To label him as a neurotic is to misrepresent him. Shamanism was often dismissed as being fraudulent, and even in the twentieth century, as mental illness. The bizarre experiences that shamans reported and the images that they recalled seeing were once viewed as nothing more than the ravings of schizophrenia unrecognized in “primitive societies.” Such a view is now considered unfounded, for it views human experience narrowly through the “abnormal /normal dichotomy” into which all people must fit. Yet studies with the diagnostic tools of psychoanalysis such as the Rorschach test show that the shamans are mentally healthy.<sup>xv</sup> They simply live on two planes, everyday reality and the world of the spirits. Shamans voluntarily seek out imaginings, while schizophrenics do not (not to mention that schizophrenia is often treated by drugs today and not psychoanalysis).<sup>xvi</sup> The shaman today is thought of as a kind of therapist within the socio-historical context of his society, not a psychopath. He mediates between the forces of the three worlds of the universe and develops inner power to overcome chaos, not indulge in

it.<sup>xvii</sup> Ironically, it is Freudian psychoanalysis and not shamanism that is considered suspect today.

We also have heard for decades that Pollock's work is negative, that is, that it describes Pollock's troubled mind; but we see that it is actually ultimately positive, for the shamanic is about overcoming through growth and healing. Shamans, dreamers, and visionaries return again and again, extending consciousness and reality at the source level of gnosis and creative processes:<sup>xviii</sup> "Magic and the supernatural are the means that the shaman uses to gain control over a cosmos of uncertainty. Natural and supernatural events commingle in the person of the shaman."<sup>xix</sup> In this, as in so many other things, shamanism is close to the visionary world of the collective archetypes or pathways of Jung, which are used to do the same -- overcome difficulty and redirect the darker elements of the psyche and mass man to light.

We have also heard for decades that Pollock's work is, in the typical fifties mantra, individual and subjective, but shamanism is a public system for the public good, its values and its *communitas*. The shaman brings back knowledge from other realities to heal the body and mind and to regenerate public order. With its essential goal of guarding and changing the group's mythology, shamanism contains a decisively positive program for life. Health in shamanic societies means being in harmony with the whole of things and healing results from establishing this harmony. For shamanic cultures, health is spiritual development and connectedness to all.

Interestingly, during the greater period of his abstractions, from 1947 to 1950 Pollock extended his shamanist exploration by the method of sensory deprivation. He did not fast or undergo the experience of sweat lodges but more importantly for him, he largely gave up his drug of choice, alcohol. In the 1950s, although he started to drink again, he attempted a homeopathic cure, using herbs and plants to restore himself to health. This is a shamanic technique. Perhaps even his famous love of jazz music was a form of shamanist auditory alteration which in folk cultures consists of singing, dancing and the spellbinding playing of the drum. Pollock's auditory alteration was more modern and appropriate for his culture, although he did deliberately acknowledge the "music" of animal and life spirits in his "Sounds in the Grass" series.

But the most powerful of Pollock's shamanic techniques for growing toward a new reality and mediating the three realms was the visualization of illness, a standard shamanist practice that draws on inherent abilities. He was not just visually expressing but codifying that other reality. Pollock's mode was direct, creating his own revelations without religious hierarchies, dogmas, or political ideologies. It created harmonies on many levels and ultimately with the cosmos. The shaman develops *spiritual sight*, and through his strong ability to visualize he creates a vivid imagery of forces known as spirits, which he then conjures. This is shamanic enlightenment, a form of clairvoyance, for these spirits are guides and repositories of the collective wisdom of the species. For Pollock, it was the supernatural, not correct politics, more science, or mass

man reason that would restore health to the wasteland. As an artist he drew upon his great abilities of visualization to carry out his task. He sacrilized his art as the material realization of the altered state of consciousness he sought and shamanically “dreamed” in paint through metaphor, joining his techniques and behaviors of transformation.

The shaman accumulates inner power so that he can influence society and culture for its benefit, and thus mass man and society are subverted and recast. Shamanism indicates a turn toward the inner realm rather than to materialistic or scientific rationality. Pollock’s work privileges inwardness and the therapeutic, and turns away from critical, analytic consciousness for results. It suggests a search for growth rituals that in Western society have been managed by the medical profession. As in Jungian psychology, shamanism treats the loss of one’s soul as the loss of the meaning of life; wherever there is disharmony, the shaman must play a constructive role with his unique abilities.

Shamanism, however, is not unique, but parallel to other forms of mystical alteration. Pollock’s early work exemplifies the “shamanic state of consciousness” or “SSC.” But it ultimately is part of a long tradition, for not only is it the most archaic and widely distributed occult tradition, it has shared and articulated aspects of occult traditions and ancient mystery religions throughout history. We briefly looked at those when we discussed Jung, whose thinking is much closer to Pollock’s than Freud and modern man writers.

There seems to have been some shamanism in the Greek tradition; Orpheus, for example, is described as the “doctor of souls”; as we have seen, Osiris is key to the Egyptian tradition. Moses brought forth laws after spending days in the wilderness, like many in the Jewish and Old Testament tradition. We can add Paracelsus, cited by Gottlieb and the surrealists, who in his *Philosophia Sagax* wrote that everyone may educate and regulate his imagination so as to engage the spirits and be taught by them. (Modern spirits are gods, deities, guardian angels, ghosts, apparitions, deceased ancestors, and fairies, who exist in the popular imagination today.) For the most part, Native Americans are strong practitioners of shamanism, although not all are, for example, the medicine men of the southwest, for in their sand painting rituals to restore someone to health, they do not take magic flights or pass into the three realms, a necessity of shamanism. The Ghost Dancers of the Plains Indians, however, do seek knowledge from dead ancestors in their vision journeys to the Upper World, one of the three zones of the world of Pueblo Indians.<sup>xx</sup>

Shamanism also shares many aspects with the Perennial Philosophy and Ancient Wisdom of Hinduism, Buddhism, yoga, and other forms of esoteric knowledge. Pollock’s shamanism shares their views that a numinous unity underlies all forms and all appearances, an idea of the mythical journeys of heroes, death, and rebirth, rites of passage and other rituals of initiation found in the ancient mystery religions. Interestingly, just as it has been traditionally noted that New York was a wonderful place in the 1940s because all artistic traditions were readily available in museums, in the same period many

cultural, religious, and spiritual traditions were equally accessible. And as we have seen, the search was to find the right one for modern life, culture, and mass society. Shamanism emphasizes the instinctual side of being, which, however, reconciled itself with the spiritual, which Freudian psychology had not done.<sup>xxi</sup>

Shamanism also relates to the Western occult traditions of alchemy and ceremonial magic. The former, and Pollock's interest in it, will be discussed below. Ritual or ceremonial magic is a long tradition that utilizes visions to contact and manipulate spirits for divinatory and empowering purpose. We have seen Pollock's allusion to sand painting and the rituals surrounding it. One can also mention the "Golden Dawn" society in Britain in the 1880s, a theosophical society, and the title of a 1952 painting by Pollock's fellow mystic Pousette-Dart. Ceremonial magic was well known throughout Europe as well, with Faust as one example of that. In its way, Pollock's shamanism was parallel to Joseph Campbell's path of the hero and the monomyth from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) which spoke of separation, journeys, trials, and reintegration. That Campbell had as great an impact as he did at that time is a testament to the ground that was already prepared by the mythic thinking among Pollock's colleagues.<sup>xxii</sup>

The twentieth century's system of magic healing -- psychoanalysis -- consists of getting in touch with memories and dreams for the purposes of divination. However, unlike psychology, shamanism does not seek to release

the latent powers of consciousness or see the world in terms of mental problems. Instead, it seeks illness on the planes of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual, as all three are integrated in practices of shamanism. Ultimately it was Jung who, as we have seen, plied this tradition the most. The Bollingen Foundation was dedicated to it and Jung himself was recognized as being like a shaman who, through his special vision, translated mysteries into terms meaningful for this tribe.<sup>xxiii</sup>

And Pollock's shamanism recalls his earliest youthful interest and pursuit -- theosophy. Shamanism shares with theosophy the belief in several realms of existence in addition to everyday reality; human life is one with what came before and what will come after; through initiation, a person can obtain power that transcends the ordinary limits of experience; and there is a universal ancient wisdom and spiritual path that precedes and underlies the great religions, and it stands in a critical relationship with industrial and urban modernity.<sup>xxiv</sup> For Pollock's shamanism and for theosophy, human beings are integrated mind-body-spirit continuums.

In the shamanic state of consciousness of his early work, then, Pollock turned himself into an active creator and not a patient of the mysteries of a non-Western, "primitivist" universe. He sought to transcend the oppositions and conflicts at work in his cosmos and in his cultural being with the aim of making all things possible and emerging with new visions and directions. (His work thus transcends the reductive conflict of modern man discourses and the



fifties model to which those discourses were addressed as cultural sources.) And Pollock sought to impose form as a forceful metaphor to create a path to the numinous. Internally directed, he sought to bring it back to his world because in 1946 that world needed renewal and rebirth. This is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's mythic method of applying ethnology, the ideas in *The Golden Bough*, and psychology, in other words "primitivism" and the traits of "unconscious" and its behavioral patterns as they related to the "panorama of history." Having collapsed his world, Pollock aimed at a structured rebirth to rearrange the psychic surety of those around him in order to bring about socio-psychic cures for many.<sup>xxv</sup> Indeed, anthropologists have recognized the shaman as not a trickster but a "psycho-therapeutic healer who knows the ways of healing and has suffered to acquire that knowledge."<sup>xxvi</sup> His symbols, the shamanic process and his ritual imagery of birth and growth empower him so that he can gain access to that other reality. Indeed, the psychoanalytic trend popular in the 1980s which urged us to find our "child" within now has a competitor: finding the "shaman within."<sup>xxvii</sup> Pollock thus joined other modern artists such as Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, all of whom addressed a larger world despite their very individual art.

Pollock restored balance in the world by maintaining an equilibrium of the power relations between his community, his world and himself. The shaman as a mediator is a specialist in ritual communication and in maintaining the fragile state of social/psychological equilibrium.<sup>xxviii</sup> For the Huichol shamans, for example, "The continuity between the living, the wise

dead, and ancestral nature spirits is a primary course for the shaman, who is not only intercessor between spirit and the human but also a medium for forces from the Other World. The shaman is thus the channel for the knowledge of the Ancients, the means by which the wisdom of the elders and elements is transmitted to the community.”<sup>xxix</sup>

Pollock’s imagery of dismemberment, “incorporation” by demons, supernatural ascents, cosmic visions, magical heat, spiritual possession, sacrifice, and mystical rapture among others seeks to be an efficacious agent of spiritual power. He is the creative individual needed in mass society who develops his faculties and a self that cannot be revoked. As was typical in his time, the new culture/individual appropriate for the age was to be an ancient personality and not the Marxist-Leninist new socialist man.

Pollock understood that for the non-Western individual, an object is not merely, if at all, an aesthetic thing. Rather it is a functional means. The distortions of Pollock’s forms are not intended to satisfy some sentimental or political idea of torment or to fulfill aesthetic laws or to quote Miro and Picasso for their own sake, but to reveal the powers of metamorphosis in the world. In the restoration of roots, authenticity, and creativity, his forms are magical instruments and thus they are functional. They are alive, giving voice to the vision of something evolving out of the unknown. As with ritual images, his powerful fields of movement and force, indeed, all his forms so strange to our eyes (Clement Greenberg originally called them “ugly”) deliberately create a

sense of the supernatural, of that which is beyond understanding and the normal, of awe and wonder. In keeping with ideas of the non-Western as the unadorned, at least in comparison to Western art, Pollock's early work began to make ritual magical power simple and direct. With the forthcoming abstractions, he would create great art. In the wake of fifty million dead, he materialized ritual change and metamorphic transformation, his own hope and that of his world.

Pollock's shamanism and mythic growth finally revealed how he absorbed and made accessible to himself the final overriding theme of his era: separating the living from the dying. As noted above in the remarks of Wilder, Jung, Rivera and Breton, the "historic moment of today addressed the unstoppable and universal between what is dying and [what is] being born . . . amplified in the Paradigm of the World War." Pollock's work symbolizes transition and change. In his abstractions, he more directly manifested his and his era's Eros and Thanatos. His art then is not just an array of European modernist forms but a way of thinking, a way of constructing order, a way of *newly envisioning the "panorama"* of history and the world, including himself. Pollock's "abstract" paintings elaborated on the intensified, explosive, and expressive areas of many earlier works into a *power web*, one of the most basic beliefs of shamanism and a key idea for Pollock. Besides the examples noted above, emblems or "webs" were a frequent if not prevalent concept of shape throughout Pollock's work. Explosive piles characterize drawings and paintings such as *Male and Female* of 1942 and (3:542), (3: 724), (3: 765) and so many

others of his earlier compositions. Indeed, his compositions are so full of energy that even without an emblematic shape, explosiveness/ecstasy is implicitly if not explicitly realized in the figures and to the edges of most of his canvases. Pollock's dynamism was a constant throughout his work and was amplified even further in 1947.

It took the drip style to take Pollock's images and forms of expansiveness to the next level. In taking this step, he found the means to fuse his forms, making explosiveness one with the figure in the drip paintings. In works such as those discussed above as explosive piles and in such examples as *Untitled* (4:1014) (fig. 11),



explosiveness was articulated by multiple figures in a jumble that often seemed to bob and weave. As in the latter work with linear stick figures and ink “splatter” on paper, the many figures and dancing feet are often combined with marks that enact the charge. In the gouache *Untitled* (4: 1010) (fig. 12),





figures, marks, and their space seem to be engorged with vitality, yet they are separate entities of figure, line, plane, and mark. The extension and promotion of the linear drip technique made it possible for Pollock to give all of these the same profile. In other words, the line, figure, plane, space, and mark were all newly rendered as broader or narrower lines, and thus stunningly unified. (Pollock earlier had tried to give line, figure, etc. an allover unity in works such as *There Were Seven in Eight* of 1943, but he failed because the thin lines were drawn and the constituent elements remained prominent.)

Pollock discovered that the drip technique could render form as a unified entity. Hence, for him, form became one with explosive and ecstatic vitality. And his new paintings, while retaining some figural references as we have seen,

fused expression with form as one. That seems to have been Pollock's breakthrough. Line could be figurative but not very planar, if at all; it also could be an abstract "splatter," with all that meant to him. Through this greater unity of parts, Pollock created the drip painting and the allover style. Evident in his abstractions from 1947 onward Pollock never changed his symbols, figures, or subjects but rather found a more pictorial means of bringing them all together; this was his "concretization," in Rothko's words. The great claim, which we will discuss below, that Pollock dropped his earlier, often called "Surrealist" subjects to go abstract is false as was the fundamental claim made in the fifties that Pollock led a charge to an abstraction that had little to do with his previous figurative work and that it was totally new. *On the contrary, it was the same expression in a different form. The change is pictorial, not conceptual.* Critics in the fifties thus made a fundamental error, and subsequent interpretations such as the idea that his new work was based on the new topics of existentialism and individualism simply repeated that mistake. But more on that below.

Let us end our preliminary discussion and examine the establishment of the symbols and not merely "unconscious fantasies" of Jackson Pollock. As noted above, Pollock's work, including his drip paintings, is shamanic. Indeed, Pollock's shamanism held to a dynamic web of power that all share and that informs the universe. Shamans believe that everything is alive and connected, and that the web organizes the world. Everything is integrated into and interacts with the cosmos/world and universe. The connective web represents

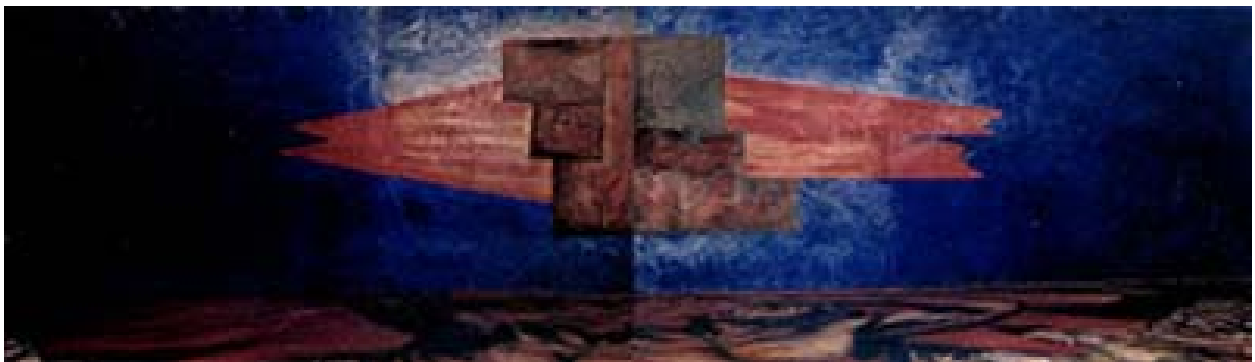


the unlimited amount of potential and power of the spirit world that can be transformed into the natural world. Because “the net of power animates the cosmos,”<sup>xxx</sup> the shaman or “Blessed One” taps into it. Everything in the world has a living force within and this power infuses all things. In the shaman’s cosmic power web, everything has endless potential for transformation. For example, Pollock’s *Comet* and *Reflections on the Big Dipper* of 1947 manifest the cosmic aspects of these webs of power; in them, nature, the earth and the sky are not dead substances but animate organism.

Again Orozco’s paintings served as a precedent for Pollock’s idea of an expansive field as a dynamic explosiveness in symbol and form. We shall see that the fusion of opposites in *Male and Female* may have originated partly from or at least paralleled Orozco’s *Omniscience* of 1925 (fig. 13).

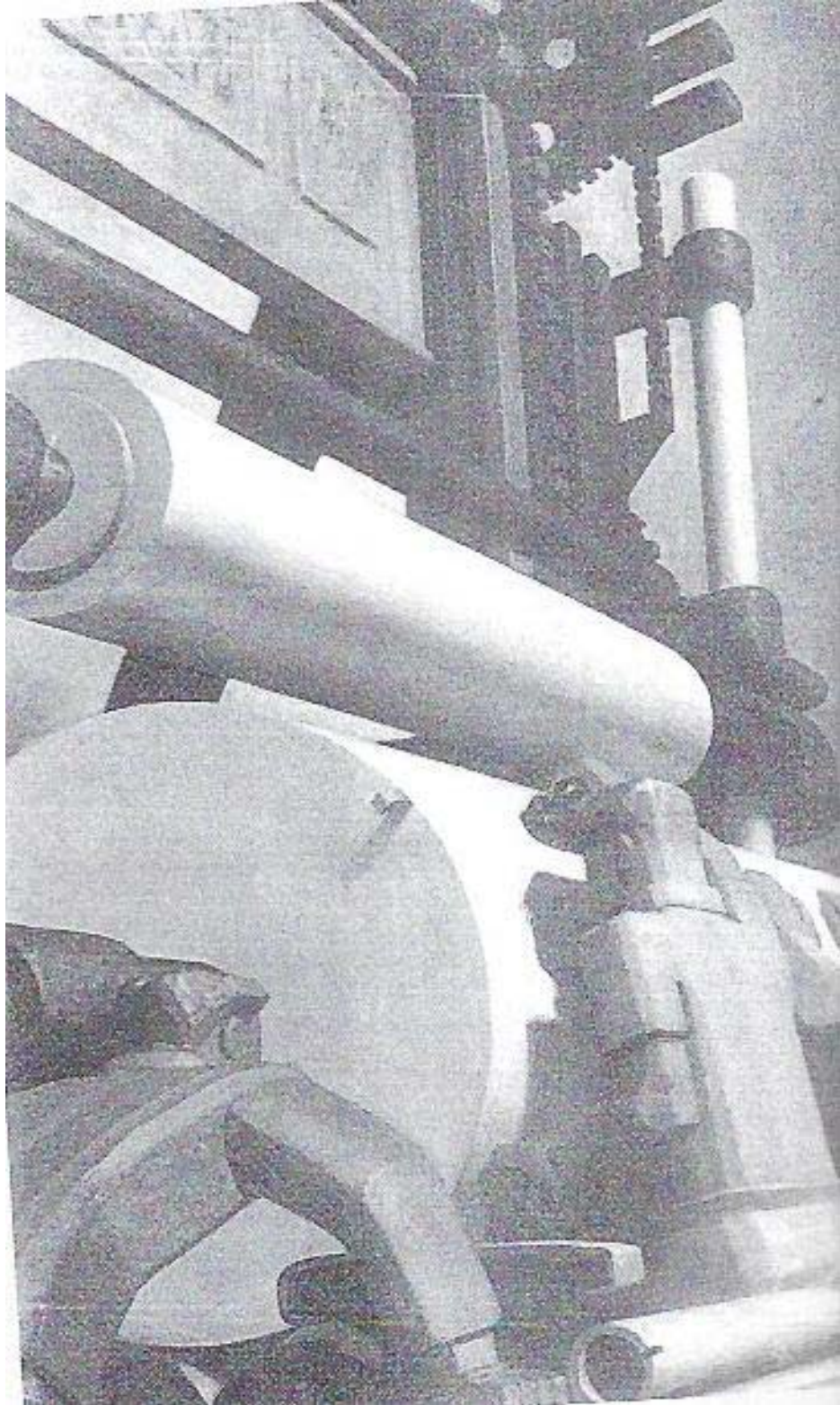


For Orozco, the issue of that new power was a baby. We shall see that Orozco then moved to an abstract metaphor for explosive fertile power in *Prometheus*, dispensing with the figurative image of a baby: the ceiling above the mural consists of an expanding, interlocking, radiating set of abstract rectangles (see fig 14).



And we will see that Pollock used that metaphoric form in several early prints such as CRIV: 941 & 942. In his classic abstractions, he fully developed it as a symbol totally his own, one of chaotic but life-generating force. His figures are thus fused with what he wanted: direct and powerful transformative force itself. This expression is Pollock's key form, partially learned from Orozco, and it is from the thirties and his early years realized yet again in his abstractions. The counterpart of the thirties in which human beings are fused with the transformative force - mechanical industrial power -- of that decade can be

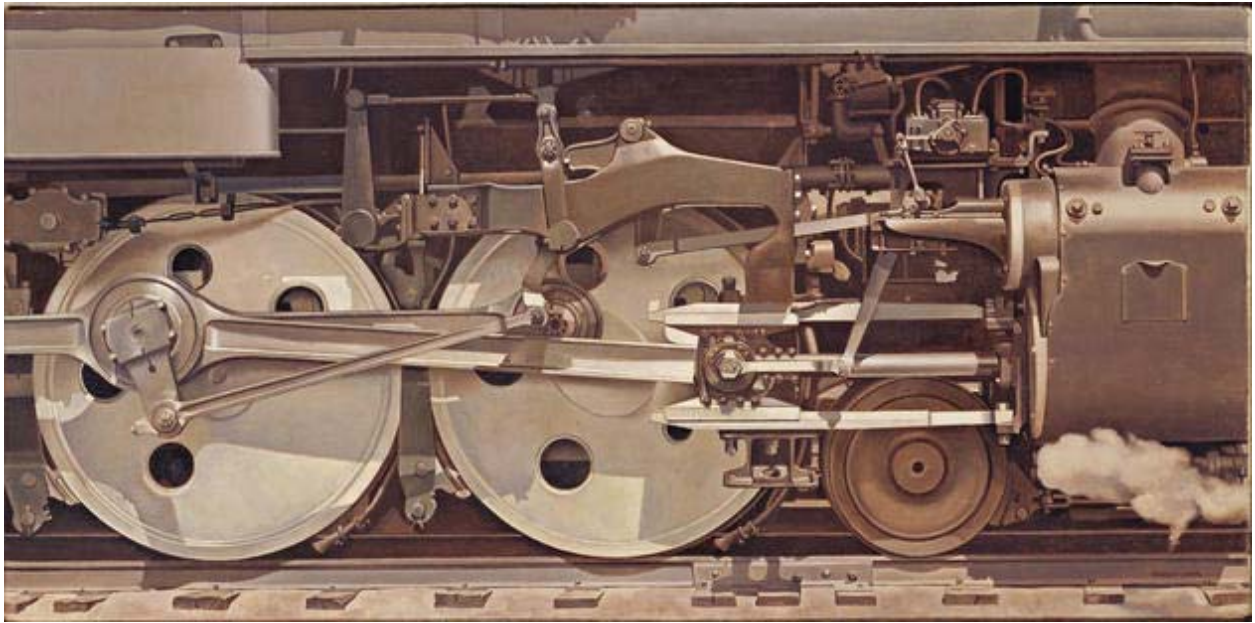




seen in figure 15.

So, too, can the independent, transformative “magic power” of the 1930s – industrial, mechanical force as in Charles Sheeler’s *Rolling Power* of 1939

(fig.16):



As we saw, the celebrant crowd-as-humanity is a key explanatory image in *Autumn Rhythm* as it welcomes the magical power that can be attained.

There are multiple variants of the crowd in Pollock's drips. *Number 4, 1948*: *Gray and Red* of 1948 (fig. 17), for example, an obviously figurative work of his classic drip period, contains a looping centralized figure with upturned arms, as Karmel notes.





The figure is joined by smaller figures, particularly shrunken and telescoped in space on the left (one with backward-pointing Thomas Hart Benton feet), and larger with a round head or heads with eyes on the right. This latter figure is suggestive of a female with a delicate “Betty Boop” mouth. At the bottom of these figures are possible remnant “glyph” heads of a crowd, and a ribbed (thus perhaps sacrificial) figure, as Pollock’s sacrificial figures are often skeletal at the bottom left. A more obvious variant of the crowd as a group of stick figures is *Untitled (Drawing with Spirals)*, 4: 947, 4: 949 and *Untitled*, 1946 (OT1014). Such stick-figure crowds also mark one of Pollock’s most famous paintings, *Blue Poles: Number 11*, 1952 (fig. 18).

It should be noted that in this post-Namuth age with the abandonment



of notions of Pollock's work as totally abstract or made from nothing but spontaneously dripped paint (as opposed to being slowly and deliberately dripped), crowds with stick figures telescoped in space undermine the idea that Pollock's work is "flat" and indeed "about flatness," a belief that dominated the criticism of Greenberg and his followers. In Pollock's "abstractions," the juxtaposition of large and small figures brings together that which is near and far, creating three-dimensional space. Often the figures in "the back" are in a higher register, their placement suggesting a different and deeper location than the foreground. The different sizes of the celebrants, then, suggest the acting out of the drama which is the subject. These are tricks Pollock learned from Benton, El Greco, and Joan Miro. Pollock's space, however, undermines the idea of a strictly optical space, for space differentiation and diminution are hallmarks of Renaissance perspective and figure and ground relationships.



In *Blue Poles: Number 11*, 1952, “poles” dance left and right to the rhythm of a high pitched if not hysterically yellow, orange, and silver gray field. The “poles” are derived from Benton. As he wrote:

I think it highly improbable that anybody but Jack would have thought of them – anybody, I mean who had not studied composition with me. [In one of my articles] poles are shown in a diagram and explained in the text . . . In an actual composition I always erased the poles or most times simply imagined them. I never made them parts of a composition as did Jack in the “Blue Poles” painting. But it was probably some vague memory of my theory demonstrations that caused him to “inject” the poles in that painting. Their use however is a purely Pollock concept . . . The only possible precedent, *that I know of*, is shown in the “The Arts” diagrams of ‘26-27 and that is a minor one.<sup>xxxix</sup>

But again, Pollock’s forms are not poles but figures. Close examination reveals that they were created in two campaigns, one in black and one in dark navy blue. They restate Pollock’s stick figures. The “figures” of *Blue Poles* celebrate with extended body parts that were obviously deliberately added. Slight hips, pelvises, breasts and extended arms recall Pollock’s humanity-as-crowd figures.



The second figure from the right has an extended blue arm while the fourth from the right has a yellow hand with differentiated fingers projecting up at its upper left side. *Blue Poles* of 1952 emphasizes Pollock's consistency, his deliberateness, and the desire for conceptual meaning that he felt throughout his career. Even in the troubled years before his death in 1956, he reiterated the human celebration of divine or magical creativity.

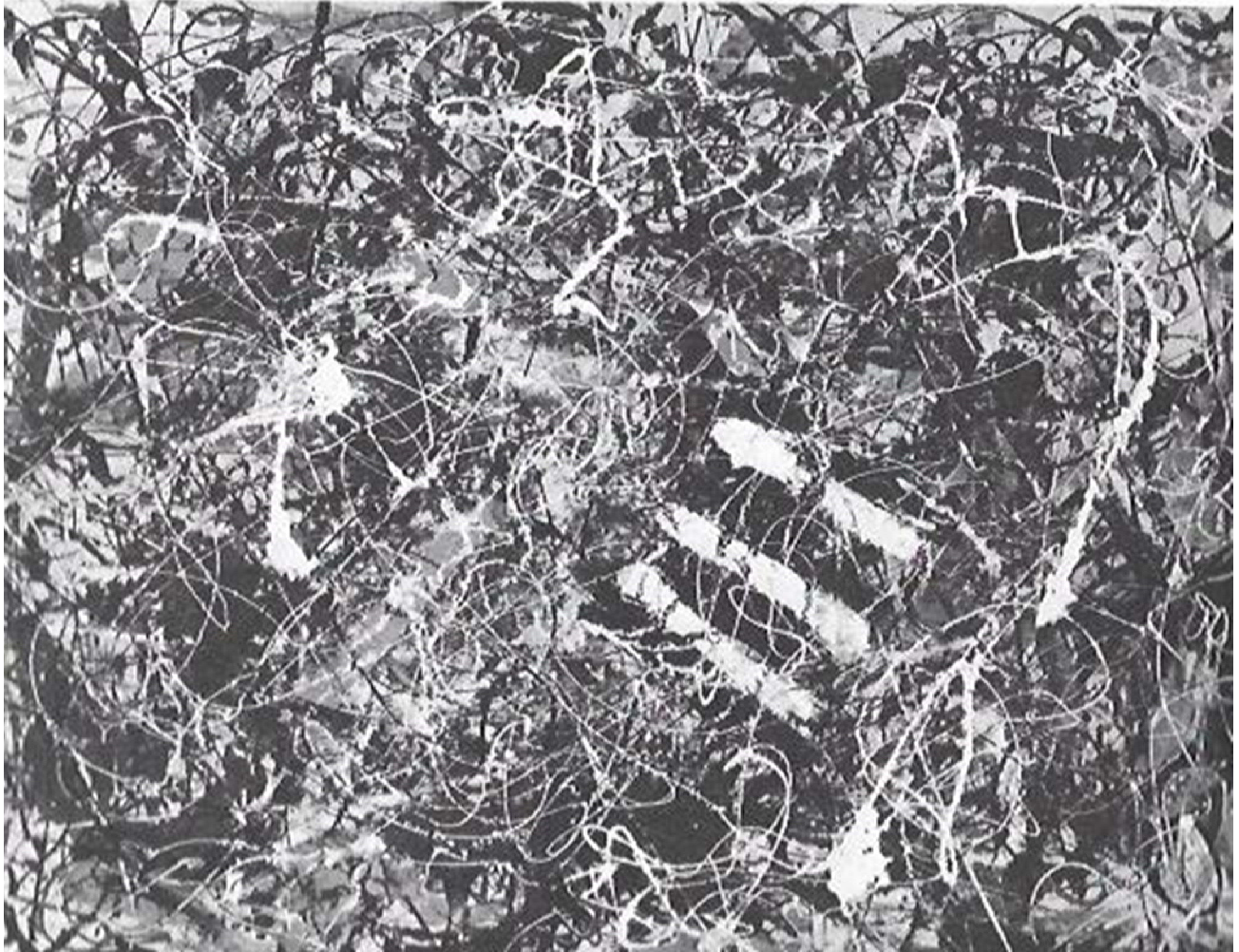
At times, Pollock based a painting on a single celebrant figure, as in *Number 26A*, 1948 (fig. 19).



Number 26A, 1948

This is a vertical canvas depicting a figure with a large head and the hint of an upraised hand with several fingers next to it, a composition reminiscent of Andre Masson's figurative automatic drawings. However, there are many paintings of this implicit verticality and breadth, that is, they feature not stick-figures but looping shapes with even less definition. *Full Fathom Five* of 1947 is a vertical full-bodied drip web the wide loops at its top which resemble the breasts and broad figure that Karmel compared to the stacked rubber tires of the Michelin tire man. (X-rays suggest that Pollock may have begun with a figure.) Part of its "head" is accentuated by the three parallel orange lines that

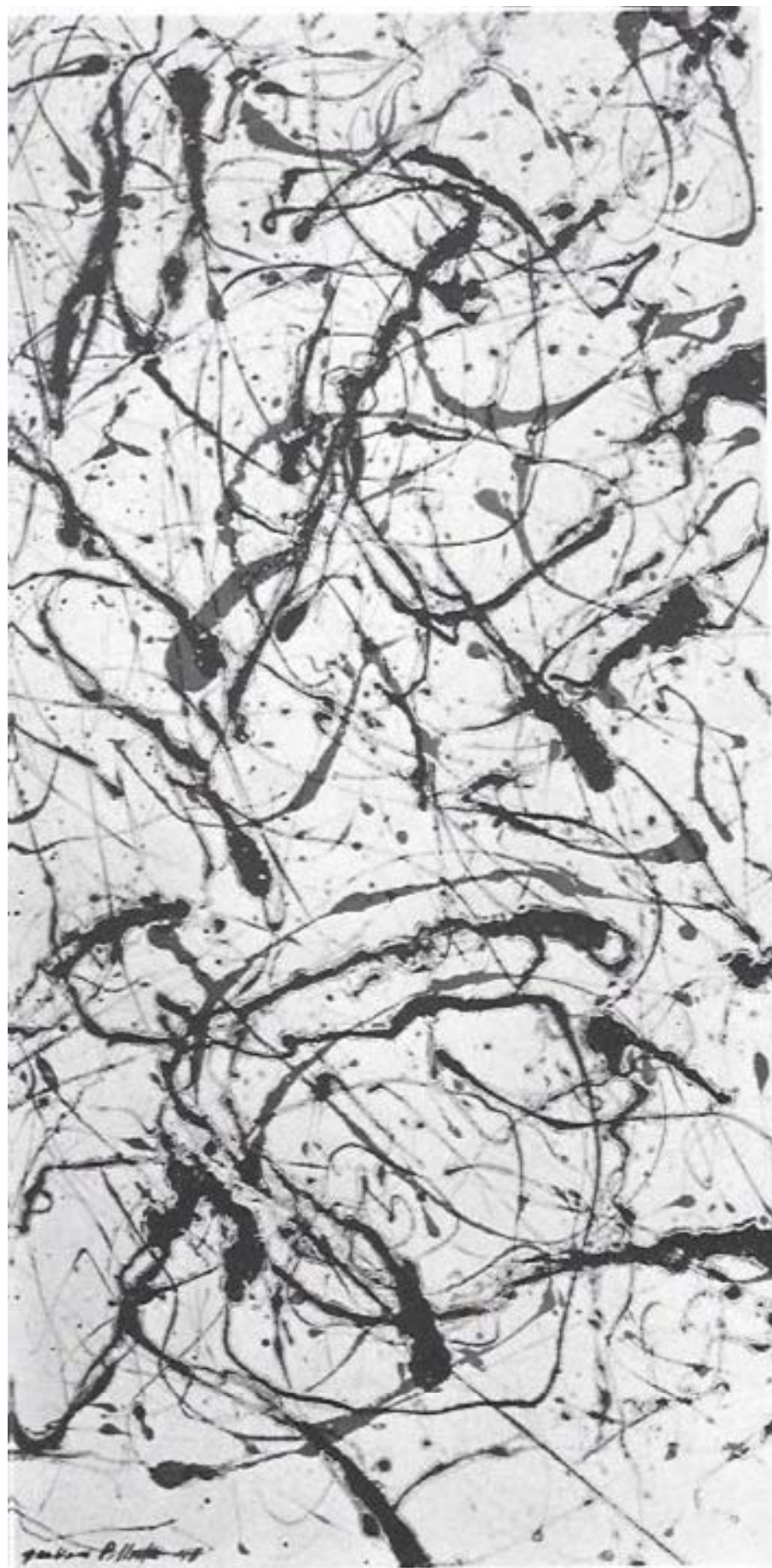
Pollock used throughout his work, as in [*Composition with Pouring II*] and *Number 17A*, 1948 (fig. 20)



to signal a “head.” Such suggestive figurative loops dominate many canvases of this period including *Enchanted Forest*, *Cathedral*, *Number 11A*, 1948 (*Black*,

*White and Gray*) of 1948 (fig. 21)





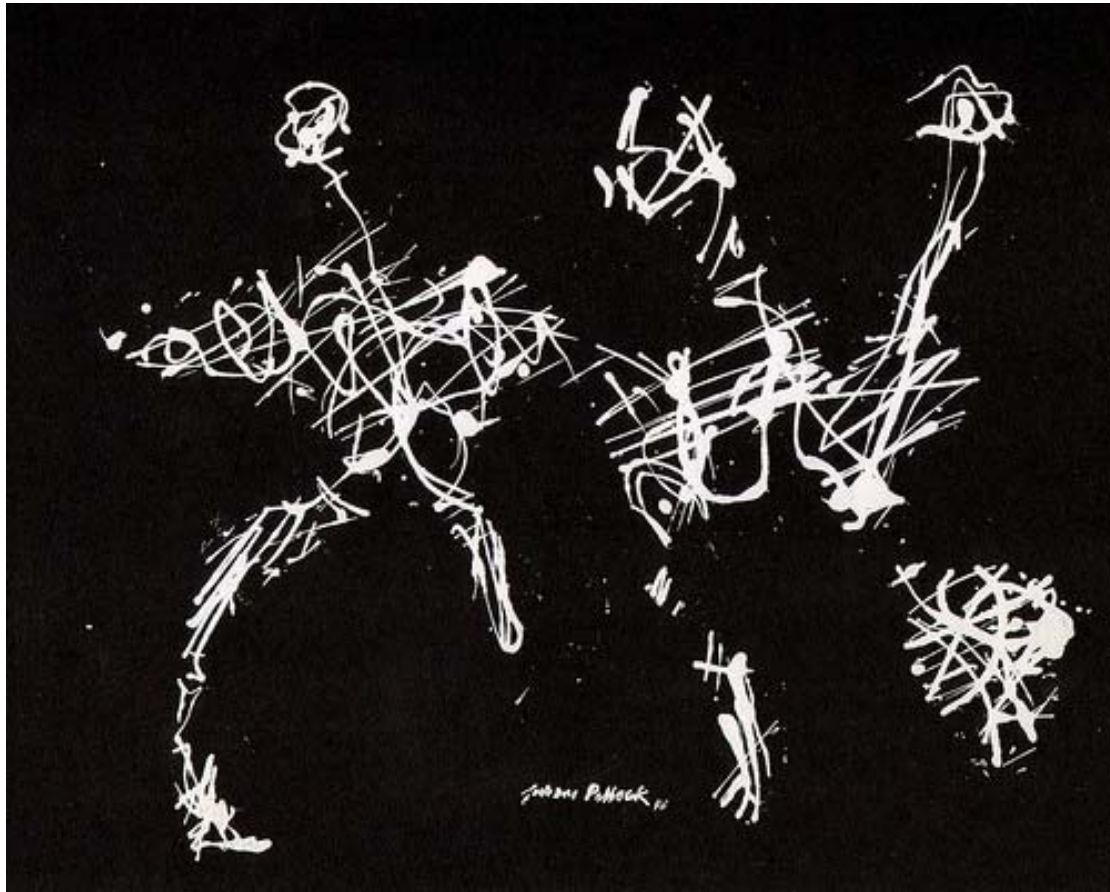
and *Number 28, 1950*. Other works such as *Number 3, 1940: Tiger* evoke earlier figures such as that of *Wounded Animal* of 1943 while also suggesting the laterally parallel figure seen in Pollock's work throughout from *Flags and Banners* to [*Poured Painting # 2*] and from *The Key* of 1946 to *Echo* of 1951. And the large, broad heads that lie at the bottom of his earlier works as in *There Were Seven in Eight* lie at the bottom of his "abstractions" too, for example as what I call the "cleft" head. It appears at the right bottom of *Autumn Rhythm* after surfacing in works such as *Gothic* and *Number 22A, 1948*.

Even a newly emphasized form of the period, the cutout, evokes the simple celebrant figure and the crowd as humanity – "newly emphasized" because contrary to most critical discussion, cutouts, that is, figures silhouetted most often by a single color section, were standard in Pollock's work starting at least in 1943 in works such as *She Wolf* of 1943 and *Moon Vessel* of 1945. (*Untitled (Cutout)* presents a broad figure of this type (fig. 22),





while *Triad* of 1948 consists of three such dynamically interiorized “figures” silhouetted against a dark ground (fig. 23).



The two

torsos at the right may be copulating to the celebration of the single figure at the left. In *Untitled (Shadows: Number 2, 1948)* (fig. 24), the sexes of the center and right hand figures are obviously male and female, while the third figure gesticulates, welcoming once again a future of growth for the issue. of their

issue. The figures seem to be drawn from Picasso's *Three Dancers* of 1925.



It has been noted that these silhouetted figural works are a completion of a cutout mode that Pollock had used repeatedly throughout his work. While the bottom “diamonds” of *She-Wolf* are the best known, works such as the *Untitled* gouache drawings, (O'Connor and Thaw IV: 978), (IV: 977), (III:706), (IV: 991) and even (IV: 973) of 1943-44 are also precedents. In them, as in the figural cutouts, fragmented “figural” forms are shaped by the insertion of



colored planes so that a figure or figures appear, featuring interiors busy with Pollock's symbols or suggestions of radiant force. Such figures with radiant magic lines of power depicting the life energy that activates body and soul-essence in their interiors are shamanic figures, Pollock's constant form. xxxiii

All of this is reinforced in the most elaborate of the cut-outs, *Out of the Web: Number 7, 1949* (fig. 25), with its cut dancers or multiple celebrant figures, now in Miro-like biomorphic shapes.

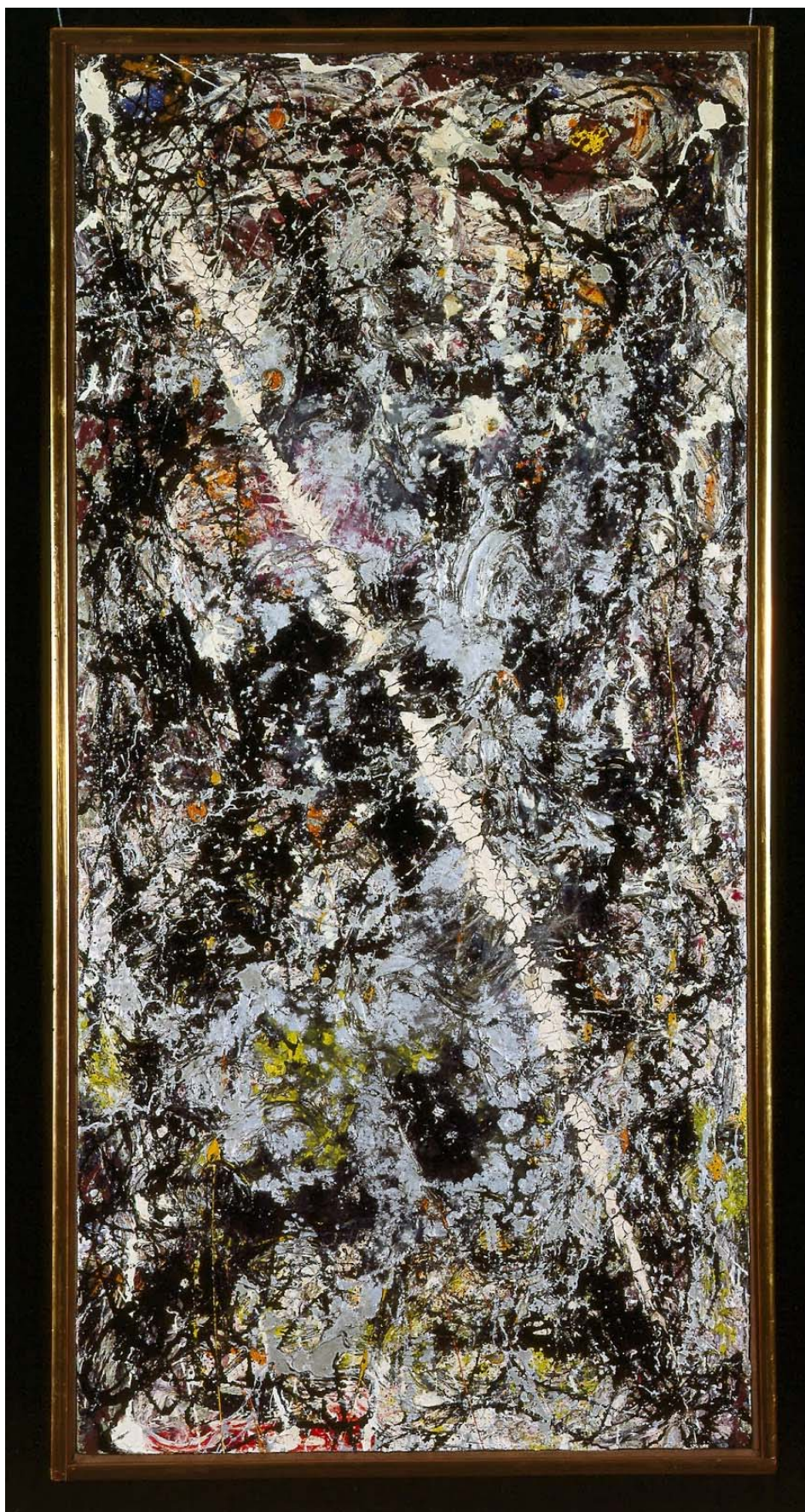


These elastic, swirling, gesticulating figures, some with arms raised, reflect the vital energy and fluidity filled in around them. The energy that is without is within and vice versa. Other figures seem to be telescoped in space in Pollock's manner.

The flat outlines of *Out of the Web: Number 7, 1949*, and *Untitled* (*Shadows: Number 2, 1948*) on the one hand, and the linear skeins of *Triad* on the other, clarify a Pollock approach that had been generally hidden in his

earlier figures. In general, Pollock used two techniques to construct figures, one linear and the other planar. In the cutouts discussed here, we see the repetition of the two possibilities: the figure can be a combination of lines (sometimes in different colors so that the figure is hard to trace) or it can be closer to a combination of flat planes. Once we realize that, we can see the appearance in the webs not only of a suggestive linear stick or figured, billowing shape but of a group of flatter, multiple planes that also add up to a figure. In his abstractions, Pollock alternates these two approaches to the figure as he alternated a layer of pictograph figures and a layer of webs. In comparison to his many paintings of linear figures, works such as *Comet* (fig.





26),

*Number 31*, 61



1949, and *Untitled [Red Painting 1-7]* of ca. 1950 employ the implicit flat figure, while paintings such as *Lucifer*, *Cathedral*, and many others fuse both approaches.

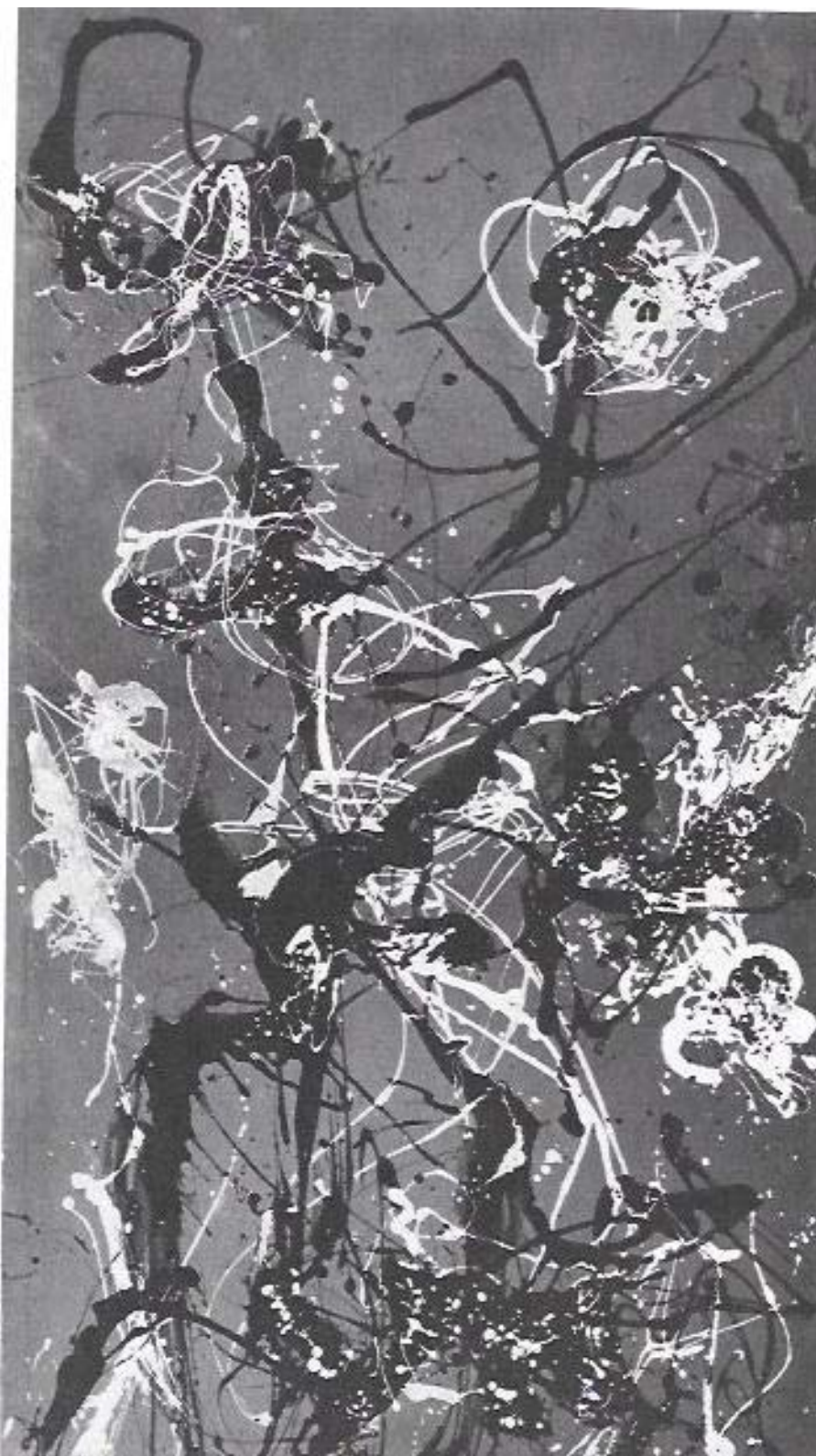
Perhaps the best example of a new variant of crisscrossing thin, linear planes can be seen in *Summertime: Number 9A*, 1948. This work is a multigure, more open and less dense, linear pole or stick figure-like complex with contoured planes of a single-figure design much like the possible multiplication of figures in *Number 21*, 1950 (fig. 27).



It perhaps represents the overlapping crowd fused into a continuous flow. As we have seen, Pollock had drawn such crowds of figures a number of times in his career from 1938-41 (for example, sheet CRIII: 505). Sometimes they were both stick-figure linear, as in CR IV: 948 and sometimes planar, as in CR: IV: 947. Such forms lie at the basis of a unique form in Pollock's abstractions -- the frieze as a work with that title suggests. As Lisa Frye Ashe has pointed out, the frieze form, with its two- or three-foot high and its fifteen foot plus format, that is, horizontally extended rather than the narrower rectangular mesh, was a constant in his "abstract" work.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In paintings such as *Number 2* and *Number 10*, both dating from 1949, the frieze confirms and extends the stick-figure or linear crowd composition, which hovers between figurative and abstract, scrolling arabesque. A work such as *Summertime* evokes this form and flow of suggested figures. However, the title suggests organic life at its height, something Pollock alluded to in the *Sounds in the Grass* series of 1946 and *Echo* of 1951.

*Summertime* also contains another allusion at the left: an interfacing, copulating couple. Such a couple was a standard of Pollock's repertoire throughout his work. As we have seen above, the cutout *Triad* references it. This pair makes up *Composition with Black Pouring* of 1947 (I: 170), *Number 22A*, 1948 (perhaps even with a child as the lower half of the central woman), and *Number 24*, 1949, amidst others. And as Jack Rushing has pointed out, in *Number 10*, 1950 (fig. 28).





All, of course, they  
are reiterations of the drawings of copulating couples from 1939-40 – CR III:

491 and 492 as well as *Male and Female*.

Recently it has been argued that Pollock's force webs are really "labyrinths" and thus that his abstractions signify an ideological "modern man" trap parallel to the plots of film noir. Modern man in this way is seen as being "entangled in forces beyond his ability to understand or control – webs woven of fate, past actions, and unconscious and primitive impulses." <sup>xxxiv</sup> This is a seductive theory but ultimately unsustainable. To be sure, the idea of the labyrinth is strongly present among the Abstract Expressionists. Adolph Gottlieb, for example, titled a series of paintings in the 1950s as "labyrinths," and de Kooning painted a backdrop to a dance choreographed by a Martha Graham dancer and called it a "labyrinth," too. (Once thought to be the *Study* for it, a related work is now named *Judgment Day* of 1946.) This interpretation emphasizes Pollock's embedding of a figure, particularly in his cutouts, as an indication of this despair, tension and anxiety of "modern man". While such feelings are present in most other Abstract Expressionist work, there is more to it, and to Pollock's work as well, than film noir's ideology of anxiety and social alienation in the face of "consensus," that is, of democratic majority culture.

First, the ideas of the labyrinthine entrapment of man are a commonplace of the twentieth century, as so many ideas of "modern man" are not exclusive to this ideology. For example, Orozco used Piranesesque steel cages to represent the modern industrial state in his *Epic of Civilization* murals at Dartmouth and, as noted before, depicted chains binding man in his

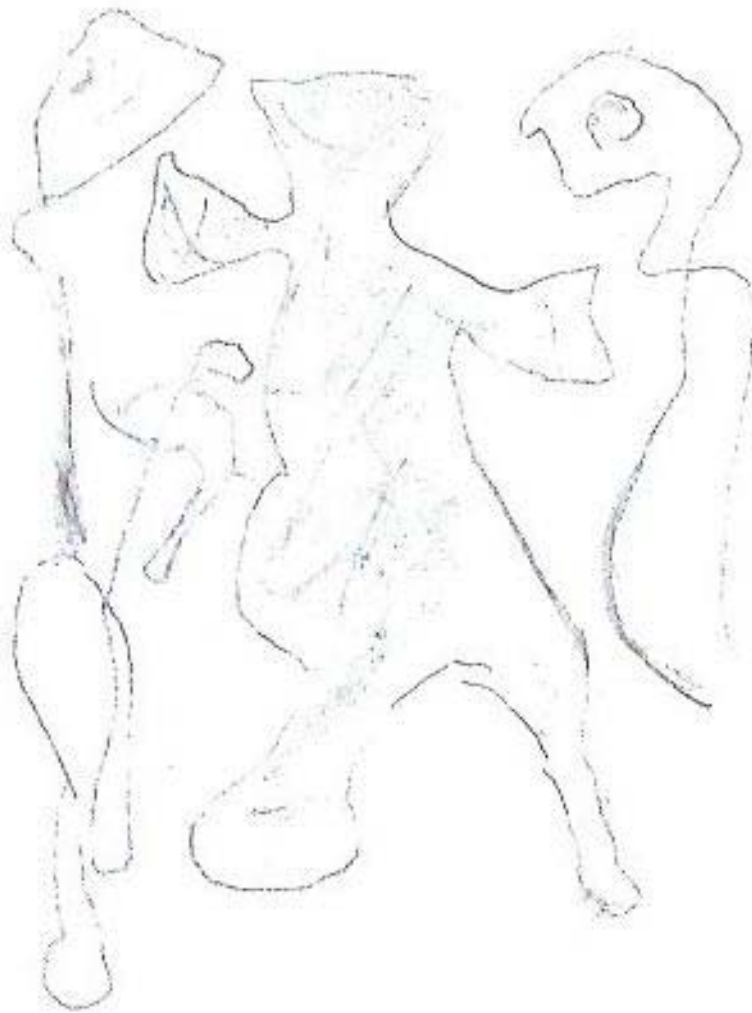
portable mural for the Museum of Modern Art in 1940. Labyrinths are a commonplace of Surrealist thought. George Bataille in his 1939 magazine *Acephale* conceived of the famous cover illustration of a headless figure not as a man or god but a “labyrinth in which he has lost himself.”<sup>xxxv</sup> Similar representations are Alberto Giacometti’s cages and his *Invisible Object/Man Holding the Void*, Andre Masson’s *Labyrinth*, and Max Ernst’s *Forests* and *Garden Airplane Trap* series, among many. In literature, as the classicist Guy Davenport notes, “the labyrinth became a life-symbol of our century (witness [also] Borges and his labyrinths, Gide’s *Theseus*, Cortazar’s *Hop-Scotch*, Kafka, Kazantzakis).”<sup>xxxvi</sup> Moreover, in some cases these reflected recognized *experience* and not simply an intellectual conceit of the World Wars, from the network of putrescent trenches in the First (“To be in the trenches was to experience an unreal, unforgettable enclosure and constraint, as well as a sense of being disoriented and lost”) <sup>xxxvii</sup> to the Second’s prisons and concentration and death camps. Perhaps among his colleagues, the issue can be summed by Gottlieb’s painting *The Castle* of 1950. The “castle” is that of Franz Kafka whose writing became very popular in New York after the Second World War.<sup>xxxviii</sup> That Gottlieb would paint such a theme indicated his commitment to the ideas of enclosure and entrapment, and the fact that he referred to Kafka indicates that the idea was as much modern and European as the American ideology of Modern Man. Kafka was, of course, Czech. As we will see in this study, much more than a narrowly conceived American “modern man” conception and its illustration lay behind Abstract Expressionism.

It is visually tempting to see Pollock's figures as buried in labyrinths, but Pollock never indicated any interest in labyrinths as entrapment in his semi-figurative work, which we now know later he continued in the networks of his "abstractions." Scroll labyrinths do appear in his early works but they are shamanic pathways to spiritual rejuvenation, and have nothing to do with the fashionable idea of the triumph of "despair" in the postwar period. Instead, Pollock always indicated interest in flux and connection as positive elements. (In Navaho ritual, in which Pollock was interested, it was important that the Native American be brought into "Hozho" -- harmony -- and know "beauty" all around. That was accomplished by connectedness of man with all things.) Perhaps we can best see the significance of the relationship of the figure to the web in Pollock's cutouts of which it is argued that the figures' linear envelopment expressed despair.

As we have seen, the cutouts reprise many of the motifs of Pollock's repertoire of motifs and are much more than simple negative envelopments and not only with the examples discussed. We can see Pollock celebrate their appearance not only through his standard gesticulating figure or figures, but in the fact that he placed guardians around them. In *Untitled (Cutout Figure)* of



1948 (fig. 29), two tall linear figures, both possibly pregnant, “guard” or *celebrate* a cutout figure whose body plane is a dripped field taken from another painting. The interior figure with the guardians is all shamanic vitality while the painting from which it is taken reverses the idea. Its figure is placed on a dynamic field. Both presentations mean the same thing. Celebrating or guarding a vital figure is an act, much like Pollock’s earlier version of the guardian idea, *The Guardians of the Secret* of 1943, of positive joy, not weak, victimized despair.



Indeed, in sand paintings, guardian figures stand at the opening protecting the ritualized figures within. This work, as in all of Pollock's works, recalls the fact that the shaman in Central America is often called "*the guardian of the stream of life*," a designation that I do not think he knew but that nevertheless ties together several of Pollock's key subjects.



In most of Pollock's abstractions, then, the figures consist of linear overlay; in other words, they are formed from webs themselves, thus defining the figure as constituted by whatever constitutes the web, that is, by positive forcefulness, not weakness. In this, Pollock significantly echoes Jose Clemente Orozco's *Prometheus* once again. Its civilization revitalizing figure is engulfed in orange rays emanating from the sun/godhead for which he reaches. This is inner and outer vitality, not modern man's labyrinthian entrapment or victimization under "bourgeois" capitalism as the banal Marxist view would have it. Ultimately, the idea common in the crime melodramas of film noir, "modern man" entrapment, belongs to the ideology of negativity that has distorted discussions of Pollock from the 1950s onwards. The "modern man" ideology seeks to source these views from the 1950s and its mistakes in a containable "subjectivity" derived from a narrow American prewar ideology but the era's criticism and its ideology of Pollock's work are too insufficient to "explain" Pollock's abstractions.

One can also note that references to Pollock and Abstract Expressionism as analogous to the popular crime dramas of film noir is also unsustainable. While such analogies feed on the late twentieth century pop fashion for film noir, allusions to guardians, celebrant crowds, she-wolves, birds, copulating couples and the like have nothing to do film noir. Pollock and Abstract Expressionism are much more than a reduction of popular culture.



One last element of the cutouts should be noted. Adding to or subtracting from a work of art was an idea and practice of David Alfaro Siqueiros, as can be seen in works such as *The End of the World* and *Collective Suicide* of 1936 with their added masonite panels. As we will see, Siqueiros taught Pollock how to treat the surface of a work of art as a “ground” to and from which material could be added or subtracted. Pollock seems to have used the same kind of wood saw as Siqueiros for his cutouts, too. Thus, the impact of Mexican artists extended not only to iconography, image, and symbol but to practice as well.

Figures and other forms thus may lie within and structure Pollock’s webs from the “ground” and from a layer or two in the finish. Whatever he did, however, taking up an approach that involves integrated metaphoric and metamorphic figures creates the danger of falling into the banal “see the figure” game played by those who refused to respect abstraction. Pollock’s work may include figures, but the finished paintings usually “disguise” them and they do so for a reason -- because the figures alone cannot say everything Pollock wanted. Despite the fact they are figures, the forms are very abstract, made of almost free-floating lines and curves that do not depict, but rather signify. They are reductive, lack fine detail and are generalized. The constituents and the concise figures are so abstract that they fit and blend into the many more abstract lines and marks that are not part of any figure, although they may be suggestive. Thus, the barrier between figure and abstract (force) is effaced, as cubism erased the separation of figure and ground. Pollock not only covered

his figures and subverted their presence by veiling them from without, he subverted them from within by making them so much part of a larger world, a larger web of lines and relations, thereby fusing them with abstract ideas and concerns. They thus became one with the stratum of the world that Pollock conceived and sought to embody but not illustrate. The result is that the emblematic, shamanic power webs of Pollock's networks enlarge associations and allusions to the world the figures signify and express. The assimilation of Pollock's figures into the field unites them with that which is beyond the human, making an abstract ideational and pictorial totality, neither figure nor complete abstraction or "non-objectivity." They represented shamanic ecstasy of all in the world, a "configuration of energy."

Pollock's "abstractions," then, are paintings of "hidden symbols." He is the American Kandinsky, for Kandinsky's abstractions are now recognized to contain the repertoire of chiliastic imagery he employed in his early work. At first Kandinsky's paintings of 1911 onward were thought, much like Pollock's, to be completely spontaneously abstract, but later scholarship corrected this notion. Though Pollock worked at the Guggenheim Museum in 1941 when there was a Kandinsky exhibition, he would not have known that then. Instead, he seems to have arrived at hidden abstraction -- incidentally, similarly devoted to Kandinsky's ideas of the rebirth and resacrilization of society with images of St. George, serpents and the like -- on his own, although through his generation's means of psychology and culture. As with fellow Russian John

Graham, Kandinsky was knowledgeable about Russian shamanism, too, just outside Moscow.

One could leave Pollock at that, with his power webs of his old symbols, but as with all the Abstract Expressionists, Pollock used his signature forms and practices to articulate further meanings. That is, his signature forms took on new associations for him. These new meanings can be understood in the titles he “agreed” to in mostly 1947-48. They use the drippings to expand and expound upon concerns hidden or not previously made manifest, although they were at least implicit. We will return to Pollock’s new associations after we discuss his chronological development in the next part of our study.

But before we do that, let us clarify our position. Pollock used birds, she-wolfs, the crowd-as-humanity, celebrants, guardians, males and females, power webs, copulation, cleft heads, and other symbols in works heretofore thought to be “abstractions.” The presence of these figures changes the clichés and banalities that started clinging to Jackson Pollock from the very beginning like barnacles on the hull of a boat. He appears as a thoughtful, informed, deliberate and symbolizing artist in these as much as in his earlier works. That means the so-called abstractions do not represent mere gesture painting as claimed by the catastrophically misguided interpretation of Harold Rosenberg, who formed the basis for popular understandings of Pollock. These paintings are not an arena for action. They do not indicate that when he was in his painting, he did not know what he was doing. They do not represent mere “individualism, risk and freedom,” if at all, particularly capitalist “freedom” as they have been used to illustrate. (Of course, the works’ symbols precede the Cold War and this fact alone demolishes any attempt to make Jackson Pollock, or any other Abstract Expressionist, Cold War artists. Such a view is part of the intellectual corruption of the new left Cold War generation.) The symbols stand for much more than the personal and subjective as the fifties’ generation of Movement Abstract Expressionism would have it for self-serving reasons. And perhaps most importantly, the symbols cast doubt on the fundamental misrepresentation of Pollock’s so-called abstractions as something totally and

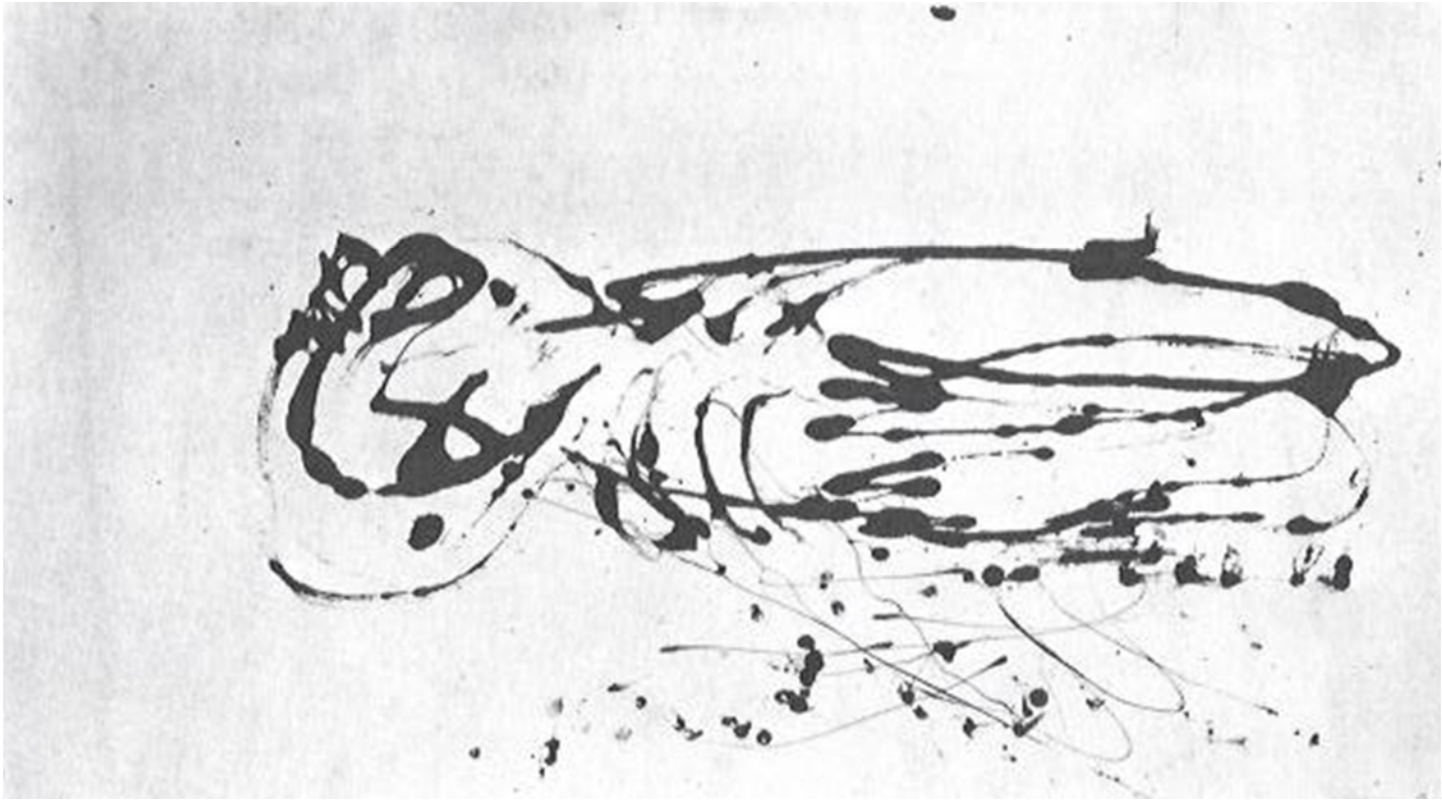
completely new and different from his previous work. Pollock's "abstractions" are a variant on what was once called his "Surrealist" work and thus *they emerged from the culture of the thirties and early forties, not the fifties*. They are not a complete transformation to an easy art of a blank canvas with some paint tossed around that makes, according to this traditional definition of Abstract Expressionism, you, dear reader, an Abstract Expressionist too if you want to be. If that were the case, all you would have to do is grab a blank canvas and swirl some paint on it. Here as in so much else, the critics got it fundamentally wrong, as Pollock himself noted. This book seeks to reconceive the issue by looking hard and close at his work and not developing "theories."

### *The Fifties*

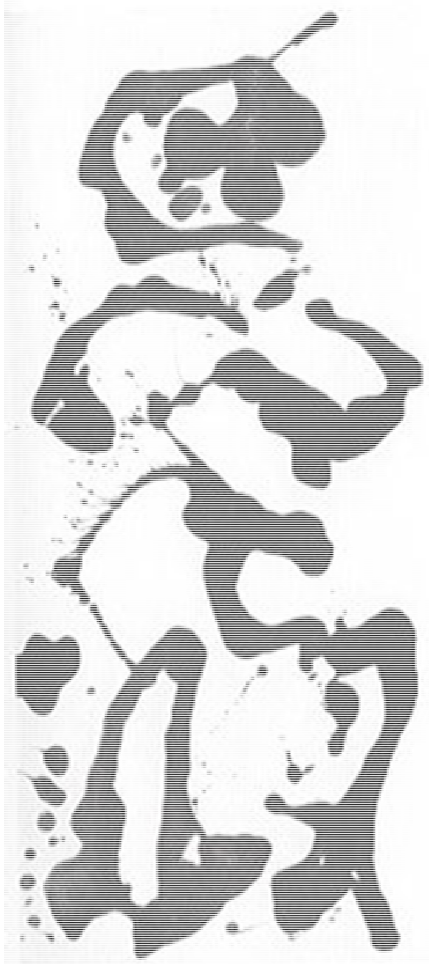
Jackson Pollock's "decline" is a well-known story. After the triumphal "abstractions," whether because of fatigue, his characteristic restlessness, or a loss of confidence, in 1951 Pollock both reiterated and sought to reinvent his work. His reinvention was stylistic as he seemed to work no longer in "campaigns" but all at once. That is, he drew figures not at one stage in the construction of a work but as the image itself. Certainly, that was his new emphasis on drawing and as he said, some of his older figures were coming through. In his "black paintings" of 1951, he accepted his figures as the image and then seemed to "fill in around them" rather make them a layer in his classic 1947-50 work. The result is a sort of positive/negative play with planes and shapes of forms and figures as blanks made up of the canvas ground, and concentrations of black enamel paint contain them.

For the most part, these black paintings no longer drew specifically from Native American forms. Except for *Echo: Number 25, 1951* which employs the finned mask of Northwest Coast masks<sup>xxxix</sup> and [*Black and White Painting I*] (II:

325) (fig. 30) which draws from half of the shaman headrest that lies at the bottom of *Bird*, Pollock did not use Indian forms very often.



In 1951, he did again reassert references to the work of Jose Clemente Orozco as in [*Black and White Painting III*] with its *Trench*-like outstretched arms as a crucifix over a spotted and concentrated figure. In other works, he simply drew the figure via a thickened line as in *Number 3, 1951 [Image of Man]* (fig 31)



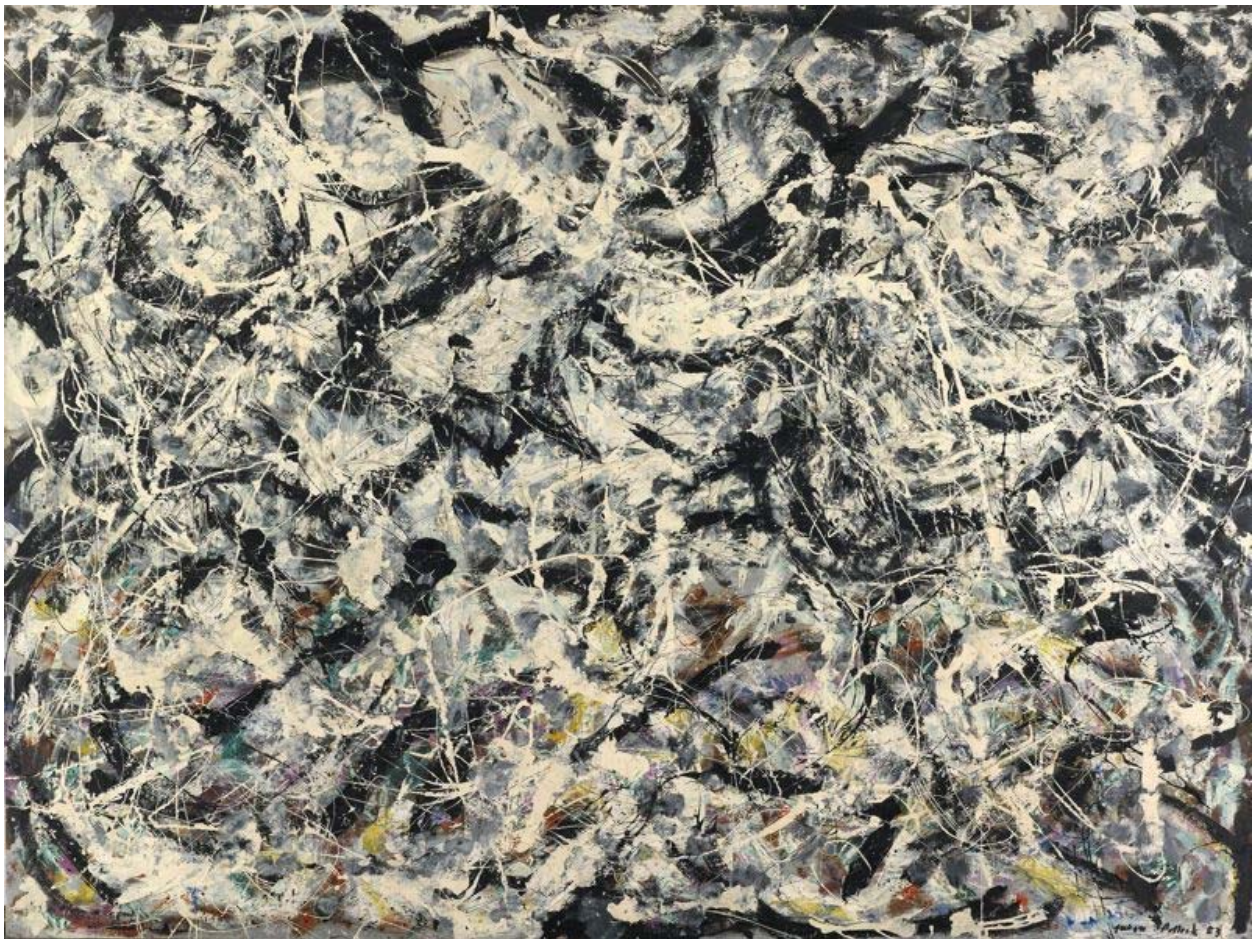
or joined shapeless thick areas of marks and planes to outline the numerous parts of a figure or group of figures. Other works seem to be made from his own 1940s drawings with their multiple figures and forms.

At the same time as these black paintings, Pollock experimented with new drip compositions that now bled more to edge of his canvas. They were quite different, from the more angular lines of *Number 28, 1950* to the more thickly planed *Composition on Green, Black and Tan*. The climax of the renewed



drips was *Blue Poles* which was discussed above. It is new in its more high pitched yellow and blues than his earlier abstractions.

In the next two years Pollock brought together single heads, multiple heads, and joined black figures. *The Portrait and a Dream* of 1953 consists of a dualistic head and seemingly dualistic or multiple black figures. *Ocean Greyness* evokes his horizontal heads while *Greyed Rainbow* of 1953 (fig. 32),



[*Scent*] of 1953-55, and *White Light* of 1954 recall *Shimmering Substance* and *Eyes in the Heat* of 1946. He was responding to the rising significance of Clyfford Still in *The Deep* with its reference to the fissure fundamental to the figural “mesas” of Still’s shamanic entities.



Other works are one of a kind. Nevertheless, in what turned out to be his final years as his marriage was disintegrating, Pollock sought to renew himself by drawing from the well of his own past, from his own “environment.” The works of these years are original and they have no singular direction much as with his pre-dripped work. They can and have been seen as indicative of a period of floundering but for so singular an artist with such achievements, perhaps he cannot be faulted for seeking to reinvigorate that newly recognized and prominent originality.

Stylistically, then, the late Pollock tried to reinvent himself. But what he did not reinvent was the subjects of the work. They maintained his interests and renewed his intellectual thrust. Besides those issues discussed above, with its headrest allusion. [*Black and White Painting I*] suggests a shaman dreaming in his sleep. *Echo* alludes to the earlier sounds in the grass series of 1946 organic life. *Number 7, 1951* (fig. 33) contains a stick crowd celebrating a conjoined male and female to the right.



(The female has a triangular, that is, “vaginal” head that harkens back to Pollock’s original vaginal and labial drawings, CR3: 473 and 479. The right male face is a self-portrait). *Number 6, 1952* fuses his dog/wolf with a pile of organic forms. *Number 7, 1952* has a profile, maybe a female head with a frontal male head within. *Number 1, 1952* depicts dances with more celebrant

figures as curves and *Easter and the Totem* of 1953 allude in its unusual Matisse colors to Pollock's chosen types of "resurrection."

Whatever the subjects and allusions, Pollock's brief work of the 1950s is certainly more general than the more detailed symbolism in his earlier work. Perhaps this is why so many people in the fifties believed he had always been so general and so simply, so reductively "working out of the unconscious." Still, these works both verbally and visually are yet another phase of the same subjects that had evolved from the late 1930s, as Lee Krasner had said. That is, Pollock did not need a whole new set of ideas drawn from the latest intellectual fashion for his abstractions after 1947. These ideas, such as personal subjectivity for its own sake, the anxiety of everyday life, and Existential engagement and conflict make at best only a gloss of the work, if that. The work is complete without them. It is just the difficulty of the work that made it possible for later commentators to inscribe the ideology of the fifties onto the work, as we have seen. Pollock's work from the 1950s is another version of his abstract, conceptual thought. Once understood in this way, the paintings fall in place.

Perhaps those explanations and interpretations from the 1950s can best be explained with an analogy of the construction of a Gothic cathedral. Like a cathedral which is built over time, with its last portal crafted in the latest style, Pollock's exemplary work contains many concepts from disparate motivations. It should not be judged, just as a cathedral should not be, only by the last

additions. Work needs to be done to restore some balance and perspective to our understanding of the complex relationships in this new art. As with the work of his colleagues, Pollock's thought and work was of the thirties and forties and came to completion, although with embellishments and new emphases, in the fifties. It is what the anthropologist Frobenius der Geheimrat called a *paideuma* -- "a people's whole gonerics of patterns of energies, from their 'ideas' down to the things they know in their bones."<sup>xl</sup>

Jackson Pollock's webs codify the organizing concept of the 1930s in a new form -- the search for a culture/personality worth having in a new industrial world. In keeping with his era, Pollock sought to match a vision of thinking, acting, and behaving with the culture/psyche of its time. Whether Regionalist, Osborn, Lynd, Marxist, Mexican, or Mass Man critique, Pollock sought to represent a system of values and beliefs that could keep pace with the technological changes of mass functional society and renew man. The result was that Pollock's abstractions created an image of an evolving harmonious whole that would implicitly suggest new modes of behavior, values, and customs but in a way that did not repudiate the past. To be sure, Pollock's personality was one of conflict and resolution, the basic drama of man. Yet his work found as the personal psychological the cultural psychological of his phase of modernization. As with many in his era, he constructed a vision from the necessary components of the new democratic and

reintegrated culture of America and reintegrated man with the web of his natural and social environment. For Pollock, material, social and psychic forms were thus joined together to constitute a new future. His paintings simply do not depict or specify the chosen elements of the next whole but elevate vital threads to parallel the idea. He enacted the principles behind the culture and “issues” of his time.

Pollock thus sought a new world view. He was a self-examiner of the cultural and social as well as the self. He was also a psychologist of the modern. As with the regionalists, Jung, Modern Man, and mass society critiques, his personal crisis was one of living and liming in modern culture. It was thus not only, if at all, his psychological conflicts with this mother or with fame, but the needs of modernity and urban culture. Pollock’s art was designed to end his and his era’s dislocated self and waning culture. That required the end of spiritual impoverishment. Pollock was a psychologist, moralist, and societal critic. His art thus aimed to analyze modern and cure it by reintroducing traditional meaning and values unacceptable to modern, secular, and scientific culture. Pollock’s art and thought was based on counter-enlightenment and reasserting the spiritual and traditional values that the culture of reason had vacated. The fact that Christian churches had been replaced by revolutionary values from the murderous Houses of Reason in the French Revolution to the ministries and homes of the proletariat in the Soviet Union now met their match in the counter of the desire for a modern spiritual revolution at the war-haunted midcentury. Pollock’s personal need for psychic

transformation thus created a craving for new meanings and form by means of new trusses and processes. His transformation was thus one with the ongoing historical and cultural transformation. Pollock's own life, of which so much has been written, cannot be separated from the social conditions and cultural dilemmas of his age. His illness was a creative illness. Creative life was his answer, a life redone. It was an design for the future, a vision of modernity as mythogenic limitless growth, a single image of multiple creations. It was Pollock's paradise – a harmonic rhythm of man and modernity, man and the universe, man and his renewed spiritual inner life. Pollock sought to cultivate his and man's soul and mind, leading to a fuller meaning in life that would also balance his technical development. It was his living personality for the age, writ large.





*Illustrations* Fig. 1. "Art of the South Seas." Installation view from *Arts of the South Seas*, January 29 through May 19, 1946. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 2. New Guinea carving, wood. Field Museum of Natural History, Neg. #111 718, cat. #141 179, Chicago.

Fig. 3. New Guinea carving (detail).

Fig 4. *Eyes in the Heat*, 1946. 54 x 43 in. The Peggy Guggenheim Collection. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

Fig. 5. *Shimmering Substance*, 1946. From the *Sounds in the Grass* series. 30 1/8 x 24 1/4 in. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. Albert Lewin and Mrs. Sam. A. Lewisohn Funds.

Fig. 6. *Full Fathom Five*, 1947. Oil on canvas, with nails, tacks, buttons, key, coins, cigarettes, matches, etc. 50 7/8 x 30 1/8 in. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Peggy Guggenheim.

Fig. 7. *Summertime: Number 9A*, 1948. Oil and enamel on canvas, 33 1/4 x 18 ft. 2 in. The Tate Gallery, London.

Fig. 8. *The Enchanted Forest*, 1947. 45 1/8 x 87 1/8 in. Peggy Guggenheim Collection. Photo: Robert E. Mates.

Fig. 9. *Easter and the Totem*, 1953. oil on canvas, 6 ft. 10 1/8 in. x 58 in. The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Lee Krasner in honor of Jackson Pollock.

Fig. 10 Andre Masson, *Landscape of Wonders*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 x 25 3/4 in. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Bequest Richard S. Zisler, 2007.

Fig. 11. *Untitled*, CR IV:1014, 1946 Ink, pastel, gouache and spatter on paper. 19 x 26 in. Collection Denise and Andrew Saul.

Fig. 12. *Untitled*, CRIV: 1010, 1946. Gouache on paper. 22 1/4 x 32 1/2 in. Thyssen-Bornemisza Collectio

Fig. 13. Orozco, *Omniscience*. Fresco, 1925. Casa de los Azulejos (Sanborn Restaurant, Mexico City.

Fig. 14. Orozco, Ceiling, *Prometheus*, 1930. Pomona College.

Fig. 15. Anonymous, 1930s.

Fig. 16. Charles Sheeler, *Rolling Power*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 15 x 30 in. Smith College Museum of Art.

Fig. 17. *Number 4, 1948: Gray and Red*, 1948. Enamel on paper. 22 3/8 x 30 7/8 in. Frederick R. Weisman Foundation, Los Angeles.

Fig. 18. *Blue Poles: Number 11*, 1952. 1952. Enamel and aluminum paint with glass on canvas. 6 ft. 10 7/8 in x 15 ft. 11 5/8 in. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Fig. 19. *Number 26A, 1948: Black and White*, 1948. Enamel on Canvas, 6 ft. 9 7/8 x 47 7/8 in. Musee national d'art modern, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Fig. 20. *Number 17A, 1948*. Oil on canvas. 34 1/16 x 44 1/8 in. Collection David Geffen.

Fig. 21. *Number 11A, 1948 (Black, White and Gray)*, 1948. Oil, enamel, and aluminum paint on canvas, 66 x 33 in. Private Collection.

Fig. 22. *Untitled (Cut-Out)*, 1948-50. Oil, enamel, aluminum paint on cardboard, 30 1/2 x 23 1/2 in. Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan.

Fig. 23. *Triad*, 1948, oil and enamel on paper mounted on composition board. 20 1/2 x 25 3/4 in. Collection of Art Enterprises Ltd., Chicago.

Fig. 24. *Untitled (Shadows: Number 2, 1948)*. 1948. Oil and paper cut-out on canvas, 55 1/4 x 44 in. Private Collection. Fig. 25. *Out of the Web: Number 7, 1949*. 1949 Oil and enamel on fiberboard, 48 in x 8 ft. Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

Fig. 26. *Comet*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 37 1/8 x 17 7/8 in. Wilhelm-Hack Museum, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Germany.

Fig. 27. *Number 21, 1950*. Enamel on Masonite, 22 1/4 x 22 1/4 in. Private Collection.

Fig. 28. *Number 10, 1950*. Oil on canvas, 65 x 36 1/2 in. Collection Richard Deutsch, Connecticut.

Fig. 29. *Untitled (Cut-Out Figure)*, 1948. Enamel, aluminum, and oil paint, glass, and nails on cardboard and paper, mounted on fiberboard, 31 x 22 5/8 in. Private Collection, Canada.

Fig. 30. [*Black and White Painting I*], 1951. Black paint on canvas, 19 ½ x 36 ½ in. Location unknown.

Fig. 31. *Number 3, 1951 [Image of Man]*. 1951. Enamel on canvas, 56 x 24 in. Location unknown.

Fig. 32. *Greyed Rainbow*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 in. The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of the Society for Contemporary American Art, 1955.

Fig. 33. *Number 7, 1951*. Oil on canvas, 56 x 66 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Gift of the Collectors Committee.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> For Barnett Newman, see “Los Formas artisticas del Pacifico,” *Ambos Mundos* 1 (June 1946), 51-55, reprinted in English as “Art of the South Seas,” *Studio International* 179 (February 1970): 70-71; published in Mollie McNickle, *Barnett Newman Selected Writings and Interviews*, introd. by Richard Shiff (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), 98-103.

<sup>ii</sup> For de Laszlo, see Jackson Rushing, “The Influence of American Indian Art on Jackson Pollock and the Early New York School,” (Master's thesis, University of

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Texas at Austin, 1984), 36; see also Ellen G. Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, (New York Harry Abrams, 1989), *Jackson Pollock*, 58 & note 23, and Donald Gordon, "Jackson Pollock's Bird or How Jung Did Not Offer Much Help in Myth-Making," *Art in America* 68 (October 1980) 48, 50, and note 50.

iii Polcari, interviews with Harold Lehman, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, 1997, transcript, 117.

iv Paul J. Karlstrom, "Jackson Pollock and Louis Bounce," *Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Journal* 24 # 2 (1984): 26.

v Joan Halifax, *Shaman: The Wounded Healer* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 86.

vi See Stephen Polcari, *Jackson Pollocket Le Shamanism* (Paris: Pinacothèque, 2008), 79.

vii Halifax, *Shaman*, 25.

viii Ibid., 88.

ix Ibid., 26.

x Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 172.

xi Ralph Linton and Paul S. Wingert, with Rene D' Haroncourt, *Art of the South Seas* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 111.

xii Armand J. Labbe, *Guardians of the Life Stream* (Santa Ana, California: Bowers Museum of Cultural Art: Cultural Arts Press, 1995), 90-91.

xiii Personal communication, December, 1991.

xiv Halifax, *Shaman*, 92.

xv Stanley Krippner, "Dreams and Shamanism," in Shirley Nicholson, *Shamanism An Expanded View of Reality* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 1987), 130.

xvi Richard Noll, "The Presence of Spirits in Magic and Madness," in *ibid.*, 52-56.

xvii Mihaly Hoppal, "Shamanism: An Archaic and/or Recent Belief System," in *ibid.*, 82-85.

xviii Jean Houston, "The Mind and Soul of the Shaman," in *ibid.*, xiii.

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<sup>xix</sup> Gary Doore, interview with Michael Harner, "The Ancient Wisdom in Shamanic Cultures" in *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>xx</sup> For ascents to the upper world, see *Eleventh Annual Report*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology: 124; to the lower from the middle, see 127. See also *Sixth Annual Report*, Rev. J. Owen Dorsey, "Osage Traditions," 380-390.

<sup>xxi</sup> Joan Halifax, "Shamanism, Mind and No Self, in Nicholson," *Shamanism*, 213-222, and Ralph Metzner, "Transformation Processes in Shamanism, Alchemy, and Yoga," in *ibid.*, 233-252.

<sup>xxii</sup> See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 285.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Noll, "The Presence of Spirits in Magic and Madness," in Nicholson, *Shamanism*, 58-60.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Robert Ellwood, "Shamanism and Theosophy," in Nicholson, *Shamanism*, 254.

<sup>xxv</sup> See Mary Schmidt, "Crazy Wisdom: The Shaman as Mediator of Realities," in Nicholson, *Shamanism*, 69.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Hoppal, "Shamanism: An Archaic and/or Recent Belief System," in Nicholson, *Shamanism*, 83.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See David Feinstein, "The Shaman Within," in Nicholson, *Shamanism*, 267-279.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Hoppal, "Shamanism: An Archaic and/or Recent Belief System," in Nicholson, *Shamanism*, 90.

<sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-90.

<sup>xxx</sup> Halifax, *Shaman*., 9.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Letter, December 26, 1973, Thomas Hart Benton to Francis O'Connor, cited in Francis O'Connor and Eugene Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonne of Paintings, Drawings and Other Works II*: 196.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Halifax, *Shaman*, 61, 80.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Lisa Frye Ashe, "Between the Easel and the Mural: Jackson Pollock's Frieze Paintings," College Art Association, February 16, 2006.



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xxxiv See Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 72.

xxxv George Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy, *Acephale*" # 1 (June 1936) cited in Stich, "Anxious Visions," 4. See also Stich, "Anxious Visions" *in passim*.

xxxvi Guy Davenport, "The House That Jack Built," in *The Geography of the Imagination* (Boston: David Godine, 1981), 51.

xxxvii See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 51. See also Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

xxxviii See Anatole Broyard, *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir*, (New York: Vintage, 1997).

xxxix See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 259.

xl Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 507.

## **The one**

### **Vitality and the “Living System or Network”**

Whether Pollock’s meshwork integrate familiar figures within his abstract form, or if they are constructed in embedded figures or “abstractions” organized in meaningful fabrics, Pollock’s paintings continue to rely on the simple and very significant ideas and associations of his world. His work of 1947 to 1950 has additional significance beyond that associated with his figures alone. Take the talisman of the 1930s and 1940s — the hieroglyph of motion. Pollock’s integrated processes or interlacings, whether part figurative or not, realize in a new modern form -- the thirties’ hieroglyph of flux and flow, movement and change, metamorphosis and change, the “hopes and dreams” of motion or the motility of people striving in movement. Attenuated in their physical substance, figures still merge or flow into their surroundings with ebullient rhythms. Pollock thus reaffirms the compounds of curves that dominated the previous decade to newly present a dualistic image of living vitality of the constructive along with its necessary cost of the destructive. In other words, in his new work, Pollock has combined his previous figurative symbol-making with the fundamental core behind them and his formative decade — ritualistic energetic force or vitalist dynamism.<sup>i</sup> His webs construct new entities that expressed the issues of the two decades: man in the transformative flux and flow of time and space, of the individual and society, and of culture and history themselves — in new, because old, modern form. (The image of flow reflects the growing power

of evolutionary theories on social thought which helped picture a dynamic world and humanity in constant flux and transformation.) This new but old man could counter and defeat modern mass man and society.

In our study, we have seen ample examples, precedents and influences in the 1930s and 1940s for Pollock's concept of expressive and meaningful dynamism, shamanist vitalism and ecstasy. Although the decades are very different, they shared important points and they interlock with one another to create in Pollock's era a "living system" or "network" of flux and fluidity as the basis of history, the impulses of the living creature and his documented actions and form, and the need for an equilibrium in the fundamental changing, balancing and rhythmic structure of all things great and small. These conceptions created what was longed for in the thirties and mythmaking forties — an overall "usable" ritual and myth of stream and flow for the idea of fluidity, mutability, progress and vicissitude that characterized the modern period after the collapse of the nineteenth century and the fumbling emergence of the twentieth-century's new civilization. This myth also formed pattern of life values and behavior fundamental to Pollock's work underlying all encrustations, expressions and reconnections he undertook in the forties.

The "getting America moving again" of the 1930s thus necessitated the hieroglyphic continuum of creative metamorphism, flux and flow that despite adaptations worked for the more modern 1940s as well. It is not an accident that shortly after Pollock began his web, the intercontinental lacery of

streamlined flow was realized in the construction of the interstate highway system in the 1950s, the thirties dream still alive and come to fruition in those who had emerged in that era. The difference between the decades is that Pollock's vitalism, echoing his time and surrealist metaphors, suggest the dark forces of rupture and the vitality of the unknown that reveal a new or alternative possibility. It suggests turbulence and magical, ecstatic frenzy and not mechanistic or simple evolutionary harmony.<sup>ii</sup>

In 1991, I interviewed Pollock's lifelong friend the painter and underappreciated Abstract Expressionist sculptor Reuben Kadish.<sup>iii</sup> He told me that in the late 1940s when Pollock created his webs, he wrote to him indicating that his poured and dripped paintings were a kind of image. Regrettably, in one of the great losses in American art history, in 1991 Kadish could no longer find those letters. They had been long misplaced, lost or thrown away. In the late 1940s, Kadish himself had left New York and the art world and moved to New Jersey to farm and only returned to the art world in the late 1950s. The only thing Kadish remembers from the letters was that they said that the abstractions represented an idea but for a more fulsome explanation than that we may never have all of Pollock's words.

We do, however, have some words, several significant statements that illuminate the laceworks. In their totality, these statements present a view of his abstractions very different from that which took flight in the early fifties, that is, the views that Pollock's abstractions were a blank slate covered with

irrational markings or fantasies, that they were chaotic, that they were about one-shot immediacy, accident and spontaneity for their own sake, and that they were unstructured and undetermined irrational outpourings from the unconscious. As such, Pollock's statements fatally undermine the conceptions from the fifties and sixties of unthinking and unconscious romantic alcoholic. They even undermine the moderation of the 1960s formalist European modernist structuring that has dominated understanding for decades. Ultimately, they reinforce the idea that Pollock's figured webs are figured for more than stylistic or compositional ends as we have seen.

We begin with the obvious: Pollock understood the hieroglyph of motion and he identified his work with its conception. In two undated documents the allegedly unarticulate artist wrote:

*No Sketches*

*Acceptance of what I do— — .*

---

Experience of our age in terms

Of painting— -not an illustration of—

(but *the equivalent*)

Concentrated

Fluid [Pollock italics]<sup>iv</sup>

And

Technic [sic] is the result of a need \_\_\_\_

New needs demand new technics\_\_\_\_\_

Total control\_\_\_\_\_

Denial of the accident\_\_\_\_\_

States of order\_\_\_\_\_

Organic intensity\_\_\_\_\_

Energy and motion made visible\_\_\_\_\_

Memories arrested in space,

Human needs and motives\_\_\_\_\_

Acceptance\_\_\_\_\_<sup>v</sup>

These undated statements from the forties tell us much about Pollock and how he thinks of his figurative “abstractions.” For our purposes here, there are three statements of interest. Pollock defines his work — most probably the webbings of 1947 to 1950 — as “energy made visible” that is “*concentrated*” and “*fluid*,” ultimately reaffirming that *fluidity* is central to him as it was to his era. The idea of concentrated fluidity adumbrates but ultimately differs from what

has been a leading concept drawn from Harold Rosenberg's concept of "action painting," or "gesturalism."

This view has been and continues to be a leading conception of Pollock's abstractions. Aided by the photographs and films of Hans Namuth, and reaffirmed by the misrepresentation of the work of de Kooning and others, Pollock's abstractions seem to be products of the arc of his arm, seemingly for its own sake. Such gesturalism, even with figures, articulated and reinforced by Rosenberg's concept of the Abstract Expressionist canvas as an "arena in which to act," has become a self-sufficient concept and meaning for Pollock work. That is, his art is seen as producing documented physical gestures for their own sake — not only for the form but for their forceful expressiveness. This interpretation known as "gesturalism" is further reinforced when the idea that the gestures express the unconscious is added. Pollock's work is thus traditionally thought to be acting out, an outburst or release from the unconscious in the form of a gesture or rather, multiple gestures, and this kind of self-expression is thought to be an original kind of abstraction in modern art for many. The concept of "gesturalism" earned postwar American art its star in the firmament of modern art.

"Gesturalism," however, is a seductive but a deeply flawed theory for "gesture" is beside the point. The dictionary defines gesture as a movement of the body, head, arms, hands, or face that is expressive of an idea, opinion, or emotion. At first this definition seems to clinch the idea that Pollock's



“gesture,” that is, the predominant curves in his lacework, is nothing more than a record of the movement of the body or arm that is emotionally expressive. But if we deleted mention of the body or limb we would be left with a definition that says more by saying less. Such a definition notes that by itself motion is expressive of an idea or an emotion. In other words, “motion” is what we would be left within what we see in Pollock as an image and form if we did not believe Pollock’s arm movement created the motion to a degree erroneously suggested in Namuth’s edited photographs and films. It is these photographs and film that made Pollock’s arm movement famous and the basis of the gestural interpretation of his art. However, without knowledge of Namuth’s photographs and film, one can define Pollock’s work in a more relevant way. His work could also be “movement . . . expressive of an idea . . . [or] emotion.” In short, photographing and discussing arm movements distorted the reception of the work and hindered recognition as a visualization of motion itself, and all that that implies for the era.

Instead, Pollock’s abstractions are fully what he and others had been doing since the 1930s — using movement for expressive purposes and we have discussed many of those purposes. Pollock’s abstractions are more than just expressive gestures, and more than gesturalism.

Indeed, Pepe Karmel believes that arm movements are less determinant. More often there are simple drippings and flips of a brush or stick. Putting aside the figurative campaigns of the paintings, to say that arm gesture is the

source and form of Pollock's work is a little like saying that we can define Renaissance art as simply expressive wrist art because we know that it was created with the flick of a brush and not an arm. Renaissance art, of course, is much more than wrist art even if done mostly with wrists and so is Pollock's art more, if at all, than arm art. To call Pollock's abstractions gesturalism is to reduce it to a mostly physical technique and thereby only caricature it. He said as much, not only above where he said above that technique is the result of needs and more sharply, but when he said that "technique is just a means of arriving at a statement."<sup>vi</sup> That is, he hoped critics would not make too much of his working on the floor intercrossing paint with his arms in his dripping and pouring. But they did.

Elsewhere than his words above, Pollock has explicated his abstractions in ways that reveal their meanings as more than gesturalism, making clear that the drippings bring forth further the culture of the hieroglyph of motion and its larger implications. One statement was made in the 1950 in a radio interview with William Wright. In it, Pollock declared, "the modern artist is working with space and time,"<sup>vii</sup> thereby associating his project — and his figures — not with gesturalism but with the project of the thirties and forties — the *space time continuum*. As the thirties from the Mexicans to T.S. Eliot to Thomas Hart Benton to Sigfried Giedion did, in his networks Pollock developed epic structures and themes that express a long human process — a historical continuum or panorama of development and transformation over space and time and many places and peoples. In the thirties, that evolutionary process

intentionally demonstrated comparative creativity and fertility inherent in man and society. Large scale or epic structure itself implied a long temporal and spatial process and continuity from, most probably, an archaic beginning or initiation to the present and then the future. The space time continuum or panorama summarized in allegorical form a myth or allegory of usable hopes, dreams and successes for the future. In other words, despite the contemporary vicissitudes of the Depression and the Second World War, the interconnected, ever dynamic nature of human experiences formed a major part of vital or progressive historical continuum. This conception has little to do with the fifties typical creative romance of insular, wild emotional gesturing or melodramatic outbursts for the sake of expressiveness itself of the simply disturbed, melodramatic artist. Instead, it retained the overall hope of the nineteenth century of continual progress but adapted it as dynamic constructive and, at times, destructive effort.

No modern period was as obsessed not only with the space of many but with time as the interwar period and its conclusion, Abstract Expressionism. From the era's concepts of the relativity of all of Einstein's space and time continuum, from the critique of the end of the civilization of Eliot, Pound and Joyce, in the fighting back of the Regionalists against the encroachments of urban modernity to the awakening of the recognition of an archaic in modern so that Picasso can allude in his sculpture to sculptures from fifty thousand years ago (such as the Venuses and all can find kinship in the caves and stones and bones of man's past), the interwar generation situated the

smallness of contemporary man against the infinity of nature and human culture. As we have seen, life itself was defined as motion with all the hopes and dreams of man attached to it. In Bergson's vitalism (and duration where consciousness is presented as an endlessly flowing process rather than a set of demarcated states), for example, and Marxism's triumphant class struggle, Jungian psychology's psychic state of permanent becoming, Benton and the Mexican muralists' dynamic histories of political and cultural forces and their stages, transience is articulated as restless flux and flow, as potent force and energy. Pollock's abstractions are those of transitoriness and mutability in which nothing is fixed or static in his new time. In Pollock's world of the psyche, even his figures celebrate the new.

In Pollock's era, artistic unity is conceptual and thematic unity. To render unified space and time, for example, Rivera synthesized allegorical and natural elements into a flowing, yet rigorously controlled, all-over pattern thereby foretelling a unified progression of events within a continuous frieze-like-design achieving a naturalistic unity between action, time and space. Much like thirties murals, then, Pollock's webs — he even entitled one work *Frieze* — give continuity over time thereby resolving, as we saw, one of the great problems of the modern civilization in the 1930s and 1940s: the destruction of continuity with the past.<sup>viii</sup>

Another way of rendering unified time and space is layering, stratification, and deposits. In the 1940s, at least under the influence of Jung,

the psyche was conceived as a series of layers beginning with that of earliest of man's experience and continuing to the present. Layering became, then, a metaphor for the structure of the psyche and the relationship to the past, and many Abstract Expressionists used it. Rothko alluded to the inward stratification of mankind through the idea of geological stratification. His *Geologic Reverie* (1946) consists of several horizontal layers echoing stratigraphic diagrams of the evolution of life.<sup>ix</sup> Fossil creatures lie scattered about the layering of space, time and growth. Richard Pousette-Dart and Adolph Gottlieb reprised this metaphor through pictographic works of the 1940s that suggest the continual accretive metamorphosis of one live creature/culture into another and another, and thus organic growth through pressure from within. Later the evolution will take place through the layering and showing through of the multiple abstract planes, suggesting, as one mentally peels the planes off of one another, connectedness and change through time. In a way, Pollock's webs and their campaigns of figures and marks can be considered a palimpsest, a popular concept among many of his colleagues. Think, for instance, of e. g. Hofmann and Pousette-Dart's painting *Palimpsest*, from the mid-1940s. Palimpsests, of course, are sheets of parchment, which have been overwritten so many times that the new cannot be distinguished from the old.

Other artists of the period wrote of the idea of paralleling the structure of the psyche through psychic deposits. Wolfgang Paalen, a surrealist, wrote in his influential magazine, *DYN*, that Pollock and most Abstract Expressionists

read, that the psychically attuned artist represents the evolution of human thought and experience in the germination of new life:

In order to pass from emotion to abstraction, man is obliged, in the maturation of each individual, to pass through the ancestral stratification of thought, analogously to the evolutionary stages of the species that must be traversed in the maternal womb<sup>x</sup>.

But perhaps Jung's conception of the unconscious and its processes seen above that best explains the fertility of the idea of the layers of the mind. Again, as noted above, he wrote that the unconscious was a dynamic representation of the "deposit of all human experience right back to remotest beginnings . . . not a dead deposit but a living system of reactions . . . that determine the individual's life . . . [and encompass the entire] heritage of man's evolution." For Pollock, building layers or deposits was a way to parallel the structure of the mind and its connection to and evolution from the past to the present. His palimpsests then consist of metaphysical deposits upon deposit of time, memory, experience and ebullient figures ultimately woven together in endless flux and flow, "concentrated," "fluid." Pollock's paintings consequently present as directly as possible for him the weaving, integrating, binding, of his era's conception of the psyche. His construction of a painting thus actualizes the construction and evolution of the psyche itself as understood in and of time and space.

Pollock's lacings are those of continuous flow, liminality, the transitional realm. As with the popular novelist Thomas Wolfe, Pollock probably believes that "all flows and that everything must change." Pollock's earlier work, of course, was filled with images of growth, echoing the idea of the fundamentality of living and transformation. For both Pollock and Wolfe, "The growing man is Man-Alive, and his 'philosophy' must grow, must flow, with him. When it does not, we have . . . [man's] body of beliefs [that] is nothing but a series of fixations." (*You Can't go Home Again*, 566) Wolfe defined man as someone who, like civilization, psyche and art must be open and fluid, ever-changing, whose world and very being are in constant flux. For them, then, like many in twentieth-century America, and like a living organism, the lack of fixity is "the essence of Time [and mankind] is Flow, not Fix." (566) Thus, like many of their age Pollock and Wolfe made a virtue out of a fact and a necessity of modern times, instability and constant change. Further, with Pollock's abstraction, *space* is coextensive with the real space before it. Although his elements mostly do not project beyond the canvas edge, their embedded figural power webs restlessness and energy create a feeling of unboundedness, of impulsion to and fro, and left to right. The refusal of boundaries implies that the elements belong as much to our "real" world as to the pictorial. Much like Heinrich Wofflin's at the time definition of the "open" as opposed to the closed, one has a sense of the dissolution of the fixed form by means of endless layering and open space in the finished work. Rather than Greenberg's famous shallow space or "flatness," Pollock's webs create a sense of expansiveness in infinite continuity.



Each element rather than standing alone, seems to be merely one impulsion among a sea of many. Thus Pollock creates ties based on consciousness or psyche rather than class, clan or blood and this consciousness counters the idea of the rootlessness of mass man.

Pollock's titles and paintings *Comet*, *Shooting Star*, and *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, all of 1947, represent this world of openness to inner change and fluidity extended to the cosmos, as does his grand style. His commitment to the space time continuum and the placement of celebrant figures in it is a commitment to this physical unity of the universe. For Pollock's figurative webs, multiple parts form a continuous totality that is analogous to the new unity of the globe in the industrial age and in science as in Einstein's theory of relativity. The world and its history are to be conceived as a network, web, configuration or pattern of continually connecting parts. Pollock's space and time cannot be measured, suggesting its perpetual infinity in cosmic terms and not just the shallow space of cubism as is sometimes argued.

In short, in the lattice work that Pollock is painting lies the *deep time and space* characteristic of his period. That Pollock's emblems of flux and flow are more than just immediate, limited outbursts — Stuart Davis's famed characterization of "belches from the unconscious" — is confirmed in the titles that he attached to them and through which he wanted them understood. In works such as *Banners of Springtime*, 1946, a semi-figurative work indicating his thinking even before the abstractions; *Summertime: Number 9A*, 1948 with

its bright yellows and whirling skeins of organic forms in the field nevertheless remaining vaguely evocative of the figural, insect and plant life of Masson, Gorky and Pollock's own *Accabonac Series*, his later *Echo (Number 25, 1951)*



and *Autumn Rhythm* of 1950 (fig. 1), he draws on the natural world as a mytho-ritualistic and primal cycle. These works suggest the very traditional allegorical cycle of the unfolding of the seasons, the year, and the ages of man if not life itself. This metaphor thus states the evolution of inner development and the soul's — now the psyche's — progress which takes place through Prometheus's symbolic creative power and act of destruction of the old and formation of the new. Here Pollock states a view of the unity of all creation in a ritual unfolding or growth, an as the essential rhythm, pattern or configuration of the universe.

In this he parallels the thirties' generation emphasis on epic unfolding of mythic history in stages we have seen in their murals — see Orozco's *Epic of Civilization* — and we also see in Wolfe's use of the times of the day and seasons of year for his hieroglyph of eternal flux and flow. With the 1940s, such a pattern is transformed but still exploited by Pollock's colleagues. See, for example, Barnett Newman's *Day One* of 1951-52 (fig. 2),



*Noon Light* of 1961 and *Queen of the*

*Night* II of 1967. In these paintings, Newman renders the metaphor through the

emergence of one color from another, as we have seen, or the cyclic flux of times of day. Formally, then, he reprises human waxing and waning as an allegoric epic of creation and rebirth after the crises of his time, particularly the Second World War. These different times of the day suggest not just the passage of nature and time but, allegorically, the different eras in the history of man and in life itself.

The Abstract Expressionist Richard Pousette-Dart expressed a related idea of cosmic flux throughout his work. But in his voluminous notebooks of the early 1940s, he put it in words according to Lowery Stokes Sims. He wrote that edges were really the “fragile point of balance, between opposites, which are mutable and in constant flux.”<sup>xi</sup> In his art of cosmic and spiritual metamorphosis, Pousette-Dart noted that he preferred

not the hard edge nor the soft edge

but the living edge of awareness . . .

dynamic edge of creation . . .

still edge of all motion contained . . .

edge of eternal birth & genesis of all forms<sup>xii</sup>

For Pousette-Dart, all boundaries and edges were limitations, making enclosed territories that “are based on violence and bloodshed.”<sup>xiii</sup> Pollock’s figural fields almost eliminate such “boundaries.”

Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb's interest in deep time and space was indicated by such works as the former's *Geologic Reverie* and the latter's *Links of Memory* among many works. So, too, their abstractions. Consider Rothko's emblematic abstractions rendering his themes of the manifold, emotional stages of the eternal journey, ritual cycle and mythic process of humanity, not only man but civilizations.<sup>xiv</sup>

Perhaps the mythicist Joseph Campbell in summarized best the long view of the space-time continuum rendered as perpetual flux and flow in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell, a strong influence on artists, was an heir to Jung and a well-known interpreter of Joyce. (Pollock owned his 1944 *Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*. And De Kooning told Campbell that his book was a major influence on his friends when he traveled with him in 1950.<sup>xv</sup>) He wrote: "Life must be! . . . to give . . . forth is to create this world that we know. For the essence of time is flux, dissolution of the momentarily existent; and the essence of life is time. The paradox of creation, the coming of the forms of time out of eternity, is the germinal secret . . . . The problem of the hero is to pierce himself (and therefore his world) . . . through . . . to shatter and annihilate that key knot of his limited existence." <sup>xvi</sup> For Campbell, "the hero-deed is a continuous shattering of the crystallizations of the moment. The cycle rolls: mythology focuses on the growing-point. *Transformation, fluidity, not stubborn ponderosity* [my italics], is the characteristic of the living God [within]."<sup>xvii</sup> The world of Pollock's webs is similar world of fertile "concentrated fluidity." They

are emblems of fleeting life and transience, recalling the metaphors traditional in old master painting and Western life.

To return to our original point that Pollock verbally articulated some of the serious meanings of his work, a second association of the drippings by Pollock that denied “gesturalism” was the continuum of “continuousness,” of perpetual “ongoingness.” This ongoingness was known in the period in the words “no beginning or end.” Pollock liked it as a description of his work. In the interview in the *New Yorker* magazine of August 5, 1950, Pollock said “There was a reviewer a while back who wrote that my pictures didn’t have any beginning or any end. He didn’t mean it as a compliment, but it was. It was a fine compliment. Only he didn’t know it.”<sup>xviii</sup>

“No beginning or end” or is a major concept (much more important than automatism) behind not just the dynamism of Pollock but many of his contemporaries who also spoke about it and used the notion in their own works. While it has obvious affinities to artistic and intellectual “processes,” while it was another theosophical concept,<sup>xix</sup> the concept of no beginning or end or endless beginnings and ends perhaps derives from the concept of time and space in the work of James Joyce (e.g. *Finnegan’s Wake*, “to end again and awake”) and T. S. Eliot. The latter famously wrote in the *Four Quartets* “In my beginning is my end . . . In my end is my beginning.” Many of the period including many Abstract Expressionists (Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Seymour Lipton, Richard Pousette-Dart as well as Jackson Pollock) repeated the idea.



Even the Indian Space painters adhered to the concept. Steven Wheeler wanting an art to “build a reality in harmony with external fact and internal desire . . . weaving painting and life into a close-knit fabric that has not beginning or end.”<sup>xx</sup> Thus, Pollock’s webs are emblems of ongoingness for its own sake, the visionary aesthetic of greater movement, flow and flux with no finality. This continuum was the essential form and metaphor for the human journey in the 1930s and 1940s including of that of the psyche of hopes, actions, activities and dreams. “Gesturalism” is a pale concept next to it.

In recent decades in many ways, automatism has even supplanted the connectivity and perpetual continuum, the ongoingness, in explaining Pollock’s dynamism. In traditional modernist criticism, automatism served many purposes. It tied Pollock to the unconscious and to surrealism, both high points in the arc of European modernism by lending prestige to Pollock’s and all Abstract Expressionist dynamism. It reaffirmed the interpretations of Pollock’s work as personal and subjective and thus only self-referential and a private myth. And it suggests that Pollock’s abstractions began with blank slates upon which he improvised.

The classic definition of Abstract Expressionist automatism on this interpretation, however, was made not by Pollock but by Robert Motherwell. He wrote in 1944 that automatism was “a plastic weapon with which to invent new forms. As such it is one of the twentieth century’s greatest formal inventions.”<sup>xxi</sup> Notice that he defined it as a formal (and formalist) tool.

That Pollock webs are only expansions of automatist meandering thus has become an *idée fixe*. Yet his formative years were a time in which *theories* and *forms* of change, evolution, and metamorphosis predominated. It was not surprising, then, that Pollock would evolve such a form and signification, too, especially since his teachers and intellectual sources were primary practitioners of dynamic transformation and his conception was based on their purposive dynamics itself.

And it is thus not surprising that there is another definition of automatism in American art world that is more relevant to Pollock's conception than Motherwell's. That was recorded by the artist Edward Renouf in the magazine *DYN* (that Pollock read). He wrote that automatism indicated the creative "boundless reaches of presentiment and memory of man and the physical universe" which summed up and reintegrated their personal and cultural past with new life. Such a definition relates closely to Pollock's own descriptions and is more in keeping with the association of the "hieroglyph of motion" that he embraced. As such it indicates that Motherwell, Namuth's photos and films and their interpretation in the fifties once again directed critics away from the meanings of Pollock's work for the new conception of the 1950s and 1960s under which it became known.

Renouf continues in his writing to further define automatism and dynamism and, in so doing, continues to treat themes that Pollock must have shared. Renouf's definition presents things very familiar to us. He writes that

the automatism of American artists charged “the past, the known, with new life through . . . metamorphoses.” Further:

The modern artist does not seek his salvation in the hope for or belief in any perdurable utopian finality, but in the dynamism itself of progressive trial, search, discovery, construction, action. The value of his art, like the value of life itself, does not lie any hypothetical perfection . . . but in the very process and fullness of ever-changing effort, adaptation and evolution . . . . Modern painting . . . [in] its shattering of the conscious image . . . [affirms] the creative . . . unconscious. . . . [M]odern artists [are] acutely responsive to the social and moral realities of the day . . . . [I]nstitutions [should] be kept flexible to allow as great a degree as possible of spontaneous unfolding and evolving of human personality and its quintessential instrument and expression: creation. . . . Thus the nuclear problem of modern painting is the problem of transfiguring life into plastic statement . . . the boundless oceans of protean and ever-evolving and changing potentialities and realizations of which we have as yet not become aware. Thus the painting is a metaphor that expresses the life of the painter. It is implicitly a biography that as metaphor comes closer to the vitality of life and its protean awareness than could any theoretical or factual statement. It fuses fact with its ambient world . . . via ellipses . . . allusions, fusions of unconscious and conscious, of realizations and insights with mysterious presentiments. And of course

the biography of the artist is not merely his biography . . . [but] also a chapter out of the biography of his time and culture.<sup>xxii</sup>

Rather than a blank slate and a blank canvas for personal and subjective improvisation for its own sake, Renouf's automatism — and that of Pollock — declares its allegiance to the central issues of their cultural moment: the space time continuum, the unbroken continuity to the past, the unfolding and evolving of the modern human personality, the creation of vital potentialities, the fusions of unconscious and conscious, the very self-consciousness of the process of initiation, adaptation, and evolution, and finally the representation of the personal as that of one's time and culture and not only the self or "individual." Pollock's Renouf-like "automatist" abstractions loom much larger in meaning than Motherwell's technical and formalist definition. Unfortunately, though, Motherwell's formalist definition was popularized and used to express an art of individual identity, felt everyday experience and personal alienation, that they distorted the reception and understanding of Pollock's figured lacery.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Just after Pollock declared that his work no beginning or end, he added another concept that illuminates his lacings. In the film narrative to the color film of Namuth and Paul Falkenberg of June 14, 1951, Pollock declares famously that "sometimes I lose a painting." He further declares, in a comment less recognized but more important for the significations of his abstractions, that he is not afraid for a key reason: "But I have no fear of changes, of

destroying the image, because a painting has a life of its own. I kind of let it live.”<sup>xxiv</sup> With this statement, Pollock repeats virtually exactly what he said in his comments for the journal *Possibilities* (edited by Rosenberg), Winter 1947-48, “. . . the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through.” This must have been a strong desire of his.

That a painting needs and does “live” can have two meanings — one is stylistic — that the life is just that of a canvas that “works,” an artist’s colloquial expression meaning that it fits together and operates. But it could have a second meaning and that Pollock repeats the statement in two places suggests that this second meaning was very possible. That a painting has a life of its own, that the painter must let it live brings forth the idea of the “living” work of art that dominated his period (although the desire for a living art goes all the way back to the nineteenth century of romanticism and Courbet).

In the thirties and forties, the “living” was what was vital, alive and progressive. In keeping with his times, Pollock sought an art of living experience and not simply formal art although it, of course, was art and necessitated a history of art to come into being. Thus, Pollock seems to be saying that his paintings are “active” and “alive,” the “living” thing to which the response is equally living and organic rather than merely intellectual, analytic or stylistic. Their quality of “livingness” is one reason that the works still resonate. They are rich with variety, audacity, vividness and strength. Pollock has deliberately made the vital, alive and progressive, vivid and dramatic, too.

Additionally, Pollock's interlacings develop further a concept that had been first proposed in modern painting by cubism. Cubism consisted of conflation of spatial planes and disassociated pictorial groupings. That is, Picasso and Braque's modern compositions fused formerly separate planes and spaces and things into an emblematic design. A cubist painting would manufacture a consistency of edge, surface and plane from the disparate. Thus they formed a new and greater unity than ever before in modern painting. Benton took cubist composition one step further and made it into an abstract design in itself. Further, as we saw in his diagrams and his murals, that integration became more vital and dynamic, so much so that his murals became grand rhythms of a culture across time and space. They became integrated connections, systems or networks of progress with one thing, figure or activity and event flowing into another. Benton often telescoped space between them.

What Picasso, Braque and Benton then proposed was an art of vital interrelationship that Pollock and his culture disposed as a living system of relations. In the 1930s, the nature of culture and history did not consist of isolated events or heroic individuals but interrelated happenings and contextualized orders. As we saw the individual is not an individual but simply a representation of a larger whole of which he is only a part.

Benton had defined his art as Marxist because it was about "operations" and "processes" that is, active "living networks." Benton was not alone in his understanding for Marxism was an influential theory in the thirties. Karl

Mannheim, a major mass society theorist and socialist, defined the first task of Marxism as the analysis and rationalization of a society's economic, social and cultural spheres. To him Marxism characterized the structural tendencies of a society's political sphere through an analysis of the prevailing relations of production. And those relations form a dynamic or living system. He wrote, "the productive relations are not regarded statically as a continually recurring economic cycle but, dynamically, as a structural interrelationship which is itself constantly changing through time."<sup>xxv</sup>

Life, society and history then were dynamic, changing structures that could connect to the past and to fellow man. There were many other forms of living systems in many spheres of thought. For Wolfe's George [Webber] and for America too, the form it would take was "the form of growth." Both were rooted in the "soil of Time — and Memory," but disappear in change. To be sure, these were "a giant web in which I [Webber] was caught, the product of my huge inheritance — the torrential recollectiveness, derived out of my mother's stock, which became a living, million-fibered integument that bound me to the past, not only of my own life, but of the very earth from which I came. . . . Nothing [however] that had ever been was lost. It all came back in an endless flow" (572-73).

The art and political history in this period then subordinated the individual and event to the portrayal of dynamic structural interrelations through space and time. It might be said such thinking was the case with



politics and earlier art but Pollock's work was, allegedly, from the unconscious and thus would not be concerned with living systems. But, on the contrary, there again we find another concept of living system or web because that is the very way Jung defined the unconscious: the unconscious was ultimately a network, "a dynamic deposit of all human experience right back to remotest beginnings"

The portrayal of the unconscious in Pollock's abstractions are thus a portrayal, or really, a reenactment through "deposits" of a living system of human experience or the potentials of experiences through the ages that lie within and that shape the evolution of the individual and of "man" as a whole. Yes, Pollock references the "unconscious" but it is an unconscious as a complex set of generative relations and connections and interactions. Pollock's webs are an emblem of dynamic agencies as the structure and shape of his and the world's inner life.

The final evidence for the commonplaceness of the interrelating of fragments and individual diverse units in his era of life and society and history and the individual and the unconscious as such a living systems or networks and not isolated, unrelated moments is found in heretofore unrecognized unlikely place: a hand-drawn diagram by Alfred Barr, reproduced as the frontispiece of the catalogue to the 1936 exhibition of "Cubism and Abstract Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The diagram is an illustration of the historical development of modern art *as a living network*. As we saw in

our discussion of the hieroglyph of motion that epitomized the ethos of the 1930s in America, Barr had drawn the evolution of modern art first in the prevalent ideal shape of the period, the torpedo and then in a diagram of interconnections between different styles. His flowchart of the vectors or dynamic lines of connections between artistic concepts in different times and places parallels to a degree the composition of Pollock's abstractions. It parallels them because Pollock and Barr share their own time and place — the America of the 1930s where the “living system” web, not the isolated, unconnected, fragment event or element or individual, rules. In this regard, it is not accidental that an individual can represent the flowchart of his space and time and its needs.

There is one more additional element to Pollock's living or vitalist dynamics. His webwork have been described as optical by Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss. That is, according to this argument, in his abstractions Pollock's line has been freed of its traditional role of contouring form thereby differing from the tactile shapes three-dimensional roundness or “sculptural” form of both traditional and earlier modern form. Because it bounds no form, it is independent. Without such traditional substance, it only appears to the eye. Hence it is optical, even rendering the unconscious “optical.” Fried argued that Pollock's all over woven quality created a “homogeneous visual fabric, which both invites the act of seeing on the part of the spectator and gives his eye nowhere to rest.” This argument can hold for the final layers of Pollock's abstraction, of course, but not for the pictographic

first of which he was unaware or denied (as Krauss did in a symposium on Pollock as the Museum of Modern Art, January 23, 1999).

Nevertheless, despite its seductiveness, Pollock's line is neither optical nor tactile. While he largely has no mass three dimensional form at any point in his abstractions, the painting's pure opticality is limited by the materiality of the paint. It is also limited by the fact that his fluid contours and swollen line is a generalized signifier of biomorphic form and thus stimulates in the viewer associations with dynamic organic life. As with biomorphic as a whole, it is not specific. His alleged opticality, then, is bound and tied to structured, interrelated fields of living life more than cold eyesight.

Further, Pollock's line does not have to be only optical or tactile, for the finished painting makes visible that which is invisible — dynamic "life" and ecstatic vitality. Pollock's line is also a vector. In this, it is not the first modern art; futurism and constructivism used them to project the future. Their vectors, however, were angular as they were ultimately derived from cubism's rectilinearity. Pollock's, of course, were organic, not architectonic, reflecting the interwar language of biomorphism and man's integration with nature.

Pollock's abstractions were thus seen to reveal the physical strain and effort involved in their making. Such physicality once again undercuts the theories of "optical space" that some critics have made the touchstone of Pollock's achievement. "Optical space," as with "Flatness," "Horizontalty," and Barnett Newman's "Laterality" simply inflated formalist characterizations. As

with flatness, however, their import is greatly exaggerated. In other words, they single out and hype some small element of the form in order to make epochal importance. Pollock's figured webs consist of abstracts of striated dynamic biomorphic, that is, organic movement and form. We have the memory of the body in motion and the figure that it has constructed over the ages, not some latter day impressionist optical shimmer.

But even more so, the idea of optical spaces is limited because Pollock's abstractions appeal even more to another sense than that of sight: they appeal to one's kinetic sense. Pollock's meshwork are motile and create a motile space. In psychology, a motile person is one in whose motor images, rather than visual or auditory images, predominate. Most of Pollock's work from the 1930s onward is work in which moving is the distinction. He is a fine but limited colorist and a mostly linear painter with whom one senses and feels motion, an intense visionary experience. With the exception of *Lavender Mist* of 1950s (fig. 3), pictorial sensuous does not dominate.





It is still paint in the end. Thus, more than optical space or an optical unconscious, Pollock's work is that of the motile "unconscious" where its life is lively, immediate and teleological as the unconscious is. A motile abstraction is more relevant to his life work than an optical.

Yet there is one sense that Pollock's work is optical; that is, it is "optical" in the way it was defined in one of his early sources, Ludwig Goldscheider's *El Greco*. In the introduction, Goldscheider writes of El Greco's work as ecstatic:

Greco's great paintings in the Prado are ecstatic visions, in an unearthly light, with dreamlike distortions of forms released from earthly perceptions. Mystics have spoken of luminous apparitions, poets have

continually sought to reproduce dream faces in words: Greco caught the vision of those in ecstasy and the magic imagery of the dreamers in line and colour, in exact recollection of the experience and without assimilation to the visible world. From the moment “of the overcoming of sensual perception” Greco’s paintings are filled with an optical content, which cannot be further explained, which defies all laws of composition and colour and can no longer be tested by the proportions and optics of the tangible and visible world. <sup>xxvi</sup>

Pollock’s work is optical because it reaches a level of shamanic, ecstatic unworldliness through worldly means. Pollock’s webs emerge out of his era, an era that began in the 1930s in America and not simply the early 1940s when the surrealists appeared in America. They are a hieroglyph or pictograph of motion, as a pictograph of “hopes and wishes,” of the new time and as he said “new needs” and the “experience of the age” (and, thus, not of himself alone.)

### *Metamorphosis*

Pollock’s integrated figure/force webs realized in a new modern form his dream of movement. Previously he had personified inward transformation but in his abstractions he renders his theme as a linear expressive force alone capable of transforming and changing the future. That dream included, of course, not just a hieroglyph of vitalist movement for its own sake but a vitalist flow for a future, in other words, metamorphosis.



Two of Pollock's works position his thinking of metamorphosis. As we saw, he used these concepts in his titles, even if first suggested by others.

One dripping is *Alchemy* of 1947 (fig. 4)



“Alchemy” is a period metaphor used by the surrealists, by Jung, by Martha Graham, as well as by Pollock's colleagues such as Gottlieb (*Alchemist's Fluid*, *Alchemist [Red Portrait]*, and *Alkahest of Paracelsus*, all of 1945). In other words, it was a well-known concept at the time.<sup>xxvii</sup> In its general terms, it meant magical or exotic transformation. The surrealists saw alchemy as a solvent, a means of metamorphosis that typified many desires for a new consciousness, a new man and a new civilization. Jung described its basic meaning as the transforming of lead into gold as a symbol of the liminal psychological process of transformation. He considered it a positive event in which dark unconscious forces are transmuted into new life. He even



considered his psychology a new form of “alchemy.” Pollock’s assent to the title meant agreement with thinking that posited the process as value worth having.

However, the title was “given” to the painting in a naming session after the completion of the painting by his neighbor Ralph Manheim. This has been used by some critics to attack the idea that Pollock meant something by the title. We must take a moment to look at the issue of Pollock titles and their signification once again, because the *Alchemy* particularly clarifies it. As with the *Moon Woman*, *Alchemy* is another key controversy between formalist modernist critics and the younger Jungian critics. This is actually a debate as to whether there are legible forms and meanings in Pollock’s work and Abstract Expressionism or whether their work is primarily motivated by stylistic especially formalist desires in which the content is most minimal. The Jungians have invested much in describing the work as indicating a direct relationship between Jung’s ideas and his title. While Elizabeth Langhorne does not make a concentrated analysis of the paintings, Judy Wolfe and David Freke do. Wolfe suggests its colors are specifically Jungian (red white, black and gold) and that on its surface there are painted, directly from the tube, specific marks, an asterisk/star at the left, the number “4” in the center and the number “6” at the right. These are said to represent Jungian numerical alchemical symbols, ultimately suggesting a Jungian theme such as the union of male and female, a union of opposites that could help him. Jonathan Welch shares much of Wolfe’s point of view and adds that the alchemic process of

transformation was probably a metaphor for the artist's creative struggle to make the material of paint into art.

William Rubin, formerly chief curator of the Museum of Modern Art, fundamentally disagreed with the Jungians. And *Alchemy* was a specific case. He ascertained that Mannheim titled the painting in a naming session after Pollock finished and so could not have been the intentional subject from the beginning of the painting. Further he attacked the Jungian argument of color symbolism suggesting there are other colors they ignored. He also wrote that there were more than the three forms of an asterisk/star, a "4" and a "6" in white since white is strewn about the canvas. Significantly, in contrast to the Jungians, he writes that these forms "in the picture's hierarchy of size, paint-thickness and luminescence, function as big structured accents setting off the filigree web in a manner adumbrating the 'elbow joints' of *Autumn Rhythm* and the 'hooks' of *Mural on Indian Red Ground*."<sup>xxviii</sup> Thus for Rubin and for much of the art world, Pollock could not have anything near the iconographic program for *Alchemy* that the Jungians have suggested.

This discussion is a wonderful test case of the question of whether Pollock uses symbols and has cultural meanings in his work. Rubin is right about the there being more colors than those suggested by the Jungian writers and that white is scattered around. But if parts of the Jungian argument are flawed, in general, they are more right than wrong. For Rubin and for modernist critics for half a century, Pollock's primary use of colors and forms were for stylistic and structural purposes — thus Rubin's statement that the

three forms were really all about the picture's size, paint-thickness and luminescence. Rather than a legible meaning and even solely the metamorphic process of alchemy, Rubin believes the forms are merely "poetic" and the general personal and psychological.

Putting aside the question whether *Alchemy* represents completeness and male and female unity, and whether the Jungians overdetermine the meanings of the color as strictly Jungian in origin (e.g. Welch's idea that the aluminum paint represents the Jungian idea of quicksilver, the *material prima*, or Wolfe's concept that the dominant colors of black, white, red and yellow related to the four stages of the alchemical process), they are not far off in their belief that alchemy means transformation and that is a relevant idea for Pollock. It should be obvious to readers that rather than "poetic" license, the allegedly merely structural forms of an asterisk-star, the number "4, that is, the triangle with the line through it," and the number "6" are repetitions again of Pollock's fundamental symbolic repertoire (detail).



The star-asterisk is a variant of the form that we have seen repeatedly seen; the form misidentified by all as “4” is the symbol of copulation and thus generation of new life; and the “6” is, of course, our spiral/fetal form representing the same thing. Mentioned by neither Rubin or the Jungians, however, is the possible spread-legged figure in yellow and white at the right center, the beaked bird heads with the black dot eye at the left and the two parallel with lines at the top right which have appeared in Pollock’s work before. I have no explanation of them. Even if Pollock’s *Alchemy* does not exemplify Pollock’s scholastic Jungianism as the Jungians suggested, it is much more than



Rubin's evasive personal, "poetic" and formalist definition. The painting's forms further add more to recognition of the continuation of the symbolization of Pollock's earlier work in his so-called abstractions.

And interestingly, so anxious was Rubin to dismiss *Alchemy*'s possible meaningfulness that rather than eviscerating such a case in Pollock's abstractions, he has added more fuel to the fire. Rubin's suggestion that *Alchemy* adumbrates Pollock's "filigree web" of "elbow joints" and "hooks" in his other abstractions also raises the issue of whether Pollock generalized the use of his "4" copulation form or the Native American "elbow" pipe form seen in his early work. If he did, the general "hook" or "elbow joint" forms lie as a basis of the well-known skeins of not only *Autumn Rhythm* and *Mural on Indian Red Ground* but also other works such as the great *Number 32, 1950* (fig. 5),



a work of only black hooks and elbows among Pollock's subtle biomorphic



forms.



Another weaving is *Lucifer*, also of 1947 (fig. 6). It is very strange for a modern artist to employ and apply the concept of Lucifer to anything. Although Pollock was a spiritual-seeker, as we have seen, he is not particularly Christian. So then why “Lucifer?” The first explanation seems obvious. Lucifer is the fallen Angel, the fallen spirit, the dark angel. He is then the flip side of God, representing the potential for the troubles of human nature. In Pollock’s universe, the creative unconscious is the positive God and thus the “Lucifer” probably means its opposite — its destructive side, the second half of the dualisms of good and bad to which we have referred from the 1930s onward.

There is, however, another possible origin. “Lucifer” can remind of his Pollock’s first interest and the first part of the arc of transformation of the West that Pollock engaged — theosophy. “Lucifer” is an important concept in

theosophy for he is one of its evil angels of the “Dark Forces” whose cosmic role is to lead humanity astray. The theosophical Lucifer would seduce mankind into overestimating itself in that it can transcend human limitations by its own efforts alone and not by the walking the theosophical “path.” Lucifer was said to dominate modern literature, philosophy and art and it was the title of a longstanding theosophical journal, which describes the correct path.<sup>xxix</sup> Pollock’s use of the metaphor of Lucifer, then, along with alchemy, manifests one part of the dualism and diversity of inner life. To Pollock, inner life could be either good or bad, or, at times, both.

Further, if Pollock’s *Lucifer* is theosophical, the painting recalls and reappoints his theosophical allegiances despite the many overlays in his subsequent years. It also reasserts Pollock’s personal and artistic search as finding the “path to the light” — the secular spirituality that was and is a common place of those who believe in a modern civilization *manqué*.

*Alchemy* and *Lucifer*, then, allude to the process of metamorphosis and metamorphosis thus means spiritual change — the path to transformation. Metamorphosis was, of course, a major theme expressive of the ideals of change of the period. Metamorphosis of the thirties meant social and political change or evolution or sometimes even “revolution.” Perhaps *Eric Hobsbawm* put it most succinctly when he reminisced of the thirties: “it was a time when you didn’t believe there was a future unless the world was fundamentally



transformed.” Metamorphosis was evolution, transformation, and sometimes the making of a new tradition.

In Pollock’s formulations, flowing changes interlock and sustain one another and their biomorphic curvilinear form was a field of developing energy, forever woven in a connecting web of other forces. Order is something that is made out of the relations of harmonious interactions that energies bear to one another. In Deweyian terms, it is rhythmic ebb and flow of expectant impulse and forward movement with fulfillment and consummation leading to an experience of growth and maturation. Growth involved space *within* from which multiple doings and undergoing emerge and are elaborated. Ultimately, Pollock’s art and its creative method is a reenactment of the process of growth. As John Dewey noted (after William James), we learn to ice skate in summer after having commenced in winter. He commences and builds the painting, adding layer upon layer, color upon color, space upon space, figure upon figure, campaign upon campaign ultimately arriving at a fully realized, living dynamic entity or growth. In its way, Pollock’s working method and his paintings are an active act of what he formerly depicted and symbolized — new life itself. Woman’s fertility, the copulations, the pregnancies, the fetuses in the wombs, the babies, the branches, the flowers, the star burst — are realized in this very act of “growing” a painting in layer and figure and layer and figure or vice versa.

Pollock, then, unfolds infinite, permanent and continuous creative (and destructive) metamorphosis and change. Out of his and his generation's turmoil and suffering, he hopes to grow a new and greater life in the future. His art of events or celebrations of vital metamorphosis realized his period's desire to eliminate that which bounded, limited or regimented human action and success on the one hand, and resolved the closed and static of the Depression. His interlacings also capture for his own, the metamorphosis of America as the shape of the new urban and industrial life. To take direct charge of the situation, to valorize and to command the change on one's own terms, to grab onto, ride and perhaps even turn toward one's own advantage the forces at work what was something needed to be done and that Pollock needed to do for himself as well as his time and place. As with so much in his era, his art is that of unprogrammed, unspecific and apolitical potency and growth. He bestrides what would be the whirlwind of chaos and fragmentation toward a pictorial allegory of celebrated hopes and dreams, that is, an ever advancing nature of human experience on his ritual, psychological terms.

*Direct Experience, the Documentary, and Participation Observation*

In 1943, the filmmaker Preston Sturges narrated in his famous "Sullivan's Travels" the experiences of a filmmaker who wants to make a socially relevant film. At first, the filmmaker seeks out local material to portray on film but through a series of mishaps, he *himself* becomes down and out, a hobo on the road -- true with Veronica Lake -- but still on the road. He thus moved quite blatantly from the theoretical and representational of the artist to the actual

and real of the participant. Newly, he lived the actual experience and did not just describe or symbolize it. He thus fulfilled the thirties ideal of direct experience, the documentary, and the participant.

Thomas Hart Benton sought the same thing when at first with his father and then on his own, he tried to encounter the living reality of America in trips to southern Missouri, the Ozarks and the Arkansas rivers and byways. and other hinterlands of locality. There he would encounter the living past in the form of Civil War Veterans, farmers and other workers. He would sketch these figures and places and they would become the basis of his art. Much like Sturges, as much as possible Benton felt a need to check his ideas and knowledge in the field. For him, experience tests and defines. The artist turns to the “world of experience,” “things *as they were and are*,” and local experience.

(Ironically, Benton’s political opposite came to the same realization at the end of the 1930s when America was being rediscovered and newly recognized as a distinctive entity. In 1957, Ben Shahn wrote of his years in the late 1930s when he worked for the Resettlement Administration Division, he “crossed and recrossed many sections of the country. [He had come to know well so many people of all kinds of belief and temperament . . . [that] theories . . . melted before such experience.”)

What counted with both were not theories that intellectuals conjure but “living experience,” a profound goal and subject of the 1930s. Direct experience was argued to be a form of realism. Usually the special provenance of only

participants, direct experience suggests that live, immediate and authentic emotion allegedly speaks for itself. Direct experience is the expressionary vehicle of the documentary, in other words, a mode of expression depending on what is documented.

Through the thirties and forties, through Benton, and – recall -- through his own experiences as a boy on the road with his family searching for a better life, later reiterated in his traveling across America directly searching for the “American” experience, Pollock absorbed the concept of direct experience. From the very inception of his career, he praised it as a worthy goal, for he had written about Benton, as we saw, in a letter to his father in 1933, “After a lifetime struggle with the elements of everyday experience, he is beginning to be recognized as the foremost American painter today. *He has lifted art from the stuffy studio into the world and happenings about him* [my italics] which has a common meaning to the masses.” Benton’s art was a psychological art attuned by real experiences in real places, a living art generated by direct experience. He thus created a psychological art of actual people from his environment even though urban intellectuals failed to value and recognize them.

As we saw, a result of the social documentary impulse of the 1930 was an attempt to render American culture’s direct, immediate, vivid or living experience in art, radio, photography, dance, social science, the WPA and many other forms. As we saw, this attempt was “direct,” because it was the experience of someone actually participant; “immediate” because there was little distance in its reporting; “vivid” because it made visible the unimagined

by picturing its subject in emotionally engaging detail; and “living” because the purpose was to let the participants of the social reality of its time communicate without the barriers erected by the intermediaries. The thirties sought to have the social concept or human experience appear as a document and experience speaking for itself. In Pollock’s case, the theories were the symbolic and figurative pictographs of “unconscious” shamanic experience and fantasy in his earlier work. But in 1947, they became his figured web. In his abstractions, Pollock sought to render his conceptions as live emotion, as authenticity and instinct, as the direct experience of “ecstasy” itself whether through the internalization of the figure or not. Like surrealism and indeed, no doubt influenced by surrealism, the networks invoke untamed ecstasy, if not terror, domination genesis in fluid and interrelational dispositions. As in Masson, anatomical, vegetal and human structures function as “eruptive, interconnecting forces that are simultaneously . . . things and energies the violence and mystery of Dionysian vitality prevents formal Apollonian clarity and order from taking hold. Flux, on the order of perpetual fissures and disruptions, triumphs as an ineradicable condition.”<sup>xxx</sup> It is as much formative as fatal.

For his abstractions, Pollock’s statement that when he was painting he was not aware of anything else was often cited as a basis to praise – perhaps over praise -- his instinctiveness, spontaneity and seeming authenticity. He was thus understood to have reaffirmed the longstanding Romantic view that instinctual freedom, rebelliousness, individualism, irrationality, spontaneity

and primitivism are the source of creativity that has dominated modern culture as the highest form of validation. Recall Renoir's belief that spontaneity freedom and nature expressed through free brushwork expressing values that were threatened by modern industrial life. It sounds like a summary of the fifties understanding of Abstract Expressionism or rather, the New York School. To be sure, this "directness" was long a goal of modern culture not only from the periods of the sketch and the Impressionists of the nineteenth century, but from that of Baroque which sought directness and immediacy in expression as well as medium. While what was directly expressed and the process of its expression varied from generation to generation, the "original, "real" and "direct" were thus a lasting value. And the ultimate counter to the lifelessness of the mass society personality who was regimented, too rationalistic living with only part of his self. Pollock's living abstractions full of direct and immediate and vivid authenticity, if not psychological experience or its appearance, could not be a greater rebuke to mass society man without an inner life. Of course, with Pollock as with his colleagues, the direct rendering without seeming finish or forethought is a myth, part of the romance of the fifties, and not the reality of art making.

As we saw, for greater directness, this the artists and intellectuals of the thirties tried to do with America: touch its substance, find and lay hands on whatever would give them, and help give the 'feel' of the nation. Thirties arts are arts that renders the imaginative fullness and authentic knowingness of the best of the aesthetic of direct experience. Maybe the famous handprints of

Pollock are an image telling us of Pollock's directness, of his rendering of the touch and very substance of it all. Pollock's abstractions replaced, then, the document of the socio-political "directness" with imagined psycho-cultural "directness."

Pollock's webs represent shamanic metamorphosis of the lived psyche, and thus, the lived experience so crucial to his age. As Philip Pavia, member of the second generation of Abstract Expressionism wrote: "He was the real pioneer for creating ways to make the complete experience in abstract art."<sup>xxx</sup>

In this way, Pollock is as much a direct exhibit as what he is representing. He is the object and his painting the living experience. While direct experience was longstanding modern desire, thirties' America concentrated on a new mode that gave the impression of rendering it. This mode intended to make real experience in emotional and imaginary ways, mostly so that we may act for social change. It was a mode that thus represented socio-cultural ideas in legible forms. It was not simply "realism" – although it was sold that way – but a new form of expressionism – documentary expressionism.

In this mode, the human documents his ideas through himself – his inner world, his private self but not simply of his everyday life but as a social subject, as a representative human being of the larger sociocultural conception. The experience presented then was not intellectual but actual and living. The individual was the living document. As Benton said -- when I represent a farmer, I get a farmer. When Pollock represents the authenticity of



selfhood and living inner life, he is a modern individual grappling with mass man's passivity.

Finally, Pollock's palimpsests require not only his psyche as human document of this representative human being of a larger social world and concept but the viewer participation and integration within the experience. Pollock's abstracts bridge the gap between its documentary of living experience and environmental interaction. Since the paintings were conceived to be alive, in the thirties theory of experience, the viewer was not passive but an active participant, translating the record into his own inner sanctum, experiencing the "suffering," usually, presented to him. The paintings were to be affective the way Farm Security Administration and Murrow's broadcasts were. The only way for the viewer to gain intimate knowledge of "reality" was to live its activity and integrate your own. For Pollock, you were to feel the unconscious as a living reality -- *drawn from life* -- and not just look at it. You thus had a vicarious experience of Pollock's direct experience, allegedly, of the psyche, one that was not remote or intellectual but willful and emotional, produced by real flesh and blood. Further, the paintings also create a sense of simultaneously being outside the painting, as any painting does. Pollock thus establishes presences both within and without of the painting that enable the viewer to mediate between the work of art and its experience. The viewer in thirties' parlance was a participant observer. Much like the aesthetic of experience of the 1930s, Pollock's webs draw in the viewer and interrelates with him through the effectiveness of the experience it creates. He draws the viewer into close

involvement with the action interlocking and compelling his empathetic participation and also giving him a vivid experience of the elemental forces in dramatic struggle as his images do. Rather than making use of explanatory narrative or even his earlier multiple symbols, the compositions deliver their meaning directly by their very spatial-psychological structure. By his dramatization of the alleged life of the “unconscious,” he sought to forcefully record what he and you should hope for in the context of the 1930s and 1940s – and 1950s. Thus he sought to bring the viewer and himself into an inner world that they all could grasp. Today, under postmodernism, this concept is out of fashion but in Pollock’s time, it had a place in uniting what was thought to be mankind and ending the divisions and separatism and diversities – the balkanizations -- cultural and political, that had given the world the First World War. Thus as with his generation, his work is not so much individualism as the fifties pronounced for mass society reasons we will see below but its opposite. As Dorothy Parker announced, there is no longer “I,” there is “WE.” Martha Graham’s “We are three women; we are three million” meant the private was the public world. Individual experience was revelatory representative of the big picture and world. Pollock’s psychologizing represented and illustrated the life of the many in which the observer participated in his own mind.

### *Environmentalism*

Pollock famously painted on the floor. He stepped into it and worked on all sides or “directions’ of the canvas. He thus seemed to work more directly than any other artist before him. In other words, without sketches, as he said, he physically produced living documents of what he understood as the shamanic psychological. By working on the floor with his methods, however, he did more than make the “psyche’ more available, he made it a live presence. Pollock made a place for the *living world* he sought. In this, he fulfilled a need and quest going back to his childhood. He was at last at a “home” of his own making and where he felt comfortable. Indeed, Namuth’s photographs of his studio record a space of his own creativity as Pollock kept his work about him



while doing new paintings (fig. 7). While the directness of his working on the ground with limited imagery has been, as usual, explained as automatic practice, he actually found a new way, typically, to make more European modern the search for *place* of American culture in the thirties.

To Thomas Hart Benton, for example, a locale and milieu generated the psychologies and cultures of American life. He argued that such a “place” had a psychology and expressed the inner nostalgias, yearnings and dissatisfactions of its people. In this, Benton and much of the thirties America shared a concept that has periodically reoccurred in the twentieth century: art is product of racial or ethnic or national culture, defined through the physical and metaphysical place, in other words, an environment. The concept largely originated in the late nineteenth century, particularly in the writing of the influential critic Hippolyte Taine and in the first decade of the twentieth century where it occurred in Europe, for example, in such artists as Aristide Maillol’s *Mediterranne* of 1905. It was there in the search for Gothic roots in German Expressionism. It was there during and after World War I which prompted various nationalisms such as that of the “call to order” in France. And it was also there in Spain in the use of El Greco to symbolize the new, modern national culture or identity. To all, an artist expresses the very psychology, culture and character of his place and environment – his land and country -- which he builds.

To be an artist one had thus, in Benton’s words, to find such a vital “soil for growth.” In other words, the artist should seek out a creative environment with which he truly relates. In Pollock’s generation, many had as the concept of environmentalism grew. For example, in her dances Martha Graham became famous for including the ground as a character in her choreography. Dancers wore no shoes and deliberately engaged the earth as represented by the stage.

She seemed to indicate the land's importance when she particularly noted that her masterwork, "*Appalachian Spring*" was a dance of settlement and new beginnings. Created during World War II as a way of affirming American values in a time of destruction, in her original script for the dance, she referred to "a legend of American living," that should by theatrical clarity, add up to a sense of place.' As Louis Horst, Graham's aid and music director maintained, Graham's use of the ground was to suggest the "mysterious powers that abide in the earth." Thus, in the new integrative connectedness, earth and environment were expressive and meaning-laden entities. The land was national personality and a microcosm.

Similarly, in "Our Town," Thornton Wilder centered the major rituals and events in the human life cycle, birth, initiation, marriage, death – on an archetypal small New England village, Grover's Corner, New Hampshire. In "You Can't Go Home Again," Thomas Wolfe affirms a belief in the interrelation of man and the earth or the environment. He writes that "Time" and "Soil" are eternal and share the same cycle: "all things proceeding from the earth to seasons, all things that lapse and change and come again upon the earth—these things will always be the same, for they come up from the earth that never changes, they go back into the earth that lasts forever. Only the earth endures, but it endures forever."

Pearl Buck, too, spoke of the creative rhythmic harmony of man with the generative earth in her *The Good Earth* of 1930, reinforced through the movie with Paul Muni. In this totalizing epic of generations of Chinese peasants, she

centered conflicts around the land as well as the family. The cycle of the land is shown to determine and exemplify the fortunes of its inhabitants. In other words, in a language of biblical simplicity with floods, drought, and locust, *The Good Earth* portrayed the epic cycle of life and the whole range of human experience and fortune as the seasons of life and the land. Writing of the chief character Wang Lung and his wife O-Lan, Buck declared that they moved in perfect rhythm with the earth which formed their home, fed them, made their gods, generate their life and children, and healed them when they sick. The intimate connection to the earth represents all human abundance, vicissitude, and renewal. As with Benton, who according to Frank Lloyd Wright, drew people out of the soil, like potatoes, with the earth still clinging to them,<sup>xxxii</sup> they are as one with the earth. In thirties' environmentalism the earth, that is, "land" or place" was conceived as a timeless repository and fertile source of human life and creativity. In muralist Mitchell Siporin's words, it taught Americans to recognize and conjure the "soul" of an environment in art. In thirties' environmentalism the earth, that is, "land" or place" was thus conceived as a timeless repository and fertile space woven with human life and creativity. And even though the great musical of Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein, "Oklahoma!," was done in 1943, the librettist Theresa Helburn defined its appeal" "just a song about the earth, . . . the land."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Its lead song says it all:

Oaaa-klahoma

Where the wind comes

sweepin'down the plain

And the wavin'wheat

Can sure smell sweet . . .

We know we belong to the

Land

And the land we belong to is grand!

Even Native American life was defined as the land. In the catalogue to “Indian Art of the United States” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, a painted leather poncho the Chiricahua Apache of Arizona is described as representing “life form . . . [that] are usually connected with the great powers of earth and sky from which the medicine men draw their magic strength.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

As with Pollock’s figure and its ecstatic web, sequestered on the land, direct integration fused land and environment, then, to make a psychic place. Unifying the forces of a society that generated connectedness, the individual and his society and culture, it joined place, time, custom and mind as a totality, as a place, as a personality, and as a culture. As opposed to centuries of Western thought, man does not dominate nature but joins with it and his art does not tame but embodies its strength.

The Abstract Expressionists took over this sense of affective place in their art. As we saw, in a statement of his feelings at the end of the 1930s, Robert Motherwell went to Paris because there he felt he could come directly into



contact with creative soil itself. Arshile Gorky, too, alluded to the fertility of a place that he needed for his own creativity -- his own homeland, Armenia -- when he again wrote to his sister, "Can a son forget the soil which sires him?" And Mark Rothko frequently referred to his at his complex of paintings in the Phillips Collection in Washington and the Chapel in Houston as generating a "place," just as Barnett Newman sought, in his words, to make a place before his canvases.

Pollock conceived of the earth in the same way. The canvas's ground or horizontal plane was his earth. Hence he worked from it and that was one of the most distinctive elements of his fettes even though he may have begun with a figure and its space. There can be no doubt that he understood that the earth, his ground plane, was the generative place -- "mother earth" -- that could also "heal his [personal] sickness" as it should the world. We have seen that sand painting was a strong ideal and inspiration in his work from the late 1930s onward. By the time he developed his abstractions, he found a clearer way to them. Pollock's "earth" or ground on which he walks and paints then heals as does Southwest sand painting ritual. As the source of health it is the source of creative action, Pollock's earth grounds one in the ritual past, in the self, in nature and in the future. Man was reintegrated within the web of his social environment in constant metamorphosis and adjustment in Pollock's paintings. He thus fulfilled the need of the thirties for modern man to be, as in the archaic past, newly one with nature.

Lastly, shamanism, too, drew from a place – mother earth. Pollock's webs, then, form a "legend of living" for today. They are a "place" in themselves from which a new "soul" for modern man grows. To view his famous lacery is to view in front of you, quite deliberately, American living as Pollock wants it – inward-driven, sited between modern and traditional inward places, vitalist and rooted but not fixed. These paintings were also intended to represent instinctive, unconscious, subterranean, and ritualistic vitality. Pollock thus modernized a mostly highly valued kind of traditional painting (although without traditional representation) – the humanized or moralized landscape usually enriched with historical, religious or mythological associations and symbols of transition. Pollock's ground or place is a place of generation and renewal.

Pollock's "landscapes" or "places" are thus lifted from mere descriptions of nature to the level of the myth or poetry of his time's needs. For him truth could only be expressed through the close attention not to visual fact but through moral idea. And besides place, the past and memory provided the idea. With many of his generation, except for the social realists and the left, he needed memory of the past to believe in the future, and he believed in the future as a proposition to make himself and his world better.

### *Memory*

At his "place," Pollock created revitalizing memory or the past in an original way -- through anatomical expressiveness. Although the use of the

pictographic imagery in his work would seem to limit the significance of Pollock's sweeping physicality, as Karmel points out, as with the use of the ground, Pollock is most probably aware of the use of the body in his abstractions and innovates its use. His famous remark, made also by de Kooning and Martha Graham, that "I am nature" thus held many implications.

In his time, besides allusive biomorphic curvilinearity, anatomy itself was recognized as allegorical means. For example, once again we find Pollock's teacher Benton defining its importance for his time. He considered body motion an expression of consciousness. Not only did Benton's anatomies engender activity and cultural event, they shaped the very form of art and life themselves. He wrote:

Forms in plastic construction are never strictly created. They are taken from common experience, recombined and reoriented. Reorientation follows lines of preference also having definite biological origin. Stability, equilibrium, connection, sequence movement, rhythm symbolizing the flux and flow of energy are main factors in these lines. In the "feel" of our bodies, in the sight of the bodies of others, in the bodies of animals, in the shapes of growing and moving things, in the forces of nature and in the engines of man the rhythmic principle of movement and counter-movement is made manifest. But in our own bodies it can be isolated, felt and understood. This mechanical principle which we share with all life can be abstracted and used in constructing and analyzing things which also in their way have life and reality.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Indeed, Pollock's webs are the greatest realization of Benton and Dewey's principles of the actions of the "live creature" elaborated even further in the articles. These principles form the diverse impulses that are organized by the live creature whose mental and physical actions parallel the forms of art.



Pollock's famous technique of pouring paint and using the entire arm, not just the wrists, in the creation of a rhythmic composition probably reflects Benton's further suggestion of the paralleling of physiological movement in plastic structure. It is important that Benton drew a reasoned parallel between the forms of life and the forms of art:

Forms in plastic construction are never strictly created. They are taken from common experience, re-combined and re-oriented. This re-orientation follows lines of preference also having definite biological origin. Stability, equilibrium, connection, sequence movement, rhythm symbolizing the flux and flow of energy are main factors in these lines. In the "feel" of our bodies, in the sight of the bodies of others, in the bodies of animals, in the shapes of growing and moving things, in the forces of nature and in the engines of man the rhythmic principles of

movement and counter-movement is made manifest. But in our own bodies it can be isolated, felt and understood. This mechanical principle which we share with all life can be abstracted and used in constructing and analyzing things which also in their way have life and reality.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

For Benton, these impulses thus have an order that follows the actions of human anatomy. He further describes those actions. They are movements and counter movements of the muscles of the upper arm as rhythmic interplay of convexities and concavities – “bumps and hollows” – around the bone which corresponds to his central pole (fig. 8):

There are here a series of masses that bulge and hollows, which recede. These are organized around a central vertical, the bone, and are so distributed that there is no possibility of collision between the bulging masses when a change in the arm's position causes them to shift. This shifting takes place along the lines of the hollows, which are filled, emptied and refilled, with the changing positions of the arm. For every movement of a mass there is an equilibrated counter movement which finds “expression” also in a new alignment of the hollows. . . . It will be noticed that the arrangement of these hollows and bulges forms a very clear rhythmical pattern, that is, there are repetitions at alternate intervals of similar movements, different in the different positions of the arm.

Pollock's webs consist of these innumerable “bumps and hollows” arranged in rhythmical patterns of curve and color disposed at alternate

intervals in different places in the canvas as the body and arm shift around.

Thus as with Benton, muscular shift and counter shift traced the extension of muscular action, and anatomical movement constructs pictorial composition. Muscular functions match rhythmical structure, muscular functions build up piece by piece a work of art.

Thus, Pollock's figured webs combine integration, correlation and process to represent a parallel to mental and physical activity, to nature and man himself. They do not constitute mere chaos, mere psychic release, mere direct expression for the sake of direct expression but for an end – the building of impulse upon impulse in other words, constructive, productive impulsion, as sort of biofuturism or growth. His work is an art that conceives and documents its own productivity, or rather, in forties terms, growth and creativity.

Ultimately, Benton and others declare that the body is a creative and constructive entity realizing a world of connection, flux and flow. In his paintings, it seems as though the figure is culturally shaped and driven as it absorbs and relays the energies of the entire composition and natural and psychocultural environment.

Benton thus sees the body as an allegorical subject replete with all the associations he needs. Ironically, it carries the inheritance of previous ages and moves them forward, just as the retrospective nature of American, Mexican and Jungian collective consciousness does.

The use of the body was thus more than a mere technique for Pollock. It was an expression of vital life and its creative past that by necessity would and

should repeat themselves. This was certainly true of repeated use of the imagery of biomorphic life among Abstract Expressionists. This imagery was thus more than a stylistic quotation from surrealism. It was a way of declaring the continuity, indeed, the survival of the prehistoric and primitive past as human drive and instinct within. From Seymour Lipton, Theodore Roszak, Adolph Gottlieb, William Baziotis, and at times David Smith to Friederich Nietzsche, Lewis Mumford, and Martha Graham -- just to cite a few major intellectuals and artists affected by or parallel to Abstract Expressionism -- the body was seen as an agent or creative force from the past.

As Nietzsche wrote: "That which his ancestors most liked to do and most constantly did cannot be erased from a man's soul. . . . It is quite impossible that a man should *not* have in his body the qualities and preferences of his parents and forefathers whatever appearances may say to the contrary."<sup>xxxvii</sup> Jung gave biological continuity (through the nineteenth century theory of ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny)<sup>xxxviii</sup> a psychic expression: "Just as the human body connects us with the mammals and displays numerous relics of earlier evolutionary stages going back even to the reptilian age, so the human psyche is likewise a product of evolution which, when followed up to its origins, shows countless archaic traits."<sup>xxxix</sup> Mumford employs Darwin to suggest a similar evolutionary source to human behavior: "We understand that man's nature is continuous with that of animal creation: the biological past of many organisms has shaped the organs of his own body: their needs, their impulses, their urges have laid channels for his own conduct."<sup>xl</sup> For the Abstract Expressionist of the



dance Martha Graham, the body is memory: "The human body . . . is the instrument by which all the primaries of experience are made manifest. It holds in its memory all matters of life and death and love." For Graham, the muscles of her dancers have memory of both their work and human memory itself. For Rothko, man was shaped by his *Dream Memory*, by his *Prehistoric Memory*, by his *Tentacles of Memory* and by his *Ancestral Imprint*, all of the mid 1940s. So too was Gottlieb's humanity with his *Links of Memory* of 1946.

For Pollock's generation, then, the body was like the ground -- the place of memory and the source of the creative powers and desires of the past. Stanley Kunitz, a good friend of Mark Rothko and a major poet of this culture, recently summed up and updated the concept for Bill Moyers on PBS: "The echo that moves us comes from the Stone Age caves . . . I don't think it's absurd to believe that the chain of being, our genetic code, holds memories of the ancient world that are passed down from generation to generation. Heraclitus speaks of mortals and immortals living in their death, dying into each others' lives."<sup>xli</sup> For Pollock the physical is coextensive with the spiritual, integrities and memories of the physical, mental and cultural. Today we would call this 'muscle memory.

For Pollock the physical is coextensive with the spiritual, integrities of the physical, mental and cultural. The body, then, is a source of consciousness and an agent of the creativity of memory, and it is memory (John Graham's "memories of immemorial past . . . [expressed] . . . in terms of pure form {in space and matter})" that is Pollock's as well as other Abstract Expressionists' understanding of creativity and the unconscious. Pollock himself said of his

paintings: they are "organic intensity -- energy and motion made visible--  
*memories arrested in space, human needs and motives* [my italics]."<sup>xlii</sup> Creation is  
 the revitalization of the past through memory as well as nature, and a rediscovery  
 and reenactment of its powers. The future is the fecundity of the past and its,  
 and not the modern mass society's world's, mode and methods of growth. This  
 is in keeping with the thinking of many Native American and other tribal cultures  
 for which ritual inspires, as the Native American Jamie Highwater wrote: "new  
 vitality from the most distant memories of the past."<sup>xliii</sup> The first half of the  
 twentieth century with its emphasis on youth similarly held such a belief.<sup>xliv</sup>

### The Third Way of Form

Pollock's "place" or "legend of living" was a movement of hope, optimistic  
 self-examination and construction. His works are works of faith, much as the  
 clean efficient harmonies of the thirties were. They were thus psychological  
 portraits of his consciousness, his state of mind and the forces that engender  
 it, his culture. Pollock's psyche was expressed not only through symbols and  
 images but creative doing itself. And that creative symbolization sought a third  
 way between modernity and tradition; that is, Pollock rejected scientific,  
 rational industrial modernity of the new as he rejected the social traditionalism  
 of the old world. The new for him and others was the only recently discovered  
 archaic tradition with modern means.

The third way is evident first of all in the technical and formal means and  
 methods of his art, which navigates between the new and the old, between  
 tradition and the modern. He chose a form halfway between the traditional but

new mural and the modern easel — that is the thirties form of the portal mural that his teachers Siqueiros and Rivera and his friends Kadish and Guston also advocated. Pollock's stated in a 1947 application for a Guggenheim Fellowship that he "intended to paint large movable pictures which will function between the easel and mural."<sup>xlv</sup> In the 1950s, he worked on an "ideal museum" and church with his friend, the architect Peter Blake. There his easel painting would be the walls. This search for a new form of format was indebted to Siqueiros' belief in finding the right format and scale for painting in the new modern world. Although the Mexicans and Kadish and Guston were involved in making "portable murals," this quest, along with Pollock's use of Duco, an industrial enamel paint with transparent, fast drying qualities, for his webs of 1947 on, reflect the need to find the right technique for the right expression. He further wrote in the fellowship applications that he thought, "The easel picture to be a dying form, and the tendency of modern feeling is towards the wall picture or mural." Even if the time is not quite ripe, that is the "direction of the future."

In his popularization of the portal mural as textural format, he extended the worldwide thirties taste for large statements about history and experience with the dynamic myth-culture and psychological patterns attendant. Much as he chose the right culture personality for the time, then, Pollock also chose the right technique, materials, format and scale needed for this time.

Pollock made industrially modern choices in media, too. As we saw, Siqueiros proved decisively important to his experiments. -The exercises in Siqueiros Experimental Workshop had provided the foundation for Pollock's pouring and dripping of Duco on a canvas on the floor. As Siqueiros did, he also embedded debris within his work — famously in the fifties — cigarettes, paint tubes and caps, and glass. Because his Duco paint dried quickly, it made possible not only the stop action effect of Siqueiros' pourings, but also hard, frozen pieces of paint. Siqueiros, too, painted on the ground according to Irene Herner. For Siqueiros the future required new materials for the age. So, too, Pollock found and projected the forms of the past with the materials of the future.

Pollock's way is thus a true third way, marrying traditional expression (that is, the archaic) with new modern technical innovation to form aesthetic and ideological change; and the direct and concrete, the particular and specific to generate the broad and universally transformative imagination. Pollock's ideographs of vital and psychic metamorphosis constituted a modern, expressionist, monumental allegorical and mythical projection — if not prophecy — for his time.

Perhaps fifties explanations and interpretations can be explained by a comparison to the construction of a Gothic cathedral. Like a cathedral built over time, with its last portal in the latest style, Pollock's exemplary work contains many concepts from disparate motivations. It should not be judged,

just as a cathedral should not be, only by the last additions. Work needs to be done to restore some balance and perspective to our understanding of the complex relationships in this new art. As with his colleagues, Pollock's thought and work is of the thirties and forties and complete, although with embellishments and new emphases in the fifties. It is what the ethnologist Leo Frobenius called a *paideuma* — "a people's whole gonerics of patterns of energies, from their "ideas" down to the things they know in their bones."<sup>xlvi</sup>

In 1956, Pollock drove his car off a road near his home in Springs, Long Island, cruelly killing himself and a young woman who was visiting for the weekend.

Jackson Pollock's figured webs codify the organizing concept of the 1930s in a new form — the search for a culture/personality worth having in a new industrial world. In keeping with his era, Pollock sought to match a vision of thinking, acting, and behaving of the culture/psyche to its time. Whether Regionalist, Osborn, Lynd, Marxist, Jungian, Mexican, or Mass Man critiques, Pollock sought to represent a system of values and beliefs that could keep pace with the technological changes of mass functional society and renew man. The result was that Pollock's abstractions created an image of an evolving harmonious whole that would implicitly suggest new modes of behavior, values and customs but that did not repudiate the past. To be sure, Pollock's personality is one of conflict and resolution, the basic drama of man. Yet his

work finds as the personal psychological the cultural psychological of his phase of modernization. As with many in his era, he constructed a vision from the necessary components of the new democratic and reintegrated culture of America and reintegrated man with the web of his natural and social environment. For Pollock, material, social and psychic forms are thus joined together to constitute a new future. His paintings do not depict or specify the chosen elements of the next whole but elevate vital threads to parallel the idea. He has enacted the principles behind the culture and issues of his time.

Pollock sought a new worldview. A self-examiner of the cultural and social as well as the self, he was a psychologist and moralist of the modern. As with the regionalist, Jungian, Marxist, Modern Man and mass society critiques, his personal crisis was one of living and liming in modern culture. It was thus not only, if at all, his psychological conflicts with this mother or with fame, but the needs of modernity and urban culture. Pollock's art was designed to end his and his era's dislocated self and waning culture. That required the end of spiritual impoverishment. His art thus aimed to analyze modern and cure it by reintroducing traditional meaning and values unacceptable to modern, secular and scientific culture. Pollock's art and thought is counter-enlightenment, reasserting spiritual and traditional values that the culture of reason had vacated. His personal need for psychic transformation thus craved new meaning and form by means of new trusses and processes. His transformation was one with historical and cultural transformations. Pollock's autobiography, of which so much has been written, cannot be separated from the social

conditions and cultural dilemmas of his age. His illness is a creative illness. Creative life or life redone is his answer. An all-over design to the future, a vision of modernity as mythogenic limitless growth, a single image of multiple creations. It was Pollock's paradise — a harmonic rhythm of man and modernity, man and the university, man and his renewed spiritual inner life. Pollock sought to cultivate his and man's soul and mind, leading to a fuller meaning in life that would also balance his technical development — his living personality for the age, writ large.

*Illustrations*



Fig. 1. *Autumn Rhythm/Number 30, 1950*, 1950, oil on canvas, 8 ft. 9 in. 17 ft. 3 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, George A Hearn Fund, 1957.

Fig. 2. Barnett Newman, *Day One*, 1951-2, oil on canvas. 153 x 50 ½ in. Whitney Museum of American Art. Purchased with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Fig. 3. *Lavender Mist/Number I, 1950*, 1950, Oil, enamel, and aluminum paint on canvas, 7 ft. 3 in. x 9 ft. 10 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund.

Fig. 4. *Alchemy*, 1947. Oil, enamel, aluminum paint and string on canvas, 45 ½ in. x 7 ft. 3 1/8 in. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

Fig. 5. *Number 32, 1950*, 1950, Enamel on Canva, 8 ft. 10 in. x 15 ft. Kunstsammlung Northrheim-Westfaallen, Dusseldorf.

Fig. 6. *Lucifer*, 1947. Oil, enamel, and aluminum paint on canvas, 41 in. x 8 ft. 9 1/2 in. Stanford Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Anderson.

Fig. 7. Photo. Pollock painting, 1950, Hans Namuth.

Fig. 8. Thomas Hart Benton, "The Mechanics of Form Organization," *The Arts*, November 1926-March 1927.

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i The popularizing museum essayist David Anfam offers criticism of this view while, nevertheless, appropriating the idea for his own use. See David Anfam, “Pollock Drawing The Mind’s Line,” in *No Limits, Just Edges Jackson Pollock’s Paintings on Paper* distributed by the Deutsche Guggenheim Museum: 2005), 31.

ii Sidra Stich, “Anxious Visions” in Sidra Stich et al., *Anxious Visions Surrealist Art* (New York: Abbeville, 1990), 108.

iii Summer 1991. The interview was carried out for the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art in New York.

iv Document 89 in O’Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock/A Catalogue Raisonne*, IV: 253.

v Ibid., Document 90.

vi Ibid., Document 87 IV: 251

vii Ibid., 250. As did his colleague Arshile Gorky who wrote of his murals at Newark Airport as an innocent concept of “Space and Time.”

viii See Karal Ann Marling, “A Note on New Deal Iconography: Futurology and the Historical Myth,” in *Prospects* 4 (1979), and Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

ix See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 128-129.

x Wolfgang Paalen, “Totem Art” DYN 4/5 (December 1943): 18.

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- <sup>xi</sup> Lowery Stokes Sims, "Ciphering and Deciphering: The Art and Writings of Richard Pousette-Dart," in *Richard Pousette-Dart (1916-1992)* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), 17.
- <sup>xii</sup> Notebook B 152, 1973-74, cited in *ibid.*
- <sup>xiii</sup> Notebook B 67, 1930s, cited in *ibid.*
- <sup>xiv</sup> See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 117-149.
- <sup>xv</sup> Jean Edman (Mrs. Joseph Campbell), personal communication, June 5, 1984.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Abacus, 1975), 124.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Pollock, quoted in *The New Yorker*, cited in Document 86 in O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock/A Catalogue Raisonne IV*: 245.
- <sup>xix</sup> Mabel Collins, *Light on the Path* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, first edition 1885; fourth edition, Quest Miniature, 1989), n.p.
- <sup>xx</sup> Cited in Barabara Hollister, *Six Indian Space Artists* (New York: David Finlay Jr Gallery) June 7 to July 17, 2003, n.p.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Robert Motherwell, "The Modern Painter's World," *Dyn* # 6 (November 1944): 13.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Edward Renouf, "On Certain Functions of Modern Painting," *Dyn* (July/August, 1942): 44.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 301-21.

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Text cited as Document 100 in O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock/A Catalogue Raisonne*, IV: 262.

<sup>xxv</sup> Mannheim, in Salvador Giner, *Mass Society* (New York: Academic Press, 1976), 130.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ludwig Goldscheider, *El Greco* (New York: Oxford University Press, Phaidon Edition, 1938), 15.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See Elizabeth Langhorne, "Jackson Pollock's 'The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle,' *Arts Magazine* 53 # 7 (March 1979): 128-137.

<sup>xxviii</sup> See William Rubin, "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator, Part II," *Art in America* 67 #8 (December, 1979), 82.

<sup>xxix</sup> Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon / A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), 144.

<sup>xxx</sup> Stich, "Anxious Visions," 81-2.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Pavia quoted in "Jackson Pollock: An Artist's Symposium, Part I," *Art News* 66 # 2 (April 1967): 30

<sup>xxxii</sup> Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton / An American Original*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989) 150.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Quoted in Ethan Mordden, "Six Decades Later, Still the Great American Musical," *The New York Times*, (February 24, 2002), online, page one.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> See Frederick H. Douglas and Rene D'Harnoncourt, *Indian Art of United States* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, reprint edition: 20.

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xxxv Thomas Hart Benton, "The Mechanics of Form Creation, Part IV," The Arts (February 1927): 95-96.

xxxvi Ibid. For the first discussion of these articles and the work of Jackson Pollock, see Stephen Polcari, "Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock," *Arts Magazine* (March 1979).

xxxvii Friederich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. with an introduction by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1973), 184.

xxxviii For a discussion of the theory and its use in modern times, among them, as a rationale for so-called primitivism, see Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*.

xxxix Carl G. Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul, trans. W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1933), 126.

xl. Lewis Mumford, The Condition of Man (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanich Harvest, 1944), 4.

xli Kunitz with Bill Moyers, PBS, "Dancing on the Edge of the Road," 1989, published in *Interviews and Encounters with Stanley Kunitz*, Stanley Moss ed., (Riverdale-on-Hudson, New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1993), 162.

xlii Jackson Pollock, Document D90, in O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné* IV: 253.

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xliii Jamake Highwater, *Dance\_Rituals\_of\_Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred van der Marck, 1985), 191.

xliv See Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination*.

xlvi Jackson Pollock, Document 67, in O'Connor and Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonne* IV: 238.

xlvii Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 507.

## **Conclusion**

In the 1940s, it was believed that the solution to human unhappiness was a course of psychological adjustment and repair, and Jackson Pollock believed in that as well. He held to the notion that human motives are to be comprehended as a validation of psychological theory simply articulated and understood. As such, it was a lived religion. And there grew the sense that un-verbalized formulations of the purpose of meaning necessarily led to un-verbalized art.

Pollock argued for an inner-directed man, assimilated to the past, but new, articulating a third way between modernity and the traditional, and between regimentation and chaos. He wanted a new healthy self — natural, genuine and direct and with a personal individuality appropriate to modern life. Such a social and psychic ideal would create a new harmonious society of creative individuals that would counter mass society man.

But the triumph of creativity in the work of the Abstract Expressionist did not mean that mass society man was dead. On the contrary, in the postwar period, despite the defeat of fascism, mass society theory took on new life and Pollock both benefited and suffered in equal turn. “Alienation,” “isolation,” “freedom,” “anxiety,” and “absurdity” became the watchwords of much of fifties postwar America. For the most part, these maxims reconsidered and reconceived the understandings of prewar mass society, reaffirming and reconfiguring the idea of a mass society and mass man theory that drove much



thinking in the immediate prewar world. In the postwar period, mass society theory became the general social theory of many very different critics. What they had in common was the notion of the alienated, rootless, meaningless, atomized and dangerous society and man of the growing middle classes, suburbanization and bureaucratic industry. And again, what is assumed is that, following Marx, Weber, Freud, Ortega, Jung and other mass society theorists, modern cities, bureaucracies, science and now prosperity and the media have completely altered the landscape of human experience.

The *reaffirmation* and *updating* of mass society theory is evident in fifties popular intellectual thought. The new variants were presented in some of the most important and influential writings and concepts of the age that maintain and extend key characteristics of mass society theory. One of the most important conceptions was the emergence of the idea of the “other-directed” society argued in sociologist David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (written with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney) of 1950. The bestselling book set new terms for discussion in the 1950s and 1960s. It restated as conventional wisdom the alleged movement of modern Western society into the social character and psychological disposition of a mass society.

According to Riesman, the first societies were traditional societies with a balanced social order and stable population, and limited technological change. Traditional societies engendered cultures based on the small village with tight and long-lasting social relations. Here the “tradition-related” cultures follow

ancient rules and customs. This description fits the so-called primitivist and Regionalist paradigm, and accounts for the urban and modern contempt for middle america both geographically and culturally. It also asserts for the modernist audience admiration of non-Western society such as Africa or Native America. Riesman seems unaware of or indifferent to the thirties' thesis that cultures, places and societies develop themes and patterns that persist over the culture's time and space and other cultural formations, as the work of Martha Graham and others both noted and demonstrated.

The second culture and disposition was that of the "inner-directed" world of early industrial modernism. In this period of mechanical progress, population growth and urbanization, as with the Renaissance and the Reformation, the individual separated psychologically from the power of the family group. While absorbing many of their values, he sought "meaning" and achievement on his own terms, making his own self and destiny. In his way, Riesman's "inner-directed" man, is the self-actualizing "individual" of Jung and of the mass society critique, for he has a self, a creative identity and an authentic, personal, inner life. Inner-directed societies maintain a balance between the goals of his social environment and those of the individual.

According to Riesman, the third type, the "other-directed" man was becoming the dominant figure in the postwar world. With population growth leveling off, "other directed" societies became less dynamic and focus changed from inner satisfaction to outer conformity. The "outer-directed" are employed

in business (mostly white-collar and service businesses) or government. And they are literate, educated and determined consumers who are shaped by mass communications through words, embellished stereotypes, and the mediocre pleasures of mass culture. Needing to be liked and accepted, the other-directed figure sought to match values and behaviors to those of his peer group. In contrast to the traditional man, he cannot affirm his selfhood through the primordial relationships. In contrast to the inner-directed, he lacks a true subjectivity and recognizes, significantly, that *other people* [Riesman italics] are the key.

*The Lonely Crowd's* outer-directed society is mass society, and the other-directed individual, the mass society individual. Although quiescence replaced chaos of the prewar "mass," the social group and individual that is "other-directed" is the new suburban middle class, which has largely replaced the proletariat as the mass. New yet familiar descriptions of mass society came forth. The suburban, middle class was a society of anomie, joylessness and fear of difference.

The post war's mass society critique became the terms to evaluate Pollock. He and his work were popularly interpreted as primary examples of "anxiety," "alienation" and "freedom." And despite Pollock's scrupulous avoidance of politics, of causes or positions and the choosing of policy and government sides, this popularization has even been recently extended to an

alleged politics of Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists as a whole. Their work has been characterized as deliberately representing “alienation.”

Ultimately, Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* continues and extends the tradition of the social characterization of personality and character that took hold between the wars in Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* and *Moses and Monotheism*. And it is heir to Jung’s psychology, mass society and modern man theory and other prewar examinations of the modern society and his inner life and personality.

As we have discussed, however, Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists work developed as a result of interwar concepts expanded during the war and not simply or directly, if at all, from only postwar fashions or villainies. Pollock’s work, for example, has little to do with “alienation” or “freedom” and was complete in itself (principally by 1947-1948) before the burgeoning of those popular concepts.

Pollock’s art is the confluence of three great liminalities. One of those was Jungian psychology: “As with liminality, much of the imagery of [Jungian] individuation [that is, the self] expresses the themes of birth and rebirth. It seems inevitable that such a motif would appear in the mental life of persons who experience themselves as ‘betwixt and between’—in transition from one order of becoming to another.”<sup>1</sup> The era’s “living and dying” became death and rebirth in the Jungian psychological process and in the panorama of history. The personality/psyche of man is becoming.

The second great liminality was shamanism. The concern of shamanism was with transition, with becoming rather than being.<sup>ii</sup> Shamanic imagery was used as a metaphor to mark the transition from one state of being or consciousness and reality to another. It emphasizes transformation and transition, the American gods of the era. To do and be the shamanic requires an intermixing of the supernatural and the human. In the twentieth century, it was possible for psychology and its forms to be incorporated into shamanic religious impulses.

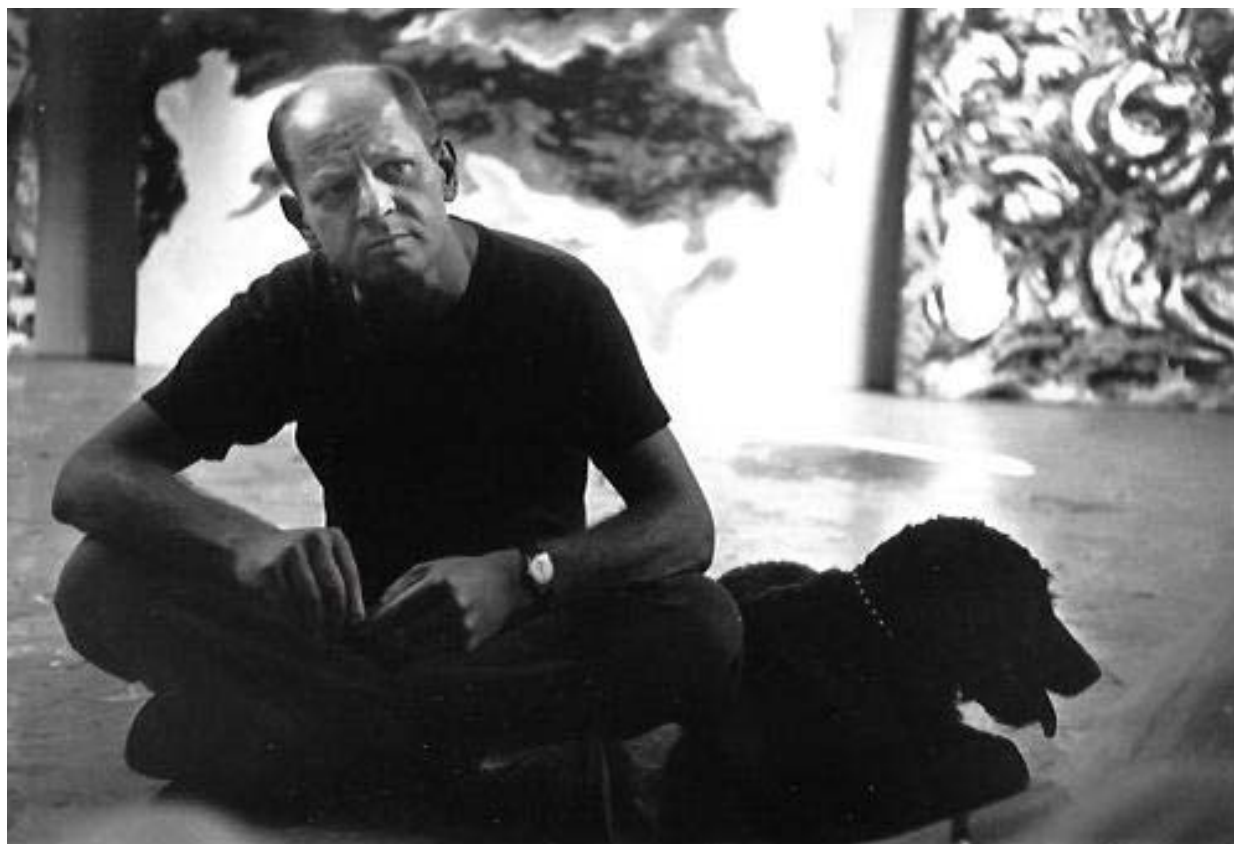
And thirdly, no matter how personal the shamanist journey is, it has a social rather than a personal reason for opening the psyche, as the individual is concerned with the community and its well-being. Sacred action, then, is directed towards the creation of order out of chaos. Actually, rather than “community” which implies social structures, Pollock’s work addresses, as noted above, what Victor Turner has famously called “communitas.” That is, after “liminal” events in which a period or group engages in change and the breaking down of structure, communitas is sought.

Communitas is spontaneous, immediate, and concrete, representing “the ‘quick’ of human interrelatedness.”<sup>iii</sup> Turner argues that it has no fixed structure and is open-ended, much like Bergson’s “open morality,” his “*élan vital*.” For Turner, communitas generates metaphors and parodies art and religion, not legal and political structures. Communitas does not emerge from the release of instinct from cultural constraint (the Freudian approach) but

from volition and “memory.” Liminality and *communitas* give rise to myths, rituals, and symbolic magico-religious systems that “reclassify” “reality and man’s relationship to society, nature and culture.” Eventually liminality (which is likened to death, darkness, and the wilderness of self)<sup>iv</sup> and *communitas* reenter society, become stabilized, and establish themselves, and then they become the structures (in modernity even the “bureaucratic” and “mass”) against which the new marginal and liminal elements protest in a never ending cycle.<sup>v</sup> The forties, Pollock himself, and his use of “primitivism” in whatever form are all expressions of these liminal “rites of passage.” As a personality, Pollock was inherently separate and marginal -- the perfect personality condition for attaining ritual liminality. He made an admirable attempt to put his consciousness at the service of growth rather than of self-pitying collapse as the fifties had done.

Pollock was born to era of transition. He made it his art, seeking to be the master rather than the victim of his fate, but, ultimately, his “fluidity”

dried up. He died at the age of 44.



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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Peter Homans, *Jung in Context: Modernity and the Making of Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, 1995), 207.

<sup>ii</sup> Esther Pasztory, "Shamanism and North American Indian Art," in Zena



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Pearlstone Mathews and Aldona Jonaitis, *Native North American Art History* (Palo Alto: Peek Publications, 1982), 28.

iii Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969), 127.

iv Ibid., 95.

v Ibid., 125-130.