

The Life of Jackson Pollock and his Influence on Modern Art

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Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), one of the most famous modernists of the 20th Century, created art that has had a powerful effect on artists from the mid-twentieth century through today. Jackson Pollock's art continues to be redefined through today's young artist. This paper will briefly touch on the phases of Jackson Pollock's life, from childhood to his early artistic influences, his life with Lee Krasner, his art, and the posthumous effects and influences of the artist and his artwork. This paper reflects on some of the most important elements in Jackson Pollock's personal life such as psychological introspect that manifested onto canvas and would eventually be some of the world's most important pieces of modern art.

Jackson Pollock (Jackson) was an introvert and socially awkward individual who spent most of his adult life as an alcoholic struggling with his inner demons. He was born to Stella and Leroy Pollock in Cody Wyoming and the youngest of 5 boys. There is much question about the influence that Jackson's father had on his life. Research shows little history of Leroy Pollock's existence in Jackson's life beyond age nine. It was at age nine that Jackson's parents Stella and Leroy Pollock separated. Stella Pollock was a domineering figure that desired a life of culture for her sons. Leroy Pollock was an unsuccessful farmer, which would be an indicator of why the family moved from place to place. This instability may have been the result of Leroy Pollock's alcoholism.

Jackson's family had moved as much as nine times by the time he was age 16. Jackson, raised an Agnostic, lived in Arizona and California. Jackson had trouble with authority in school and was in and out of school until 1928. At the age of 16 Jackson was enrolled at the Manual Arts School in Los Angeles, California. Jackson's teacher and mentor, Frederick John de St. Vrain Schwankovsky, was a member of the Theosophical Society. Jackson attended Theosophical camps and it was during these spiritual gatherings that he was introduced to the

theories of psychoanalyst Carl Jung, and in the 1940's Jackson would explore the unconscious imagery in his paintings.

Two of the five eldest Pollock boys, Charles and Sande, moved to the East Coast. Although both had artistic inclinations, it was Charles that went on to specifically study art in New York sometime between 1922 and 1928, and it was by 1930 that Jackson made the decision to join his brothers. He enrolled at the Art Student's League under Thomas Hart Benton whom Charles studied with. Benton was a major influence in Jackson's life, both artistically and personally. Benton and Jackson ultimately became very close friends and Benton may have been more of the father figure that Jackson lacked in his younger life. Benton was known as an American Scene Painter. Benton's art captured war propaganda, agriculture, and city life with the use of vivid colors and portrayal of social realities. Benton was regarded as: One of the foremost American painters of the 1920's and throughout the Depression. He was a regionalist who painted dynamic, narrative murals, which represented American life and legend (Doss 320). Jackson's *Going West*, see appendix 1A, is an example of Benton's strong regional influence on Jackson's earlier work.

Regionalism was the response to the Great Depression and politics of the 1930's, shunning the city life and replacing it with paintings of the American pioneer scene. Jackson uses iconography in *Going West*, which includes a cowboy with horses and wagons making his way through what appears to be a rugged mountain pass. The cowboy is the spirit of American life. Jackson uses these images to show the heart of America while trying to define the meaning of American art.

Benton would ultimately move out of state to pursue his teaching career, deserting Jackson as his father did; Jackson would eventually abandon regionalism to pursue abstract

expressionism. Other influences can be seen in Jackson's work such as the Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros (Siqueiros), as well as Picasso, Miro, and the surrealists. The muralists' influence in size can be compared to the large-scale art Jackson would go on to create. However, it was Siqueiros' influence that may have led to the drip technique that Jackson became famous for. Siqueiros set up a short-lived workshop in which Jackson was an apprentice. He taught experimental techniques including paint splattering and the use of industrial paints as well as incorporating sand into the paint (Fineberg 24). These techniques are found in Jackson's later works. Another important figure in Jackson's life is Lee Krasner. Lee Krasner (Krasner) an artist in her own right may have had the most influence on Jackson's art and career.

In the early 40's Jackson was invited to participate in a group exhibition for French and American artists, and among the artists was Lee Krasner. By the time Jackson met Krasner, he had already battled years of acute alcoholism like his father. At age 15 Jackson started drinking, and by 1937 he had a nervous breakdown. The following year Jackson began sessions in Jungian psychoanalysis to help with his alcoholism and neurosis, but it was Krasner that had been the successful stabilizing factor in Jackson's sobriety. Krasner was less depicted as a lover or wife of Jackson's in the movie "Pollock", but more of an unofficial nurse or mother figure. She cut his fingernails for him, helped him experiment with homeopathic cures for his drinking, and spoke for him in conversations. She also introduced him into the artist circle, which would ultimately lead to introductions to Clement Greenberg and Peggy Guggenheim.

Jackson and Krasner shared a modest apartment turned studio where Jackson created *Male and Female*, see Appendix 1B. *Male and Female* may reflect Jungian psychoanalysis. Jungian theory asserts that components of the personality join together to form pairs of

opposites, thus creating a complex web of inter-relationships. All things can be viewed as paired opposites (i.e. good/evil, male/female, or love/hate). Whenever the inferior introverted sensation function is unconsciously organized as well as repressed, it may become associated with the shadow and manifest as a complex. The shadow represents an aspect of yourself which is somewhat more primitive, uncultured, and awkward (Ruby). Comparisons between Jackson's *Male and Female* and Jungian theory resemble Jackson's own life, that being an uncultured and awkward adult.

The interpretation of *Male and Female* can be seen as two possible images that poses the question, "which is the male and which is the female?" The right side imagery of a figure with a yellow diamond shape at the mid section leads us to believe that this is a female. The diamond shape is the iconography of fertility (Emmerling 38). The left side imagery shows us a red figure with a circular red swirl at the mid section that may be a limp penis. To the contradictory, the red figure shows us plump protruding breasts and the right side shows us a premature ejaculation represented by the creamy blue and white hues.

Once Peggy Guggenheim discovered *Male and Female*, she commissioned Jackson to paint a mural that would fit the length of her entryway to her New York apartment. Over a period of months, Jackson contemplated the entryway and when it, the moment of clarity, finally came to him, he completed his task. Over the period of a night and early next morning he created *Mural* (see Appendix 1C). The completion of *Mural* marks the transitioning point for Jackson from figurative painting to gestural abstraction painting. *Mural* invites the viewer for a close up personal look. Although stepping back to view the painting from a distance allows the viewer to gauge the size, it provides no additional information from that which is derived from close up viewing as it would in a Monet painting (Emmerling 8). *Mural* nearly 20 feet wide is

composed of black painted vertical brush strokes almost resembling figures. Swirls of vivid juxtaposed colors, yellow, green, red, and white dance across the canvas with bold line leaving the impression of warm human faces laughing and peering out from beyond the swaying wild grasses of the Savannah. The feeling of awe comes over you and you feel good, as you, yourself, dance along side *Mural*, in your head.

Jackson often met up with other modernists Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Arshile Gorky, Barnett Newman, Franz Kline, and Hans Hoffman, otherwise known as the New York School. During these meetings the artists would talk politics and drink. Jackson's failed sobriety resulted in Krasner's idea to remove him from the close proximity of and easy access to alcohol, specifically, the Cedar Bar in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, to a small house at The Springs, near East Hampton.

It was there at The Springs during two years of sobriety that Jackson finally had a breakthrough with drip painting that would catapult him to legendary status in art history. Soon after establishing his studio in The Springs, Jackson spontaneously created the famous pouring technique. At a moment in time, Krasner came upon Jackson as the famous drip technique was unfolding and she exclaimed, "Jackson, you cracked it wide open" (Pollock). Jackson's technique incorporated industrial enamel paints, which were dripped onto canvas with sticks, basters, or simply dripped from holes in the paint can. At this pivotal point in time, Jackson abandoned the paintbrush and easel. He would lay the canvas out on the floor and dance around and onto the canvas; a ritualistic application of the paint to give it an all over composition.

Artists of the New York school as well as Peggy Guggenheim, and Clement Greenburg championed Jackson's art. They saw the significance in the works he was producing and where it could lead. According to Richard Kalina's article in *Art in America* magazine, "Jackson's

mythical importance on the act of painting would function as the marker of the artist's resistance to mass culture." With some push from influential art critic Clement Greenburg, notoriety eventually came to Jackson after an article in Life Magazine was published entitled, "Is Jackson Pollock the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?" (Fineberg 97). After Jackson's new technique became widely publicized, he became the front man of the Abstract Expressionism art movement in America during the 1940's. This was the era of World War II and post Depression America. Europe was left in ruins and the art capital moved from Paris to New York City.

During the height of Jackson's fame he produced *Lavender Mist*, see Appendix 1D. "Lavender Mist is doubtless one of Pollock's master-pieces, a work unsurpassed in terms of linear complexity, energy-charged suspense, and coloristic brilliance. It attests to the productivity of the phase from 1947 - 1951, when Pollock was working at the height of his powers" (Emmerling 90). My analysis of the painting appears to show Jackson's handprints in gray in the upper right hand corner of the picture plain contradicting his trademark of removing the presence of the painter from the picture plain. The color combination of salmon, white, and gray hues, results in a soft tone of lavender. The aluminum paint gives the shimmering effect. The contrasting colors of the linear paint strokes leave no evident focal point in the painting. The painting itself is inviting and calming.

It wouldn't be long before the turbulent self-destructive side of Jackson returned, and alcohol would literally drive him to his death on August 11, 1956. Jackson's posthumous influence is celebrated through kitsch jewelry, commercial advertising, TV, and magazine articles. Academy award winning movie "Pollock" traces the life of Jackson's mythic celebrity, which lives on today. His artistic influence prompted negative reaction among the post modernist "Pop Art" movement, which produced artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy

Lichtenstein. The new art was a response to two forces, abstract expressionism and the postwar popular culture. Rebellious against the first, it embraced the second (Sherman 4).

Although the pop artists rejected Pollock's romantic individuality, his concentration on the instant at which the paint hit the canvas was the central inspiration for the immediacy of gestural painting and happenings of the fifties and the directness of materials that are expressed in minimal art of the sixties (Fineberg 98). Jackson's influence can be seen in Newman's huge scale, David Smith's figurative structure, Rothko's richness of color and surface, Dubuffet's physicality of material, Kaprow's spatial expressionism, Arnesen's psychological introspection, and Johnny "Crash" Matos' graffiti drip art. "Crash submerged himself in the study of modern art and did a series of paintings that employed Pollock's drips" (Pape 118).

Jackson Pollock one of the world's most influential and important modern artists of the 20th century led a life of inner turmoil, produced priceless works of art, reached his legacy in art history, and can't be touched. What he created in the 1940's is an important contribution to modernism. As William de Kooning said about Jackson, "He busted our idea of a picture all to hell" (Fineberg 86).

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Appendix

1A



Going West c1934-38. Oil on Gesso on composition board, 15.125" x 20.875"
National Museum of Art, Smithsonian Institution

1B



©JP Male and Female c1942 Oil on canvas, 73" x 49"
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Male and Female c1942. Oil on canvas, 73" x 49"
Philadelphia Museum of Art

1C



Mural c1943. Oil on Canvas. 97 ¼ x 238 in
University of Iowa Museum of Art

1D



Lavender Mist: Number 1 c1950. Oil on Canvas, oil, enamel, and aluminum on canvas;
7 ft 3 in x 9 ft 10 in); National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.