

# **Jackson Pollock : [brochure] November 1, 1998-February 2, 1999, the Museum of Modern Art**

Author

Pollock, Jackson, 1912-1956

Date

1998

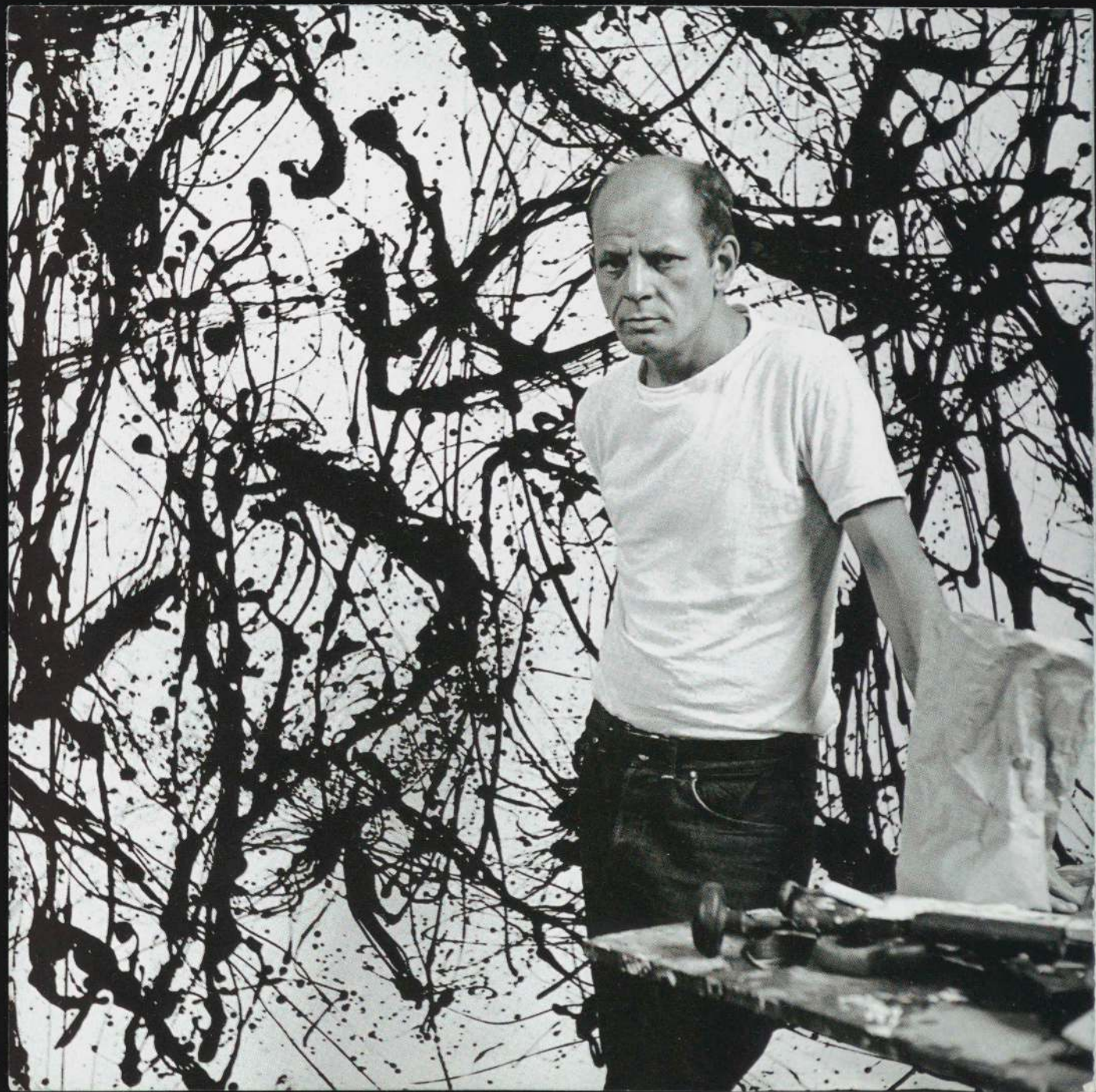
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# Jackson Pollock

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November 1, 1998–February 2, 1999

**The Museum of Modern Art**

JACKSON POLLOCK is the most celebrated, and controversial, American artist of the twentieth century. The "allover" abstractions he created in the late 1940s—by pouring, dripping, or flinging paint onto canvases laid out on the floor—exploded the traditions of picture-making and opened up freedoms for artists of all kinds. His innovations helped establish a new international prestige for American art, and their influence has been felt not just in painting but throughout the new forms of sculpture and performance art that arose after him. In his lifetime, Pollock gained a notorious celebrity as a denim-clothed embodiment of avant-garde provocation. Then his violent death, in an auto crash at the age of forty-four, helped lend his life—often troubled by emotional difficulties and alcoholism—an added aura of romantic myth. This exhibition is the most complete survey of his work ever mounted, and the first retrospective in the United States since 1967.

## Childhood and Early Development

Pollock was born in 1912 in Cody, Wyoming. He grew up in Arizona and California, the youngest of five sons in a family that moved frequently from one hardscrabble small-farm environment to another. His oldest brother Charles's decision to leave home and pursue a career in art had a strong effect on him. Pollock was a poor student, and his belligerent nature brought him recurrent disciplinary problems in his Los Angeles high school. Encouraged by an art teacher there and following Charles's example, he left California for New York in 1930 at the age of eighteen, determined to become an artist.

## First Efforts in Art

During his first years in New York, Pollock studied with the realist mural painter Thomas Hart Benton, who pushed him to

analyze the work of old masters such as Rubens and El Greco. At the same time, though, Pollock developed a strong affinity for the heroic, often gruesomely expressive imagery of politically inspired Mexican mural painters such as José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Not blessed with any conventional facility, he struggled as a student and labored at menial jobs to scrape out a living in the Depression years. Increasing bouts of emotional disturbance, fueled by heavy drinking, led him to be hospitalized for a few months in 1938. He was evidently a troubled young man, and the most original of the works that survive from these early years show a dark strain of lurid violence and conflicted eroticism.

*Pollock's work of the 1930s is featured in the first room of the exhibition and in a gallery of drawings and small paintings opening off the third room.*

## A New Model (Picasso) and a New Originality

After Pollock's teacher Benton left New York in 1935, Pollock began to move out from under his influence and to investigate the modern European art Benton scorned. In 1939, Picasso's antifascist mural *Guernica* was shown in New York, and shortly afterward The Museum of Modern Art mounted a Picasso retrospective. Pollock was tremendously impressed by Picasso's expressive deformations of the body and by his use of color. Pollock began at the same time to absorb influences from other modern artists. He was befriended by the Russian émigré artist John Graham, who showed him the links that united both modern art and tribal art (such as that of Native Americans) to the primordial forms of the unconscious. Graham included Pollock's painting *BIRTH* in a group show in 1942. Through that exhibition, Pollock met the painter Lee Krasner, who was also a participant. Krasner would become his



GUARDIANS OF THE SECRET. 1943. Oil on canvas. 48 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 6' 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (122.9 x 191.5 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Albert M. Bender Collection; Albert M. Bender Bequest Fund Purchase. ©1998 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.

lifelong companion. A year later, advocates persuaded the heiress Peggy Guggenheim, who had just opened a new gallery called Art of This Century, to offer Pollock a contract. His first solo exhibition, in late 1943, included pictures like *GUARDIANS OF THE SECRET* and *THE SHE-WOLF*. Their hieratic compositions evoked immemorial mythologies and mysterious symbolic languages, and the densely worked surfaces had a vivid, immediate intensity that drew favorable attention. For her apartment foyer, Guggenheim also commissioned Pollock to create the monumental *MURAL*, whose greater degree of abstraction and less constrained, relentlessly snaking linear energies seem premonitory.

*GUARDIANS OF THE SECRET* and *THE SHE-WOLF* are displayed in the second room of the exhibition. *MURAL* is shown in gallery five.

#### 1945–46: Marriage, A New Home, and Two New Series

In 1945, following a summer vacation on eastern Long Island, Pollock and Krasner decided to move there permanently. They

married just before leaving New York City. Their new home was an old house with an adjacent small barn in the community of The Springs in East Hampton. For the first two years there, they did not own a car and lived a fairly isolated and spartan existence—the house had no hot water and only a coal stove for heat. In 1946, Pollock created two distinct new groups of works: the *Accabonac Creek Series* (named after a nearby stream) and the *Sounds in the Grass Series*. Their titles suggest his response to an increased contact with nature. The *Accabonac Creek* pictures were painted in an upstairs bedroom of the house, and still depict figures. But the *Sounds in the Grass* canvases were executed in the barn, which Pollock had converted to a studio, and show a new kind

of abstraction, with heavily worked, edge-to-edge fields of oil paint, inflected by simplified ciphers, circles, and lozenges.

*Works from both series are featured in gallery six.*

#### The Evolution of a New Way of Painting

As early as the late 1930s, in an experimental workshop led by Siqueiros, Pollock had experimented with pouring and spattering liquid enamel paint. By the 1940s, this kind of free-form creativity had taken on a new meaning, especially in the context of the Surrealists' emphasis on cursively loose, heedlessly "automatic" drawing as a route to the liberation of unconscious imagery. At first, near the end of 1947, Pollock seems to have used poured lines of paint as a way to elaborate on compositions previously painted with a brush or to efface early layers of imagery. Then he began to use pouring and dripping—with sticks or dried-out brushes, or from holes punctured directly in cans of paint—as the primary method of creating a composition. Laying out his canvases on the floor of his barn



studio, he worked on them from all sides, creating edge-to-edge interlaces of looping lines, overlaid and underpinned with fields of poured enamel paint, sometimes articulated with accents of oil pigment squeezed directly from the tube, and frequently punctuated with seemingly accidental effects of puddling and spattering. He often worked with the unconventional medium of aluminum paint and included a complex range of color accents, from orange and yellow to teal and green. With these variations and wide differences in the density and dynamism of the layers of paint, he created a broad gamut of effects, from subtle tonalism to near-garish decorativeness, and from airy delicacy to congested turbulence. The paintings seemed to many to project an apocalyptic, fragmenting violence in their break with tradition and in their apparently reckless spontaneity. But they could also evoke a filigreed fragility and a seamlessly unified, lyrical sense of dancing energy. The first wave of these canvases were given highly evocative titles. Two are drawn from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (FULL FATHOM FIVE and SEA CHANGE); others are suggestive of cosmic light (GALAXY, COMET, and PHOSPHORESCENCE). But often Pollock's titles were suggested by others, and they were always added after the paintings were complete. In 1948, to insist on his quasi-scientific spirit of investigation, and to force viewers to contend unaided with the abstraction of the paintings, he began to title them only with numbers and years.

FULL FATHOM FIVE, SEA CHANGE, GALAXY, COMET, and PHOSPHORESCENCE are shown in gallery eight. NUMBER 5, 1948 and other similarly numbered works are on view in gallery nine.

### Star Quality

Peggy Guggenheim closed Art of This Century after Pollock's show in spring 1947 and arranged for Betty Parsons to take over her contract with the artist. Pollock's new manner of painting reached the public through shows at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1948, 1949, and 1950. It was predictably baffling to some viewers. But several major critics saw these paintings'



EYES IN THE HEAT (Sounds in the Grass Series). 1946. Oil on canvas. 54 x 43" (137.2 x 109.2 cm). Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. ©1998 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y. Photograph ©The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Photograph: David Heald

innovative force and unique beauty. When the critic Clement Greenberg, a longtime Pollock supporter, designated him the greatest painter in America, *Life* magazine responded in its August 8, 1949 issue with an incredulous, half-mocking headline: "Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?" This six-page article, with color reproductions, gave Pollock a new level of notoriety. He and his contemporaries, like Willem de Kooning, were used to a marginalized audience for avant-garde art, but the *Life* article signaled the emergence of a new kind of "star" artist in America, of which Pollock—shown in the *Life* photos as a tough guy in black denim with a dangling cigarette—was the first.





NUMBER 13A, 1948: ARABESQUE. 1948. Oil and enamel on canvas. 37¼" x 9' 8½" (94.6 x 295.9 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. Gift of Richard Brown Baker, B.A. 1935. ©1998 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.

### Autumn 1950: Culmination and Change

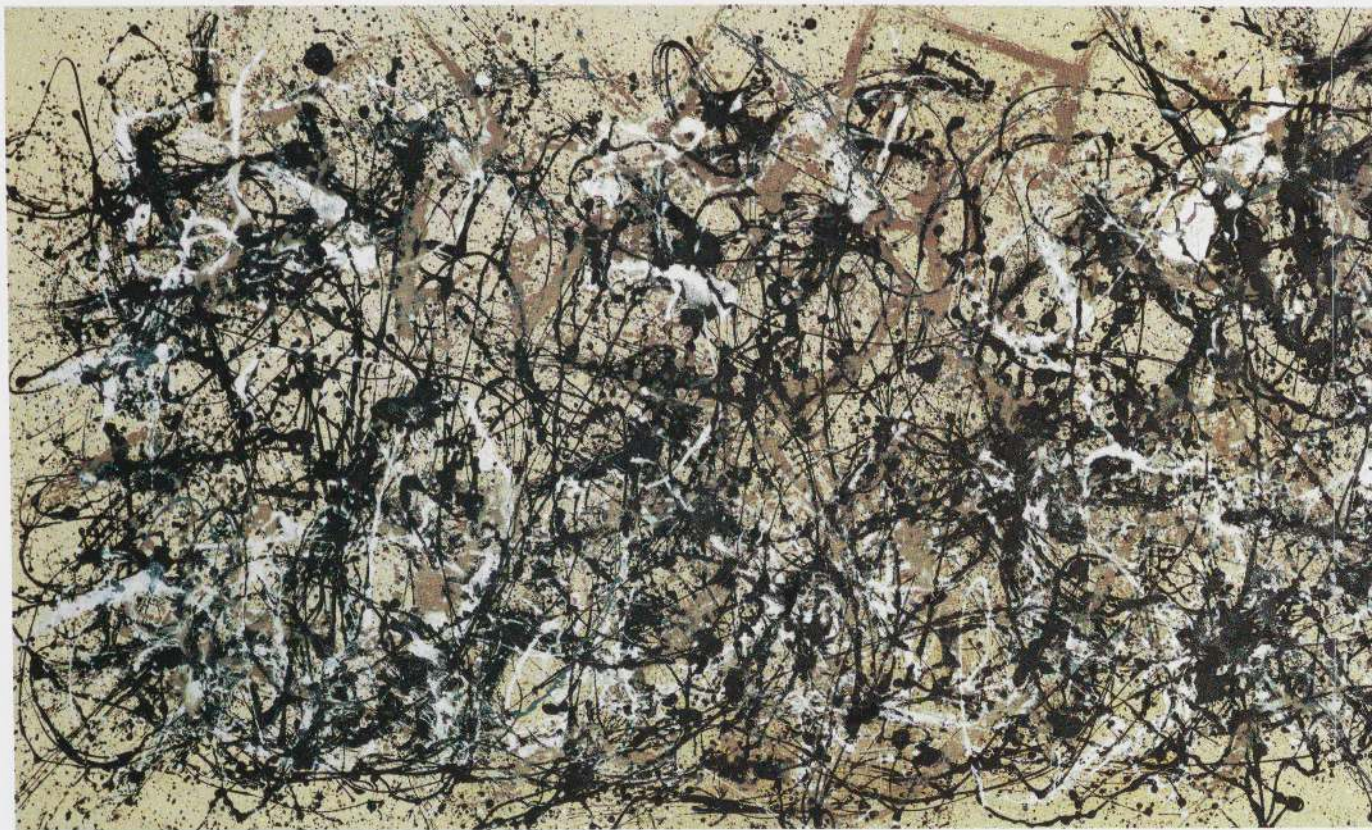
During the late summer and early autumn of 1950, Pollock executed in relatively rapid succession three monumental canvases, each measuring approximately nine by eighteen feet: NUMBER 32, 1950, an aggressively torqued, muscular tarantella of flung black forms; ONE: NUMBER 31, 1950, a softer, densely layered nimbus of beiges, teals, and black and white; and AUTUMN RHYTHM, a more juttingly angular, opened-up orchestration of browns, whites, and blacks. Not since MURAL, which he painted for Guggenheim in 1944, had Pollock attempted anything on this giant scale. Indeed, Pollock was showing a renewed interest in the idea of mural painting. He explored with the architect Peter Blake the idea of an "ideal museum" in which his paintings would act as freestanding walls within an open architectural space, and he sought commissions to produce mural-like paintings for private collectors. These three monumental works, however, seem beyond any pragmatic motivation. They embody the supreme level of pictorial ambition, confidence, and control Pollock had developed in the years since he first began his poured abstractions.

With so much invested in these exceptional pictures, and after a remarkably productive year, Pollock was intensely anx-

ious about the exhibition that opened at the Betty Parsons Gallery in late November 1950. For more than two years, during most of the time he had been painting his dripped or poured abstractions, he had been enjoying a life free from alcoholism. A doctor in East Hampton, by trusted counsel and prescribed tranquilizers, had kept the old problems away. But this physician was killed in an automobile accident in the spring of 1950, and Pollock approached this key exhibition without his crucial support. After the show, he suffered a severe, crushing depression and began drinking heavily again. One of the few consoling, bright spots in this bleak period was a series of drawings in black inks on absorbent Japanese paper, which he began at the very end of 1950 and continued into 1951. These drawings, which break with the linear webs of the poured paintings and explore compositions of discrete shapes (often with figurative overtones), form a bridge toward the paintings in black enamel Pollock would begin that spring.

NUMBER 32, 1950 and AUTUMN RHYTHM are shown in gallery eleven. ONE: NUMBER 31, 1950 is in gallery twelve. The black-ink drawings are on view in gallery fourteen.





AUTUMN RHYTHM: NUMBER 30, 1950. 1950. Oil on canvas. 8' 9" x 17' 3" (266.7 x 525.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. George A. Hearn Fund, 1957. ©1998 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y. Photograph ©1998 The Metropolitan Museum of Art

### **Pollock's Studio and Hans Namuth's Photos and Films**

The sense of unconfined space is so potent in Pollock's poured paintings, especially in the vast expansiveness of the larger canvases, that it is difficult to accept how small his studio space actually was—about twenty-one feet square. This space has been re-created within the exhibition, so that visitors can experience firsthand its restrictive intimacy. Within the re-created barn room are hung selections from the remarkable group of photographs of Pollock at work taken in the summer and early autumn of 1950 by the photographer Hans Namuth. These images

show Pollock completing ONE: NUMBER 31, 1950 and follow him through almost every phase of the work on AUTUMN RHYTHM. First published in 1951, Namuth's photographs have had an enormous impact on the public imagination of Pollock and have helped spread his influence globally, often affecting those who have little if any experience of his paintings. The concept of "action painting" popularized by the critic Harold Rosenberg and the whole body of thought that identifies Pollock as the father of 1960s Happenings and performance art are based in large part on the image of Pollock set forth in these photos. Ironically, while





Namuth's images for years seemed to confirm the headlong spontaneity of Pollock's method, recent computer synthesis of the photographs has allowed us—by reconstituting the various stages of work on *AUTUMN RHYTHM*, for example—to better appreciate how controlled and structured his working process actually was.

Namuth also made a black-and-white film of Pollock painting in his studio. In order to film in color (which required more light), Namuth persuaded Pollock to paint outdoors. That color filming took place over several weekends in the autumn of 1950, and concluded after Thanksgiving with a sequence filmed from underneath a glass pane on which Pollock painted. At the conclusion of the filming, on a bitter cold Saturday, Pollock went straight into his house, opened a bottle of liquor, and deliberately descended into abusive,

uncontrolled drunkenness for the first time in years. The anxieties surrounding the upcoming exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery no doubt figured in this lapse; but it has also been suggested that Pollock's recoil against the falseness of having staged for the camera a process previously private may also have spurred his self-destructive behavior.

*Both of Namuth's films are being shown continuously in a viewing room adjacent to gallery fifteen. The re-created studio space can be found next to the viewing room.*

NUMBER 18, 1951. 1951. Enamel on canvas. 58 3/4 x 55 1/2" (149.2 x 140.9 cm). Collection Adriana and Robert Mnuchin. ©1998 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.

### The Black Paintings of 1951

The winter and spring of 1951 were a time of severe depression for Pollock, during which he resolved not to continue his complexly webbed abstractions. Instead, he began to work exclusively in black enamel, conjuring shapes that were reminiscent of some of his Surrealist-inspired figures of the early 1940s. He wrote to a friend in June: "I've had a period of drawing in canvas on black—with some of my early images coming thru—think the non-objectivists will find them disturbing—and the kids who think it simple to splash a Pollock out." Simplification and directness seem to have been his primary goals, and—after the lavish interweavings of the previous years—these new works appear almost penitentially austere. But their broader, softer lines and saturated fields also often show ample, full-bodied rhythmic structures. When he showed the works at the Betty Parsons Gallery at the end of 1951, some critics welcomed the freshly clarified and more legible imagery. The works failed to sell to Pollock's satisfaction, however, and in the spring of 1952 he left Parsons to join the Sidney Janis Gallery.

*The black paintings of 1951 are displayed in gallery fifteen.*







BLUE POLES: NUMBER 11, 1952. 1952. Enamel and aluminum paint with glass on canvas. 6' 10 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 15' 11 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (210 x 486.8 cm). Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. ©1998 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.

### **Blue Poles and After**

In 1952, Pollock finished *BLUE POLES*, the last of his monumental abstract paintings. The picture had a tortuous beginning, legendarily helped along by fellow artists (Barnett Newman and Tony Smith) who by some accounts helped start the work in drunken sessions of "collaboration." By the end, however, Pollock had covered over all these fitful first marks and produced a picture of exceptional density and intensity. In comparison to the relatively swiftly made and airily expansive big canvases of 1950, this new picture was more aggressively larded with bright hues, and its surface was densely dripping with a crusty materiality. At the last, in order to reintroduce a more decisive rhythmic structure in the labored field, Pollock

overlaid several "poles" of dark blue, in a fashion that many have seen as reminiscent of the compositional lessons of his early teacher, Benton. The picture was the focus of much attention in 1973, when it was sold for a record price to the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. This show marks its first return to America since that sale.

From 1952 onward, Pollock's life and art began to come apart. His fame had already been established by 1950, and it grew larger each year. As his new dealer, Sidney Janis, proved adept at marketing work that had previously gone unsold, Pollock's income rose impressively. At the same time, however, he became increasingly unproductive. Whereas formerly he had worked in extended series of related works, now each suc-





cessive canvas seemed conceived in a different manner, as another restless experiment in a failing search for a satisfactory new combination of imagery and method. Often incapacitated by depression and drinking, he deteriorated physically as well, especially after two drunken injuries to his leg, in 1954 and 1955, kept him immobile for months on end. His relationship with Krasner meanwhile became increasingly contentious, and her first independent successes as a painter only seemed to exacerbate the rift. During 1954 and 1955, Pollock produced only a few paintings; UNTITLED

(SCENT) and SEARCH, which aimed to synthesize aspects of his mid-1940s work with his later abstract mode, are his last efforts.

On August 11, 1956, with Krasner away in Europe, Pollock received as weekend guests a girlfriend he had met in a New York bar and one of her friends. While driving too fast after an afternoon and evening of drinking, he lost control of his Oldsmobile convertible on a curve near his home. The car flipped, killing one of the women and injuring the other. The artist, thrown headfirst into a nearby tree, died instantly.

*BLUE POLES* is shown in gallery sixteen. UNTITLED (SCENT) and SEARCH are displayed in gallery seventeen.

THE DEEP. 1953. Oil and enamel on canvas. 7' 2 3/4" x 59 1/8" (220.4 x 150.2 cm). Musée national d'art moderne, Centre de Création Industrielle, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Donated by The Menil Foundation, Houston, 1975. ©1998 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.

## Posthumous Fame and Legacy

Just before his death, Pollock had been selected to be the subject of a mid-career exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art. This project was transformed into a posthumous retrospective, which also traveled to Europe. Almost immediately, prices for Pollock's paintings began to rise dramatically, and a battle began among those critics and artists who sought to claim his aesthetic legacy. Where some writers saw the artist as pointing painting toward a newly refined, essentialist abstraction, others claimed exactly the opposite—that Pollock had ended traditional painting and opened art up beyond the limits of the canvas, into performance art and a newly inclusive emphasis on process rather than product. So pervasive was his impact, and so admired was his seemingly uncompromised engagement with his work, that he was claimed as a model by creators in almost every field, many of whom were working in forms that appeared antithetical to Pollock's own. This influence was extended still further by The Museum of Modern Art's retrospective exhibition of 1967. The debates surrounding his work—like its complex resonances—continue today.





# Jackson Pollock

The Museum of Modern Art November 1, 1998–February 2, 1999

## Public Programs

The following programs will be held in conjunction with the exhibition.

### Remembering Pollock:

#### A Dialogue of His Friends

Tuesday, November 17, 6:30 p.m.

A panel discussion including Peter Blake, Paul Brach, B. H. Friedman, Mercedes Matter, and Jeffrey Potter. Moderated by Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, and curator of the exhibition.

### Responding to Pollock:

#### A Dialogue of Artists

Tuesday, December 8, 6:30 p.m.

A discussion with a panel of artists including Brice Marden, Richard Serra, and Terry Winters. Moderated by Kirk Varnedoe.

## Symposium

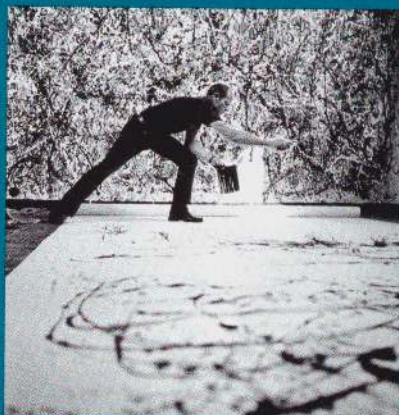
### Recovering Pollock:

#### Method, Meaning, and Impact

Saturday, January 23, 9:00 a.m.

Sunday, January 24, 9:30 a.m.

Two days of lectures and discussions devoted to Pollock's work. The speakers will be Timothy J. Clark, Chancellor's Professor of Modern Art, Department of History of Art, University of California at Berkeley; James Coddington, Chief Conservator, The Museum of Modern Art; Pepe Karmel, Adjunct Assistant Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art; Rosalind Krauss, Meyer Schapiro Professor of Modern Art and Theory, Department of Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University; Jeremy Lewison, Director of Collections, Tate Gallery, London; Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection, Houston; Robert Storr, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art; Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture,



Pollock working on the left side of *AUTUMN RHYTHM*. 1950. Photograph: Hans Namuth. ©1998 Hans Namuth Ltd.

The Museum of Modern Art; and Anne M. Wagner, Professor of Modern Art, Department of History of Art, University of California at Berkeley.

### Looking at Pollock

Tuesday, January 26, 6:30 p.m.

A lecture by Kirk Varnedoe.

All programs will be held in The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1.

Tickets for panel discussions and lecture: \$8; members \$7; students and seniors \$5.

Tickets for Symposium: \$15; members \$12; students and seniors \$8. Two-day rate for Symposium: \$25; members \$20; students and seniors \$14.

Please note that the Symposium ticket includes one free admission to *Jackson Pollock*.

Tickets are available at the Lobby Information Desk.

For more information, please call the Department of Education at 212-708-9781.

### Jazz at MoMA: Jackson Pollock's Jazz

Featured is the music that inspired and excited Jackson Pollock. Hear live swing, Dixieland, and blues performed by leading classic jazz artists every Friday in January in the Museum's Garden Café, from 5:30 to 8:00 p.m. Included in the price of Museum admission (pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 4:30 to 8:30 p.m.). For further details, call 212-708-9491.

Jazz at MoMA is made possible in part by grants from The Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, Inc., AIX Armani Exchange, and The Mary Duke Biddle Foundation. Additional support is provided by United Airlines. Piano provided by Baldwin Piano, New York, N.Y.

*Jackson Pollock* is made possible by Bank of America. Generous support is provided by The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc. The reconstruction of Pollock's studio is made possible by EXOR America (Agnelli Group). The Museum gratefully acknowledges the support of the Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw Charitable Trust and an anonymous donor. Additional funding is provided by TDI. An indemnity for the exhibition has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

The accompanying catalogue is made possible through the generosity of The David Geffen Foundation.

COVER: Pollock in front of *NUMBER 32*, 1950. Photograph: Hans Namuth. ©1998 Hans Namuth Ltd.

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