

Jackson Pollock

The world has seen dozens of painters throughout history: Van Gogh, Picasso, Monet, and da Vinci, just to name a few. When it comes to the abstract expressionist era, however, there is one artist in particular that stands out. Jackson Pollock once said, "Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is." For Pollock, that meant splotches and splatters. It meant drips and dots. His unique yet simple, engaging yet infuriating, haphazard yet completely methodically stood at the forefront of the artistic world at that time. Perhaps he was just 'painting what he was'. Perhaps he was a genius. Perhaps he was a fraud. No matter your opinion, there is no denying that his work revolutionized the expressionistic era and opened artistic doors previously thought sealed tight. Violent, spattered painting fueled by alcohol and aided by sticks and his own bare hands brought life to life itself. If anyone could make the audience see an emotion or an idea, it was Jackson Pollock.

On January 28, 1912, Leroy Pollock and Stella May McClure gave birth to their fifth son, a healthy baby boy. His name was Paul Jackson Pollock, and he was born in Cody Wyoming. Little did his parents know, that little baby would soon grow up to become a great painter. People would call him one of the greatest abstract expressionists of the 20th century- some would even call him the 'cowboy artist.'

Pollock's early years were anything but easy. He didn't get much attention from his parents, his father was an abusive alcoholic, and the family moved around a lot. They moved back and forth from Wyoming to Arizona to California, but they never stayed anywhere for very long. When he was eight, his father deserted the family. His older brother, Charles, was also an

artist, and eventually became something of a second father to Pollock. His difficult childhood was hard for Pollock, who felt unloved and would do anything to feel recognized by people around him, especially his mother. He enrolled in the Manual Arts High School but had multiple disciplinary issues, and felt like a failure in art class. He couldn't draw, and he couldn't paint- at least, not the way people wanted him to. In 1930, at the age of eighteen, Pollock moved to New York City and began studying with Charles' teacher, Thomas Hart Benson.

Unfortunately, the Great Depression made it incredibly difficult for anyone to find a job. Luckily for Pollock, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the New Deal in 1935. The New Deal provided funds to many federal programs, and Pollock was able to find work painting murals for the Public Works of Art Project. Next, he worked at what would soon be known as the Guggenheim Museum as a maintenance man. By chance, Peggy Guggenheim happened to see some of Pollock's paintings and became interested in them. Pete Norman, another painter, also saw some of Jackson's work. He is claimed to have commented that it was "possibly the most original American art he had ever seen." After that, Pollock was quickly put on a contract.

However, moving to New York did not completely ease the pain of his tough childhood. Pollock was an alcoholic. He started getting treated for alcoholism in 1937 by a Jungian analyst. This particular analyst supported Pollock in pursuing his artistic career, as well as using his artwork as an outlet for his innermost emotions. This encouraged Pollock to pour out his psyche in his art with raw emotion, honesty, and vigorously. Pollock was not a good drawer or painter of realistic things. His true strength was redefining the concept of expressionism- when he made art, he *was* art.

Therapy wasn't the only thing that helped Pollock deal with his struggles. In 1941, he met and eventually married another painter by the name of Lee Krasner. However, some sources say Krasner was less of a wife and more of a guardian when it came to their marriage: Krasner largely put her own career on hold to care for Pollock and his work. They moved to a farmhouse, and Pollock managed enough sobriety to further develop his technique.

His marriage to Krasner began a period in Pollock's art typically known as the drip period. Pollock's 'studio' - actually a barn on their property - was littered with paint cans, sticks, and canvases. He would lay out a canvas on the floor and let the paint drip off his stick. It was at this point in his life that Jackson Pollock was most famous; ironically, however, he was also quite controversial. He was already very mentally unstable as it was, and the public's skeptical eye seemed to make him insecure. He looked to Krasner for encouragement, and to see whether she thought his paintings were good or not.

It worked. Pollock became wildly famous, and even those who thought he was a fraud found it hard to ignore the emerging star. Unfortunately, popularity didn't suit Pollock. His shaky mental state deteriorated further, and he found himself relapsing. Krasner tried everything to help, but it was too much for even both of them. Pollock left Krasner, so Krasner left for Paris. Pollock quit painting. Then, on the fateful night of the eleventh of August, 1956, Pollock crashed his car into a tree. He was under the influence. He died on the spot.

However tragic the circumstances of his death, Pollock lives on through his artwork still today. He used brave new techniques and methods, such as the Action Painting technique. It basically meant that his canvas wasn't just a place for something flat and two-dimensional. It was a *stage*. His paint was the dancer, and he was the choreographer. Even now, videos of

Pollock painting are nearly as mesmerizing as the end result: Pollock's determined, almost manic gaze shows how vital painting was for him. It was his life force, his anchor. In an interview, he once stated, "On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides, and literally be in the painting." He also used his famous drip method: he would take paint (normally straight from the bucket) and drip it onto the canvas with his paintbrush or even a stick or turkey baster. Sometimes he simply poured it out of the can. Seemingly random, yet intricately purposeful was his work.

It's worth mentioning that his techniques weren't really coined by Pollock himself. Instead, they were given names after his death to explain how he did what he did. Some affectionately call him 'Jack the Dripper.' As for Pollock himself, he once said, "It doesn't make much difference how the paint is put on, as long as something has been said. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement." He used fluid alkyd paint- some of the same stuff people use now to paint their cars. His paints, being enamel based, were quite viscous and fluid, making it runnier and giving him more room to work with. He explained, "Most of the paint I use is a liquid, flowing kind of paint. The brushes I use are used more as sticks rather than rushes -- the brush doesn't touch the surface of the canvas, it's just above."

The appearance of Pollock's work can be described with words such as haphazard, frantic, intense, patchy, surprising, splattered, and dripped. Some people say all of Pollock's work looks the same, but they are terribly mistake. Although some are similar, each painting, each piece has a very distinct *feeling*. If humans had the capability of seeing emotions, Jackson Pollock's paintings would look identical. Each is a message, a feeling, and sometimes even a plea. That's where Surrealism impacted Pollock: the concept of putting the messages of the

subconscious was his specialty. He was also influenced by Cubism, although, he never really included figures in his artwork. Splotches and swirls litter the canvas with no rhyme, reason, or rule. The art spoke for itself in a way I simply can't describe and do it justice.

FORMAL ANALYSIS #1: The Deep, 1953 by Jackson Pollock



Jackson Pollock was responsible for dozens of astounding works of art, too many to even look at in these few weeks I've written this essay. However, this particular painting, entitled *The Deep*, caught my eye the moment I saw it. It consists of thick, white brushstrokes closing in over a background of dark black. The white gives the impression of a cloud- no, cotton- no, it's a blur of the subconscious. Subtle hints of yellow show thinly through as if Pollock was trying to cover them up. Across the blackish green abyss, strings of white paint stretch lazily like strings of

cheese from a bit-into slice of pizza. Ambiance creeps in, and the edges of the piece are grayer, darker somehow. The more you look, the more you see. A piece of red here. The bluish undertones of this section. It just goes to show that you can never take the value of artwork at its surface. It may be two dimensional, but it's also as deep as thought itself. It's meaning is endless, and leaves us, the audience, hungry for more.

As far as elements and principles are concerned, Pollock's style makes it tough. Other artists are careful in combining colors and shapes perfectly in order to grab your eye. But Pollock? He doesn't need complementary colors or parallel lines to make you look at his stuff. Nevertheless, many principles help us 'translate' the work into more tangible ideas. For example, the element of color. The white, representing purity and joy. The blackness, immorality. Or perhaps the whiteness is oblivion and the black is the void. It is all dependent on one's personal views. Any way you interpret it, the white and black are opposites, just like the feelings they give off.

That ties in directly with the element of depth. The white-yellow comes forward, while the black-green fades back. After all, there is a reason it's called 'The Deep.' Just looking at it, I feel as though I could reach out and stick my hand into the darkness and feel the cool darkness on my fingertips. Or, if I look too long at the fluffy white, I feel as though it's closing in around me, threatening to suffocate me. Of course, discussing depth will surely lead to an analysis of the element of space. There's no denying the abstract yet almost tangible form of the puffy white and thick yellow clumps of white paint. I've said it before and I'll say it again: Pollock's work was not two dimensional. Far from it. The space shows how a painting on a flat canvas can exist

outside of spacial restraint. The negative black area contrasts so well with the positive off-white- how can anyone deny it?

Then comes the famous element called texture, which makes the white space seem inviting, fluffy, and real. The overlapping strokes look like feathers from a pillow, and the inky black is a tear in the seam. The white lines are seams, bursting apart, the threads snapped and frayed. I could touch them, and they would be soft. The cottony look is inviting, contrasting nicely with the almost disturbing eeriness of the background.

Next we move on to movement: the principle Pollock must have dearly loved. His painting was often less painting and more dancing, and so I'll argue that the way the very way each stroke was produced was the offspring of movement. It's restless. The lines frantically scurry about the canvas like they're being chased. The eye does not simply settle on a Pollock painting. They eye can simply sit back and enjoy the show. It's paintings like this one that make me realize how people in museums can stand in front of the same piece for hours, contemplating life.

And then, the principle of value. Jackson was a color enthusiast, as it is clear from his work. However, the decision to make this particular masterpiece black and white was intentional, in my opinion. The values are darker, even when it comes to the white. It isn't a true white- it has been polluted with greens, yellows, and blues. The resulting gray tones stand silent and immovable, impenetrable and threatening. The dullness is starkly contrasted with the yellow, and keeps the audience alert.

I've been looking at this painting periodically for a few weeks now, and I think I might have the tiniest taste of what Jackson Pollock had. The principles he used may not have been

entirely intentional, but they show how spiritually invested Pollock was to his art. This particular painting was painted after Pollock's decline to fame. He was desperately unstable, and it was only by Krasner's encouragement and by talking to his mother that he managed to scrounge enough sanity to create this piece. It's easy to understand, after knowing that, how the painting can feel suffocating and desperate. The darkness in Pollock's subconscious led his creation, and so the painting is raw, unfiltered emotion. It pulls you in and pushed you out. It intimidates and frightens. It intrigues. And perhaps most importantly, it expresses.

FORMAL ANALYSIS #2: Ocean Greyness, 1953 by Jackson Pollock



Ocean Greyness is yet another Pollock painting that immediately grabbed my attention. It's breathtaking. It contains a primarily gray background, highlighted by whites and lowlighted by blacks. Emerging from the stillness of the grays sprout rosebud-shaped blossoms of color-greens, yellows, red, oranges. They stick out of the canvas as if they are real flowers, blooming

despite the weary grayness of their roots. And up close, you can see the individual thin splatters and lines that, as a whole, make up the entire painting and truly make it come alive.

Jackson Pollock uses the element of color very cleverly in this piece of artwork. He pairs it with contrast, showing the difference between the tired and dull of the gray in the background and the bright, almost optimistic splash of color in the circling spirals. This is one of the few paintings of Pollock's I feel true joy while looking at. The bright colors really add a cheeriness that isn't present in much of his work.

Line is another element found in this piece. From the ultrathin splatter marks to the thick, intentional smudges of black, line directs the eye in circles and around the canvas. You might find your eyes drawn to the largest circle in the middle right- and it's because the thickest and boldest lines are located there. The smallest lines may look scratchy, but they keep the painting frantic, keeping the onlooker on his or her toes. They also add to another element, texture. The background looks like it would feel almost hairy and bumpy with all the lines going in every direction. And that's only the implied texture. In real life, this painting is actually quite bumpy, which just accentuates the feeling of three dimensions and space. The painting is named after the ocean. The coarse texture represents the rough ocean water, always moving and always gray and mysterious.

I also see a lot of shape in this masterpiece. The lines and texture help that a lot, and I can see both simple and complex shapes. There are circles, triangles, and ovals. There are heart shapes and crisscrossing trapezoids. They are there for us to interpret. For me, I see colorful rosebuds in a cold, gray field. But somebody else could interpret those same shapes in a completely different way- and that's the beauty of art.

This painting, to me, represents growing. Those rosebuds I see are blooming despite the cold gray, and they're still beautiful. In fact, the gray only makes them look more beautiful in comparison. It's such an inspirational message: that you can grow- flourish, even- no matter what the surroundings. It makes me wonder if Jackson Pollock felt hope when painting it, because it sure makes me feel hopeful.

CONCLUSION

Many see Paul Jackson Pollock as a fraud, while others see him as a true artist. Some discredit his work, while others argue it should be acclaimed. Some point out his mental weaknesses, while others point out how it aided him paint from the subconscious. No matter your opinion, it's no argument that Pollock's impact of the art world was profound. His defiance and tendency to stray from the rules led him to become one of the greatest abstract expressionists of all time. Pollock told us to look at his paintings and "look passively, and try to receive what the painting has to offer and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what they are to be looking for." For many people, Pollock has succeeded in making them do exactly that. He painted the likenesses of feelings better than anyone, and to this day is known for his unique methods and intense creations.

GRADING:

I put a lot of research, time, and thought into this essay, and I personally believe this paper is worthy of an A.

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