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ENGL 1200 – Marc Petersen

A Pollock Piece

Jackson Pollock was truly a one-of-a-kind artist. While many critics consider his works to be simple, uninteresting, and easily repeatable, many fans see him as the art genius that dared to step out of art's societal boundaries and attempted something new. Still others remain without critique or opinion and merely pass by his puzzling works. Although numerous artists have gained inspiration from the works of this original-minded individual, Pollock's initial inspiration for his successful paintings is rarely discussed. So, what could possibly have led Pollock to the creation of such bold and unusual paintings, and could there be solely one inspiration, a bundle of inspirations, or did Pollock simply throw paint onto the canvas as some viewers believe?

A natural place to begin our examination of Pollock is with his youth. Jackson Pollock, although born into a family that was almost always poor, was given several opportunities to explore his artistry. The youngest of five sons, Pollock was constantly encouraged by his mother to explore his creativity instead of living an athletic boy's childhood (Tuchman 96). He and his brothers explored their artistic possibilities and found opportunities that would allow them to excel in their artistry. As they grew in their experiences, the boys carefully chose their desired medias. Three of the boys, including Pollock, chose painting, while one moved towards landscape architecture and the other into the craft of a rotogravure etcher. Although he was born in Cody, Wyoming, he was constantly on the move throughout Arizona and California as a result of his father's failing farms. Because Pollock was the youngest of five, he had a vast knowledge of a more sophisticated world by age ten. Therefore, he became a highly intelligent young man full of knowledge and thoughts about society and its negative and

positive aspects. Unfortunately, Pollock often used his knowledge to negatively criticize his surroundings.

Eventually, Pollock landed in Los Angeles, California where he began his official artistic career at Manual Arts High. That is, until he was later “expelled for distributing a broadside attacking athletics” (Tuchman 96). After being reinstated and expelled again, Pollock moved on to new things and became interested in observing various artists through the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. He spent his time dissecting their works, observing the various shapes, curves, features, and figures (Tuchman 98). Pollock eventually, at age eighteen, moved to New York with his brothers and sought guidance and learning opportunities from many artists. He learned from a great number of people the skills of sculpting, drawing, and painting. This high school dropout possessed the intellect to move his way through the world without a question as to where he was going. While learning from and shadowing other artists in New York, he dabbled in many artistic media, but he favored painting over all.

As a young artist, Pollock sought guidance from more experienced and successful artists and critics. It is common for artists to gather ideas for their later works from mentors in their earlier years; therefore, it is no surprise that, when looking into Pollock’s past, people believe that mentor, Thomas Hart Benton, had a major effect on his unheard of artistic style. Though Pollock himself disagreed with this notion, several researchers, such as Barbara Jaffee, have made inquiries and parallels between Pollock’s style and Benton’s critical technique. However, Benton’s teachings were traditional and not at all like the rebellious style of Pollock’s most famous works. Pollock claimed that, even though Benton may have aided his growth in technique, any influence gathered was negative rather than positive (Jaffee 69). On the other hand, Jaffee suggests that Pollock, instead of simply copying Benton’s techniques, took note of

their useful measures and created his own concept. For example, Benton, in his extensive essays, explains in detail the purpose of specific procedures such as centrifugal forms, in which the “designs coerce the viewer’s eye away from the implied surfaces...necessitating the clustering rhythms into a series of loosely interwoven sets” (Jaffee 71). Pollock created a highly similar design in each of his abstract works through a rhythmic pattern that, at first glance, looks random and careless. Not only was Benton Pollock’s personal mentor, but also he took Pollock in as a member of his family after teaching him for a while. Pollock even began living on their property at one point when he “converted a former chicken coop into ‘Jack's shack’--his own studio” (Tuchman 99). Pollock was a successful student and listened intently to his mentor, even if he failed to agree with the extremely traditional aspects of Benton’s teachings. Although Pollock considered Benton’s techniques to be too traditional, it is possible that he took what he learned from the teachings and subconsciously used Benton’s methods in his now famous works of art.

On the other hand, Pollock, with the creation of his works, became part of a growing group of Abstract Expressionists in the mid-1940s. This cluster of people took an interest in portraying post-war glamorization through their individual works of art. In fact, “the whole Abstract Expressionist era can become a fantasy vision of the creative life, a glorious combination of quirky individualism, dangerous exploits, and establishment success” (Perl 41). These artists strove to portray ideas rather than objects with the use of bold or solid shapes that instantly drew attention to the work as a whole. As mentioned in Jed Perl’s article on the development of Abstract Expressionism, “These artists began to paint with an all-in-one impact in mind [which] spawned an all-in-one way of thinking and talking about art” (41). The creation of art seemed to be becoming less about analyzing the perfection or plan of a work, but rather an

eye-opener designed to catch the viewer's interest and attention through methods never approached before. These novel and noticeably independent paintings with large masses of one single shape or a collection of shapes containing no evident subject, Perl states, became "an attractive way of turning a painting into a one-track soliloquy performed on a virtually empty stage" (42). As a result of such a wide range of people participating in the growing Abstract Expressionism movement, many artists worked hard to stand out among their fellow Abstract Expressionists. Competition arose in the most unlikely of ways between like-minded artists, leaving somewhat of a harsh or joyful personal and mental critique in comparison to the other artists' work. Pollock, as an emerging artist during this period, could certainly have followed the influence of his surrounding artists in the race to constantly produce more appealing works than the others.

In contrast to the Benton influence and the pressure of the Abstract Expressionist movement, some critics believe Pollock simply painted in a way that portrayed natural disorder. For instance, professor Richard Taylor broke down the individual elements of Pollock's painting and argued that his methods were inadvertently based around a set of fractals, "patterns that recur on finer and finer magnification, building up shapes of immense complexity" (Fractal analysis of Pollock's drip paintings 1). Taylor studied Pollock's many works in order to support his theory of nature as an influence and resulted in additional in-depth examples of fractal dimension throughout each piece. In full confidence, Taylor states that Pollock's pattern highly resembles a fractal dimension in its ability to repeat line structure in a disorderly manner and occupy canvas, as opposed to Euclidean shapes, which are more simply laid out (Fractal 1). Taylor also tested the differing elements between non-Pollock and Pollock paintings in order to confirm his proposition that nature truly was Pollock's influence. He noticed that non-Pollocks did not have

a continuous pattern size, thus making them not fractal, which supported his case. His whole idea was that, because Pollock was a one-of-a-kind artist, he was the only person able to create patterns that could somehow reflect the fractal dimensions that are apparent all throughout nature and its intriguing disorder.

Contrary to what Taylor proposed, researcher Katherine Jones-Smith runs several studies to refute the belief that fractals are only found in Pollock's original paintings (E9). She claims, "There are insufficient data to determine directly whether Pollock's motion while painting constituted a fractal trail" (Jones-Smith E9). A heated debate, through the use of published articles, forms between the two reviewers, who are both scientists. Taylor eventually agrees with Jones-Smith, proclaiming "scientific objectivity proves to be an essential tool for determining the fundamental content of the abstract paintings produced by Jackson Pollock in the late 1940s" (Fractal 422). His retraction in support of Jones-Smith's idea allows Pollock's audience to understand that the artist's artworks may have contained a pattern of natural disorder through fractal dimension, but that the idea of fractals was not only able to be found in Pollock originals because similar renderings of his works also contained the same dimensions.

Similar to Taylor and Jones-Smith's fractal suggestion, author and *Smithsonian Magazine* writer Henry Adams declares that Jackson Pollock purposely inserted words or a hidden signature within his naturally disordered pieces. Adams, upon the discovery of a possible hidden "JACKSON" lining the top with a "POLLOCK" below it, vows that Pollock must have written his name "in large letters on the canvas and arranged the whole painting around his name" (58). When scanning a Pollock painting with the naked eye, evidence of a potentially natural disorder technique is prevalent; yet, the possibility of fully random collection of splatters and marks remains feasible as well. Professors of Boston College, Claude Cemuschi and Andizej

Herczynski are believers of just that. They share the literal process of Pollock's painting methods and give credit of the artistic layout to gravity, saying, "Pouring, after all, is impossible without gravitational force" (Cemuschi and Heczynski 617). For these two professors, it is obvious that Pollock simply invented a concept and found the most probable manner to tackle it effectively. Considering the fact that no understandable pattern or structure remains present within the work, numerous viewers tend to think that no further thought is intended or necessary about the work. Although Cemuschi and Heczynski allow for careful analysis of the technique and study each stroke on the canvas, a large number of the audience overlook Pollock's paintings because of their outward simplicity. However, the reason most viewers believe that Pollock's paintings are merely sloshed or splattered is because they fail to pause and examine the curves and turns of each line and shape. Without further examination, the viewer is unable to fully comprehend the vast detail within each piece. It is possible that Jackson Pollock plainly threw paint onto a canvas layer upon layer with a similar technique each time around, but the likelihood of a specific stimulation and method is more plausible.

In contrast, a common suggestion for Pollock's inspiration comes from an idea of the striving artist: poor, constantly finding new things to work on, unsatisfied, depressed, and with a drinking or drug problem. Keeping these aspects in mind, the positive events of an artist's life are rarely mentioned because the negative ones are said to have such a great impact on the artist's work. Pollock may have been a highly intelligent man with his fair share of extraordinary life stories and opportunities, but he was still dealing with the typical trials that any artist must face, such as poverty, failure, and rejection. Most of all, he was constantly facing a problem with alcoholism and depression. As with any artist, it is possible that such a state could have led him to numerous eye-capturing masterpieces. However, it also led him to his death

when he crashed his car into a tree while in a drunken state, killing himself and a young woman in the passenger's seat. Many Pollock viewers believe that he simply flung his paints on the canvas-covered floor in a drunken rage with his ever-present, half-gone cigarette poking out of his mouth. However, the thoughts of such people are easily proved unrealistic once one comes across videos of Pollock's approach and technique as he methodically flings his paints from the bucket to his canvas. In these videos, the artist remains calm and inquisitive as he performs the swinging and shaking motions of his arm. His focus puts him in somewhat of a trance, and he begins a sort of dance around the canvas as he swiftly flings the paint around. Furthermore, with the intensely large number of layers placed on each of his paintings, Pollock must have immense patience to repeatedly lob splashes of color onto a previously white or cream-colored surface. After reviewing Pollock's careful technique, it is clear that he could not have created these pieces while in an unclear state of mind.

After examining several possibilities for Jackson Pollock's overall inspiration, not one subject seems absolute. Each suggestion on its own, besides the lack of a single inspiration, holds a strong case and includes a significant attachment to Pollock's past or present. In fact, each option could even merge right into the other, much like a flowing timeline of Pollock's growth and success. The thought of Thomas Hart Benton certainly remains a possibility considering his primary influence as Pollock's teacher and art mentor, not to mention the fact that, as a result of Benton's strict traditionalism, Pollock may have been more rebellious, therefore feeling the need to move in the opposite direction from his teacher. He becomes able to express his desired rebellion with the new era of Abstract Expressionism, in which he soon feels the pressure to remain extraordinary amidst an array of growing Abstract Expressionists who seem to be popping up everywhere. In terms of the seeking of fractal dimension and nature,

“during Pollock’s era, nature was assumed to be disordered, operating essentially randomly,” (Order in Pollock’s Chaos) therefore, natural disorder may have been encouraged in the subgroup of Abstract Expressionists. Within the same category, the possibility of hidden words and a signature is not entirely far-fetched. Pollock’s works contain randomness between shapes, lines, colors and strokes, so the insertion of his own signature is actually a clever design. Even so, suggesting that words or a hidden signature are included in every canvas is most likely not the case, but it could be truthful. Nevertheless, not enough evidence has been found to prove that a name could be placed in each painting.

Clearly, Jackson Pollock has left a mystery behind for the rest of the world who has any interest to solve it. Either that, or he had no desire to reveal his inspiration, hence the reason it was hardly spoken about while he was still present. Maybe he even left his own inspiration hidden inside the splotched layers of his paintings. Perhaps one day a secret document will be found revealing all of Pollock’s inner thoughts and purposes for each puzzling act over the course of his years. Then again, maybe Pollock did not want his viewers to know his purpose for creating each piece, so as to allow for an exploration of various, and possibly contrasting, ideas in the thoughts of each viewer. If so, Pollock most certainly succeeded in a quest to keep the minds of his viewers and fans active and thoughtful. In fact, the majority of the population, at least those aware of at least minimal artistic background, if they have not heard of Jackson Pollock or know who he is, they are at least familiar with his style of painting. Nonetheless, Jackson Pollock, whether he had an inspiration or not, created an interesting collection of paintings that have given their own inspiration to young aspiring artists over the years. This great artist, even if his thoughts and productions are never understood, has certainly made an impact on our individualist-seeking society.

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