

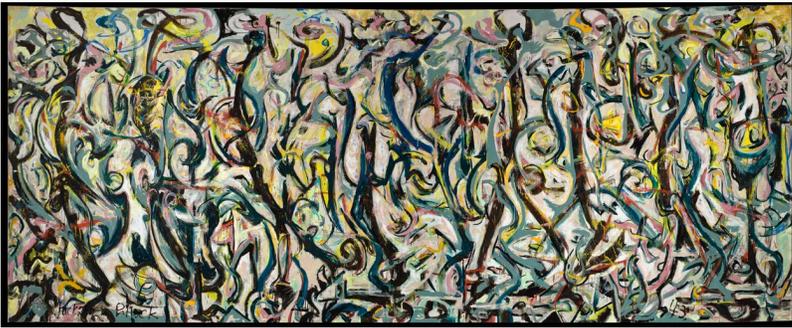
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MASTERPIECE

On the Road to Abstraction

Jackson Pollock's 'Mural' is a bridge from his representational to his radical work.



'Mural' (1943), by Jackson Pollock

PHOTO: THE POLLOCK-KRASNER FOUNDATION/ARS, NEW YORK

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Jackson Pollock's "Mural" (1943) is a starter kit for understanding abstract art. Pollock didn't adopt his signature drip style overnight; he arrived at it in small steps. Currently on view at New York's Guggenheim Museum through Sept. 19, 2021, "Mural" is poised between the figuration of his early years and the groundbreaking abstraction of his later ones.

Despite his later radicalism, Pollock's origins were modest and his training traditional. Born in 1912 on a farm in Cody, Wyo., the youngest of five, he followed his older brother Charles to New York, where he studied at the Art Students League with Thomas Hart Benton. Benton was one of the leading painters of the day, specializing in rural scenes and landscapes that featured strong colors and dynamic, curving brushstrokes.

In the decade leading up to "Mural," Pollock was making small canvases depicting country scenes in the manner of Benton, with titles like "Going West" (1934-35) and "Cotton Pickers" (1935), featuring the same landscapes as his teacher. Four years after

“Mural,” Pollock would abandon representation and embrace pure line, flung across a large expanse of canvas laid out on the floor of his studio. (His process was captured by photographer Hans Namuth in his famous short film from 1950.) In paintings such as “One: Number 31, 1950” the viewer may see a seething sea or storm, but any associations are the ones you bring to it. All references to the visible world are gone. “Mural” sits in the period between these two extremes.

The largest painting Pollock ever made, “Mural” is almost 20 feet wide and 8 feet high, made on commission for the entry foyer of Peggy Guggenheim’s New York apartment. A calligraphic web of black lines provides the scaffolding for a raucous parade across its surface. Abstraction comes from the Latin verb meaning “to take away,” and it often helps to know what is being taken away. In “Mural,” you can still see the figure, both in the spindly, calligraphic black lines and in the fleshy knobs of pink and white, but at the same time Pollock is saying goodbye to all this, like so much baggage of art history he no longer needs. At first it seems to be a painting made up entirely of lines. But the more you look, it seems he has made figures out of the voids as well. Are the figures the black calligraphic strokes? Or the pink lumps in between? Or both, skeletal structure and the flesh around it?

Pollock himself described the painting as “a stampede...[of] every animal in the American West, cows and horses and antelopes and buffaloes. Everything is charging across that goddamn surface.” It was as if Pollock had hurled a firebomb into the center of one of the staid western scenes he made in his youth and captured the action as the animals made a run for it. In place of the browns and greens of his landscape paintings, his palette proclaims its distance from the natural world: Pepto-Bismol pink, hospital-scrub green, acid yellow.

The best way to look at the painting is to keep moving, across the long surface, in time with the figures, or up and back, mimicking the steps Guggenheim and her guests must have made. The architectural scale of “Mural” evokes Italian fresco painting, while its

energy and density call to mind Renaissance works such as Uccello's "Battle of San Romano" series (at the Uffizi, the National Gallery, London and the Louvre) and Michelangelo in his "Battle of the Centaurs" (at the Casa Buonarroti).

When Peggy Guggenheim moved to Venice in 1947, she first sent the painting to Yale University, where the conservatively trained students showed little interest. Next she offered it as a gift to the University of Iowa's art department and its forward-thinking chairman, Lester Longman, who had seen the painting in her Manhattan apartment. Longman installed the work in the mural-painting studio, a direct affront to Grant Wood, who had been teaching in his regionalist way. The painting was meant to nudge art students to push boundaries—part of what became known as the "Iowa idea," that universities should be a site not just for experimentation in the sciences but in the arts. "Mural" was the anchor of a distinguished collection at the University of Iowa Art Museum until the calamitous floods of 2008 forced all works of art to be moved off site. Following the rejection of a university regent's imprudent proposal to sell "Mural" to pay for flood damage, the painting was sent to the Getty Institute for conservation and has since traveled widely while the University of Iowa builds a new home for it.

"Mural" brings you abstraction in action, documenting exactly when and how Pollock turned away from figuration. If you are an abstraction skeptic, prepare for a conversion experience.

—*Ms. Brothers is an associate professor at Northeastern University and the author of "Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture" (Yale).*

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