



Jackson Pollock: *Mural*

July 12, 2014 – April 1, 2015

Director's Comments

It is unusual for an exhibition to feature a single work of art. An artwork that deserves this special status is Jackson Pollock's famous large scale painting, *Mural*. The painting initially commissioned as a mural, thus the name, was painted for Peggy Guggenheim in 1943, and donated to the University of Iowa in the early 1950s.

Pollock's iconic painting is considered to have opened the door to Abstract Expressionism, the first American art movement that garnered international attention, and can be said to have helped shift the attention of the art world from Paris to New York.

In addition to the importance of the artwork, Pollock and Guggenheim were larger than life characters. Guggenheim's father perished on the Titanic, leaving Peggy with a fortune. Fascinated with artists and art, she set out to build a collection with advice along the way by some of the most storied figures in art history. In addition to collecting, Peggy founded and operated two contemporary art galleries, first in London and then in New York City.

Guggenheim signed Pollock, whom she was initially unsure of, to her New York City gallery, Art of This Century, and provided him with a monthly stipend against sales, even lending Pollock and his wife, Lee Krasner, funds to purchase a modest house on Long Island with an adjacent barn in which he could work.

While Guggenheim championed many cutting edge artists of her time, Pollock is the most famous, crossing over from the art world into popular culture when he was featured in *Life* magazine in the 1949. While Pollock died in an automobile accident in 1956, his popular culture celebrity has continued, and added to with a recent mainstream movie on his life titled *Pollock*.

Pollock's wife, the artist Lee Krasner who placed her own career on hold to promote Pollock and take care of him (he struggled with alcoholism), is now also recognized as an important artist. While both Jackson and Lee struggled financially during Jackson's life-time, after his death Lee managed the estate and created and left the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, with an endowment of over \$20,000,000 to help struggling and under-recognized artists.

Jackson Pollock's *Mural* is part of the University of Iowa Art Museum's *Legacies for Iowa: A University of Iowa Collections Sharing Project*. As part of the *Sharing Project* the University does not charge a rental fee for the loan of *Mural*. But due to the extra costs required by increased security and insurance, as well as facility modifications, shipping and additional expertise, the Art Center Association of Sioux City had to



Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner in front of his work, ca. 1950 / Wilfrid Zogbaum, photographer. Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

raise \$250,000 to make the project possible. The Association accomplished this goal through significant support from the Gilchrist Foundation and Blockbuster III Partners, a group of individuals, businesses and foundations whose pledges underwrite and promote major exhibitions and acquisitions of art for the Art Center's Permanent Collection.

Al Harris-Fernandez
Sioux City Art Center, Director



Blockbuster III Partners



SUPPORTED BY THE MATTHEW BUCKSBAUM FAMILY

A University of Iowa Museum of Art Collections Sharing Project

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY ROY AND DEBORAH ZETTLER



Jackson Pollock: Before *Mural*

Jackson Pollock was born on January 28, 1912, in Cody, Wyoming. Both his parents were natives of the small town of Tingley, Iowa. Jackson and his four older brothers moved continually with their parents, living most of their childhoods primarily in Arizona and California. Like many of his brothers, he showed an interest in art as a boy, but he struggled in school and eventually dropped out of high school without graduating.

In 1930, he traveled to New York City with two of his brothers, Frank, who was studying at Columbia University, and Charles, who was studying at the Art Students League. Pollock began taking classes taught by Thomas Hart Benton at the Art Students League, who was on his way to becoming one of the country's best-known artists and muralists. Benton also became a strong, fatherly figure in Pollock's life until Benton moved to Kansas City in 1935. Pollock and Benton gravitated toward each other as "outsiders" in New York. Pollock admired Benton's intensity, his physical manner of creating art, and his compositional devices of creating curves that were grounded by strong verticals.

The 1930s and the years of World War II, though times of great struggle, also were times of new and powerful creative energies. New York was the home of much of this creativity and Pollock was able to experience a great variety of ideas, techniques, and styles. In addition to watching Benton paint both easel paintings and murals, Pollock watched the three great Mexican muralists working in the United States—José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—create mural projects. Orozco inspired Pollock to look back to the spirit of Native American art as Orozco looked to Pre-Columbian art. Pollock studied the spiritual beliefs and mythologies of Native Americans, and admired their artworks, including their vibrant sand paintings that they created directly on the floor during an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Siqueiros encouraged Pollock to embrace experimental techniques, such as airbrushing and paint dripping. Pollock would also explore many other mediums and materials, including stone carving, clay modeling and pottery, metal relief bowls and plaques, and printmaking.

This time period was also a time when the great European artists of the time were either coming to the United States to escape the growing threats of war or sending their work to the United States for major exhibitions. The Museum of Modern Art displayed a massive exhibition of Pablo Picasso's work in 1939, an exhibition that Pollock visited many times with his sketchbook. He also viewed a large exhibition of the work of Joan Miró in 1941. Miró, with his playful and unusual, abstracted forms, and Picasso, with his forceful paintings inspired by



Jackson Pollock, 1928 / unidentified photographer. Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

non-Western art, were the two artists most revered by Pollock. Meanwhile, Pollock was introduced directly to the ideas of the Surrealists through the artist Roberto Matta Echaurren, known simply as Matta. Matta had arrived in New York in late 1938 after fleeing Europe. By 1942, he was teaching a small group of young American artists, Pollock included, to allow their unconscious minds to work automatically.

The Creation of *Mural*

During the late 1930s, Peggy Guggenheim became one of the strongest supporters of contemporary European artists. After operating a gallery in London, she moved to Paris, where she continued adding to her collection of contemporary art right up until the Nazi invasion. Guggenheim fled Paris and, after moving around France and Switzerland for a year, was finally able to reach the United States in July 1941. Once settled in New York, she decided to continue the project she had begun in London—establish a museum devoted to contemporary art. She leased space at 30 West 57th Street, just a few blocks from The Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (a museum later renamed for its founder, Peggy's uncle Solomon R. Guggenheim).



Pollock's paintings were beginning to attract the eyes of critics, gallery owners, and curators. His participation in a January 1942 exhibition brought Pollock to the attention of artist Lee Krasner. Krasner was a well-established artist in New York. As the two of them began their relationship, she helped introduce Pollock to her circle of friends and supporters. This led to a studio visit from James Johnson Sweeney, the curator at the Museum of Modern Art. After the visit, Sweeney recommended to Guggenheim that she pay Pollock a visit. She did not visit his studio for more than a year.

Guggenheim opened her space, called Art of This Century, on October 20, 1942. It served as both a museum setting for European artists and also a commercial gallery for young Americans. In April 1943, Art of This Century presented the first exhibition of collage in the United States, combining well-known European artists with Americans such as Pollock, Robert Motherwell, and Joseph Cornell. Pollock was then selected for the *Spring Salon for Young Artists*,

which opened in May 1943. Though Guggenheim is reported to have been initially not impressed with Pollock's work, Piet Mondrian and other well-established artists on the selection committee were. In his review of the *Spring Salon*, art critic Clement Greenberg wrote, "There is a large painting by Jackson Pollock, which, I am told, made the jury starry-eyed."¹

With everyone from artists and museum curators to her own advisors urging Guggenheim to present an exhibition of Pollock's work, she signed him to an annual contract that paid him a monthly stipend, scheduled an exhibition of his work in November 1943, and commissioned him to paint a mural for the entry hall of her 155 East 61st Street townhouse. All were risks on her part. She had never granted a one-person exhibition to an American. And, though Pollock had taken mural classes, had studied many great murals, and had participated in group projects, he had not created one of his own. In fact, other than a few wild experiments in his own apartment, he had not yet painted



Jackson Pollock (American, 1912 – 1956), *Mural*, 1943. Oil and casein on canvas, 95-5/8" x 237-3/4". Gift of Peggy Guggenheim, 1959.6, University of Iowa Museum of Art. Reproduced with the permission of The University of Iowa.

anything on a large scale. Marcel Duchamp convinced Guggenheim that she should have Pollock work on a large canvas rather than paint directly on the wall. This would make it easier to remove.

The canvas was so large that Pollock had to tear down a wall in his apartment to make room. That was the easy part. The hard part was painting something so large for the home of one of the most important clients in New York. He had not at that point completed any painting much larger than 4 x 6 feet. Legends have abounded about Pollock's completion of *Mural*. Lee Krasner had suggested that he went weeks or months without painting anything and then suddenly completed it in one overnight burst of creative energy. Some declared that he took so long to paint *Mural* that he went months past Guggenheim's deadline of November 1943. Guggenheim once described a problem with the installation of *Mural* in her townhouse that resulted in a portion of the canvas being cut off. Another recent suggestion is that the composition is primarily the name "Jackson Pollock" written upside down.

In fact, these legends are, for the most part, untrue. Recent analysis of the painting at The J. Paul Getty Museum has revealed that, while much of the initial painting might have been done in a relatively short time, there were several additional periods of painting requiring weeks to complete.² We also know from correspondence that the painting was installed in Guggenheim's townhouse in time for a November party.³ The Getty confirmed the findings of the Museum of Modern Art in 1998 that the painting was not trimmed.⁴ And The Getty's painting analysis has shown that the apparent formation of the letters of his name was not the basis for his composition.⁵ The Getty's research has shown, though, that small portions of *Mural* were created through "spattering" or throwing the paint at the canvas using a brush.⁶

So what is *Mural*? If we take Pollock at his word, "It was a stampede... [of] every animal in the American West, cows and horses and antelopes and buffaloes. Everything is charging across that goddamn surface." Whatever figures or animals viewers might find, what made *Mural* such a

distinctive painting has little to do with what Pollock might have been representing. A mural without a clear narrative that filled the edges of the space evenly with lines and shapes was unique. It has the bold lines of Picasso, the playful colors of Miró, and the vitality of Benton. It combines the spontaneity of Surrealism with aggressiveness of Expressionism. As it became more widely known, *Mural* became a new standard for American artists, in terms of its scale, abstraction, and energy. These characteristics of *Mural* would anticipate by several years what would become known as Abstract Expressionism. For this reason, *Mural* is considered to be one of the most important paintings produced by an American in the 20th century.

Jackson Pollock: After the Completion of *Mural*

Mural was seen by many people after it was installed. Guggenheim was an extraordinary entertainer and became very well connected within New York art circles. But it first received attention in the press after Pollock's second exhibition at Art of This Century. Guggenheim opened her doors to visitors after the exhibition reception. It was this exhibition that led Clement Greenberg, perhaps the most influential art critic of the mid-20th century, to declare that Pollock was "the strongest painter of his generation and, perhaps the greatest one to appear since Miró."⁷ While also reviewing this exhibition, Manny Farber of *The New Republic* wrote the most extensive review of *Mural* at that time:

*The mural is voluminously detailed with swirling line and form, painted spontaneously and seemingly without preliminary sketch, and is, I think, an almost incredible success. It is violent in its expression, endlessly fascinating in detail, without superficiality, so well ordered that it composes the wall in a quiet, contained, buoyant way. Pollock's aim in painting seems to be to express feeling that ranges from pleasant enthusiasm through wildness to explosiveness, as purely and as well as possible.*⁸

Pollock and Krasner married in the fall of 1945 and move from the city to Long Island. Pollock's paintings, which had still maintained some semblance of figuration, began to become more about color and line and less about recognizable forms. In 1947, he began creating paintings that had the level of abstraction of *Mural*, but were produced purely through dripping the paint on the canvas while it lay on the floor of the barn he used as his studio. Over the next few years, these paintings increased in size to the point that some rivaled the size of *Mural*.



Peggy Guggenheim and Jackson Pollock in front of Pollock's *Mural* (1943), first-floor entrance hall, 155 East Sixty-First Street, New York, ca. 1946. Other works shown: unidentified David Hare sculpture (partially visible, foreground). Photograph by George Karger, courtesy of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

In the spring of 1947, *Mural* was removed from Guggenheim's townhouse and included in a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art titled *Large Scale Modern Paintings*. Shown with important paintings by established European artists such as Picasso and Léger, it affirmed Pollock's ability to rival the best artists of the century. *Mural* would travel to Yale University following this exhibition, coinciding with Guggenheim's permanent return to Europe. In 1948, Guggenheim contacted the art department at the University of Iowa to offer *Mural* as a donation. After the logistics were worked out, the painting traveled to the University of Iowa in 1951.

During the years between Guggenheim's initial offer to the University of Iowa and *Mural's* arrival on campus, Pollock's fame rose to a stunning new level. In August 1949, *Life* magazine published a well-illustrated article titled, "Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?" The article was inspired by some of the recent writings of

Clement Greenberg, who had claimed that “Pollock will in time be able to compete for recognition as the greatest American painter of the twentieth century”⁹ and “is one of the major painters of our time.”¹⁰ While the *Life* article might have been intended to poke fun at Pollock and contemporary art in general, it struck a nerve: the article led to 532 letters to the editor, more than any other *Life* article of 1949.¹¹

Over the next few years, Pollock remained the most well-known and highly regarded artist in the country. In 1951, he began to shift his style back to one that was less colorful and more figurative. The paintings continued to be acclaimed. However, as his success continued, Pollock began to lose his battle with alcoholism. In 1953, his productivity began to slow down and by 1955 he had virtually stopped painting. Though he traveled into New York City regularly to see a therapist, these trips also led to visits to the Cedar Tavern, a popular hangout for artists, where younger artists would vie for the opportunity to buy Pollock a drink.

On August 11, 1956, while Krasner was in Europe, Pollock was killed when he drove off the road into a tree. His mistress, Ruth Kligman, survived, but a friend of hers in the car did not. Later that year, the Museum of Modern Art opened what they had planned as a mid-career exhibition of Pollock’s work. Instead, the exhibition was presented as a memorial retrospective.

At the time of Pollock’s death, his impact on contemporary art was undeniable. Pollock served as the unofficial leader of movements and groups such as Abstract Expressionism, Action Painting, and the New York School. These came to define much of the art produced during the 1950s and were the first instance of Americans leading Europeans in the production of avant-garde art.

Pollock had provided the impetus for these changes when his first exhibition of “drip” paintings was displayed in early 1948. These ultimately led to the publication of the article in *Life* magazine. A few months after this article, Pollock had his second exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery. Fellow artists such as Willem de Kooning noted the large, well-dressed crowd at the reception. Artist Milt Resnick turned to de Kooning and asked, “What’s going on here?” De Kooning is said to have replied, “Look around. These are the big shots. Jackson has broken the ice.”¹²

Following Pollock’s example, the scale and boldness of art produced by other American artists increased, leading to the art world to notice that something genuinely new was taking place among New York artists. However, *Mural* had preceded the rise of Abstract Expressionism by several years. Though it was painted with little of Pollock’s trademark



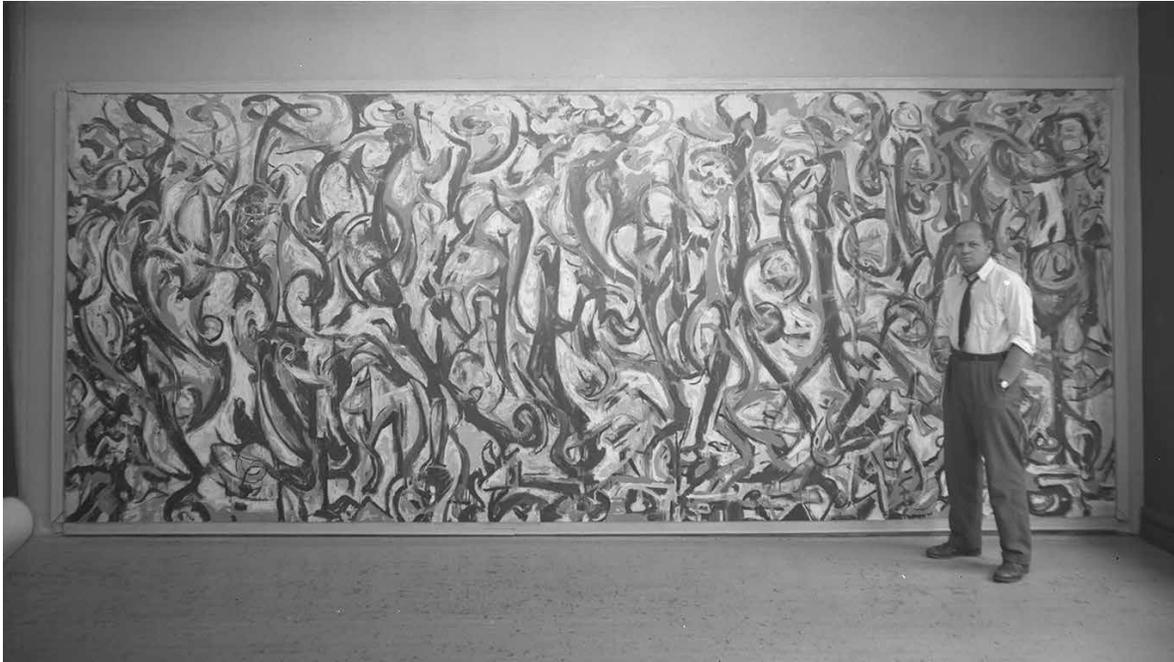
Jackson Pollock working on a painting, 1950 / Rudy Burckhardt, photographer. Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

drip style, his success with *Mural* gave him the confidence to work at a monumental scale again once he had mastered his drip technique. It was the completion of *Mural* that would lead to the entire reshaping of art in the United States.

Todd Behrens
Sioux City Art Center, Curator

Notes

1. Clement Greenberg, review in *The Nation*, May 29, 1943, quoted in Karole P. B. Vail, *Peggy Guggenheim: A Celebration* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), p. 62.
2. Yvonne Szafran, Laura Rivers, Alan Phenix, and Tom Learner, *Jackson Pollock’s Mural: The Transitional Moment*, p. 35.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
4. *Ibid.*, 68.
5. Christopher Knight, *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 2014, “Is Jackson Pollock’s Name Hidden in ‘Mural’?”; quoting Yvonne Szafran: “We knew about the proposal but found no evidence supporting it.”
6. Szafran, Rivers, Phenix, and Learner, p. 43.
7. Clement Greenberg, “Art,” in *The Nation*, April 7, 1945, quoted in Pepe Karmel, ed., *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), p. 52.
8. Manny Farber, “Jackson Pollock,” in *The New Republic*, June 25, 1945, quoted in Karmel, p. 53.
9. Greenberg, “Art,” in *The Nation*, January 24, 1948, quoted in Karmel, p. 59.
10. Greenberg, “Art,” in *The Nation*, February 19, 1949, quoted in Karmel, p. 62.
11. Ellen G. Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), p. 181, citing information from Robert W. Elson, *The World of Time Inc: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise*, ed. By Duncan Norton-Taylor, vol. 2, (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 422, n. 8.
12. Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *de Kooning: an American master* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), p. 292.



cover:

Jackson Pollock with the unpainted canvas for *Mural*, in his Eighth Street apartment, New York, 1943. Photograph by Bernard Schardt, courtesy Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, NY.

back cover:

Jackson Pollock with *Mural*, 1947. Photograph by Herbert Matter, courtesy Stanford University Libraries, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Palo Alto, CA. © Estate of Herbert Matter.



Blockbuster III Partners



LEGACIES for IOWA
SUPPORTED BY THE MATTHEW BILSKANIG FAMILY



THE UNIVERSITY
OF IOWA

A University of Iowa Museum of Art Collections Sharing Program
ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY BOB AND DEBORAH ZATLER

Blockbuster III Partners:

Principal Sponsor Gilchrist Foundation **Founding Sponsor** Charese Yanney **Patron Sponsor** Persinger Family Foundation **Champion Sponsor** Security National Bank **Benefactor Sponsor** Klinger Companies, Inc. **Investor Sponsor** Anonymous • Regina Roth **Supporting Sponsor** Richard C. Brown Jr., MD & Aaron H. Beutler • Chesterman Company • Rick & Regis Garvey • Gerkin Windows & Doors • Tigger & Irving Jensen Trust • MidAmerican Energy Company • Tegra Corporation • Thompson Electric Company • Wells Fargo Bank **Contributing Sponsor** Dennis Mahr



All exhibitions and programs are supported, in part, by a grant from the Iowa Arts Council, a division of the Department of Cultural Affairs, and the National Endowment for the Arts; the Art Center Association of Sioux City, and the City of Sioux City.