

Jackson Pollock's *Mural*

In the spring of 1943, a thirty-one-year-old artist named Jackson Pollock submitted a painting titled *Stenographic Figure* to a juried show at Art of This Century, a new gallery in Manhattan run by collector and patron Peggy Guggenheim. Artists Piet Mondrian and Marcel Duchamp, who helped judge the show, urged Guggenheim to pay attention to the newcomer. Within the year she had not only awarded him a solo show at her gallery but had also commissioned him to paint a mural for the long, narrow entrance hallway of her New York town house on East Sixty-First Street.

Painted in the summer of 1943 in Pollock's downtown apartment (after he had torn out a wall to make room for the canvas) and installed in Guggenheim's town house by early November, *Mural* stands as one of Pollock's greatest, and largest, achievements. It would be three years before he hit on his technique of dripping and pouring paint onto a canvas laid flat, but *Mural* looks ahead to those works in its remarkable energy, filling the canvas evenly from end to end with a frieze of slashing strokes. While some

viewers have seen figures or stampeding animals in the painting, or even Pollock's first name, its gestural brushwork suggests nothing so much as the dancelike action of the painter himself.

Guggenheim gave the work to the University of Iowa in 1951 after a move to Venice forced her to part with it. The 2008 flood in Iowa severely damaged the university's art museum, but the collection was saved. *Mural* was sent to the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles in 2012 for two years of analysis and long-needed treatment. The painting was cleaned, a layer of discolored varnish from 1973 was removed, and the canvas was restretched to address sagging. Today the painting's vibrant colors and subtle variations of matte and gloss have been restored,



Stenographic Figure by Jackson Pollock, c. 1942, oil on linen, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Bareiss Fund. © 2017 Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

and we understand much more about how Pollock painted *Mural*—a breakthrough painting that launched a great career.

All the works of art on view are by Jackson Pollock and, unless otherwise noted, are from the collection of the National Gallery of Art.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington

I intend to paint large movable pictures which will function between the easel and mural. I have set a precedent in this genre in a large painting for Miss Peggy Guggenheim which was installed in her house....I believe the easel picture to be a dying form, and the tendency of modern feeling is towards the wall picture or mural.

— Jackson Pollock, 1947

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE POLLOCK TO PAINT *MURAL*?

The painter Lee Krasner recalled that her husband, Jackson Pollock, painted *Mural* overnight, and this story has often been repeated, as in Peggy Guggenheim's autobiographies. However, Pollock himself, in a letter to his brother Frank in 1944, wrote that he painted the work "during the summer" of 1943. The material evidence tends to support Pollock's version: oil paint typically takes several days to dry, and much of the paint on *Mural* was applied over areas of oil paint that had already dried.

Nevertheless, careful examination has revealed four colors—lemon yellow, dark teal, red, and dark brown—that appear to be the first paints applied to the canvas. Each of these colors was heavily thinned with solvent and brushed on rapidly while the others were still wet. It is likely that the four colors were applied across much of the painting's surface. Perhaps it was this initial activity that resulted in the story of *Mural* being painted overnight.



Pollock standing in front of the mural, photograph by Herbert Matter. Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries

HOW DID POLLOCK APPLY THE PAINT?

Mural is an intricate composite of brushstrokes, splatters, smears, and dabs. Most paints were clearly applied by brush with the canvas upright: where paint shows evidence of flow after application, such as drips, they are always in the downward direction.

Some of the splatters—in particular, the stringy pink color—resemble Pollock's later "drip" paintings, for which he placed the canvas flat on the studio floor. These applications, however, have been shown by experiment to be perfectly reproducible with the canvas upright and the paint transferred to the surface from a brush with a vigorous flick of the wrist. This combination of quickly applied but controlled brushed paint and more accidental thrown paint is seen across much of *Mural*. The paints themselves are by and large traditional oil colors used by artists—not the house paint and other commercial products that Pollock would experiment with in his classic drip paintings.

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM

The Patron

On June 14, 1940, Nazi troops marched into Paris, where Peggy Guggenheim (American, 1898–1979) had hoped to start a gallery. Just days before, she had fled with her art collection, first to the South of France and then to Switzerland, eventually catching a freighter for New York City. In October of 1942, she opened Art of This Century, a gallery of contemporary European and American art at 30 West Fifty-Seventh Street, a few blocks from her uncle's museum



Peggy Guggenheim and Jackson Pollock in front of Pollock's *Mural* (1942) in the first-floor entrance hall of Guggenheim's residence, 35 East Sixty-First Street, New York, about 1946. Other work shows unidentified David Hare sculpture (partially visible, foreground). Photo: George Karger, courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives, New York.

of modern and abstract art (today the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum). There she mounted fifty-five avant-garde exhibitions, including several shows of work by Jackson Pollock. Five years later she closed the gallery and returned to Europe, eventually occupying the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni on the Grand Canal in Venice, where her collection can be seen by the public today.

Favoring surrealism, abstraction, and Dada, Guggenheim was a voracious collector—in the six months before the Nazis occupied Paris, she acquired seventy-three works of art. Her collection had more than doubled by the time she returned to Europe. In addition to those by modern European artists, she now owned works by Americans she had shown at her short-lived New York gallery. Guggenheim gave many of these to museums across the United States, and Pollock's *Mural* was among several donated to the University of Iowa.

JACKSON POLLOCK

The Artist

Born in Wyoming, Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956) was one of five boys (three of whom became artists). His itinerant family lived in Phoenix, Arizona, and throughout California, finally settling in Los Angeles, where Pollock attended Manual Arts High School. In 1930 he moved to New York City and enrolled in Thomas Hart Benton's classes at the Art Students League, where he learned about painting both easel pictures and



Jackson Pollock at the Schardes' house, Truro, Massachusetts, photograph by Bernard Schardt, 1944. Courtesy Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, New York, Gift of Jeffrey Potter

wall murals. The works of Mexican muralists such as José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros made a strong impact on the young artist.

During the Depression, the Federal Art Project of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration provided Pollock with some employment, which came to an end in late 1942. Desperate for money, he landed a custodial job the following spring at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, founded by Solomon R. Guggenheim. Soon his work was brought to the attention of Solomon's niece, Peggy Guggenheim, and she offered Pollock a contract with her gallery. This included an exhibition in November of that year and a commission to execute a site-specific painting (*Mural*) for the entry hall of her rented apartment at 155 East Sixty-First Street in New York City.

**Number 1, 1950
(Lavender Mist)**

1950

oil, enamel, and aluminum on canvas

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1976.37.1

This is one of a handful of monumental works that Pollock painted in a converted barn in Springs, Long Island, in the middle of 1950, when he was at the height of his powers. Having laid a large, loose canvas on the studio floor, Pollock stalked around it as he poured, flung, and carefully dripped liquid paint from cans onto the cloth, employing brushes as sticks or spouts to control the flow of paint through the air. With this technique, he not only revolutionized the act of painting but also redefined what painting could do. By using line not to create shapes but to build textures, he achieved an effect at once delicate and dense, optical and tactile, shallow and deep.

The subtitle, *Lavender Mist*, was suggested by the critic Clement Greenberg, Pollock's champion. There is no lavender in the painting.

Number 7, 1951

1951

enamel on canvas

Gift of the Collectors Committee 1983.77.1

In 1951, after five years of making his classic "drip" paintings, Pollock changed course. Still working on raw canvas laid on the floor, he used turkey basters to squirt paint rather than pouring it from cans, and he took color out of the equation. In the so-called black paintings that resulted, human figures and animal forms emerge alongside more abstract passages. Some commentators believe that figures had already been lurking in the drip paintings. Pollock himself said, "I'm very representational some of the time, and a little all of the time."

Number 7 is an early black painting. Its two-part structure reflects the fact that Pollock, who was laying down multiple images on long rolls of canvas, often decided where a painting would begin and end simply by cutting the canvas once it had been painted.

Mural

1943

oil and casein on canvas

University of Iowa Museum of Art,
Gift of Peggy Guggenheim 1959.6

Ritual

1953

oil on canvas

Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

Untitled

1944/1945

(printed 1967)

engraving and drypoint on paper

The William Stamps Farish Fund 2009.4.2

Untitled

1951

ink on Japanese paper

Gift of Ruth Cole Kainen 2012.92.123

Untitled

1944/1945

(printed 1967)

engraving and drypoint on paper

The William Stamps Farish Fund 2009.4.4

Untitled

1944/1945

(printed 1967)

engraving and drypoint on paper

The William Stamps Farish Fund 2009.4.5

Untitled

c. 1950

ink on paper

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1985.62.2

Untitled

c. 1939/1942

brush and ink on paper

Leonard R. Stachura Fund 1985.62.3

Untitled

1944/1945

(printed 1967)

engraving and drypoint on paper

The William Stamps Farish Fund 2009.3.1

Untitled

c. 1945

pen and ink on paper prepared
with yellow gouache

Leonard R. Stachura Fund 1985.62.4

Untitled

c. 1943

pen and ink on paper

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1985.62.1

Untitled

c. 1939/1940

graphite and colored pencil on paper

Ruth and Jacob Kainen Memorial
Acquisition Fund 2015.11.1
