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## Fashioning the New York School

What difference does it make that some of Jackson Pollock's most commanding, fully realized paintings were used in 1951, when they were barely dry, as a backdrop for fashion models in the pages of *Vogue* (pl. 6)? Over the decades of adulatory writing on the New York School, the answer would plainly have been: none at all. But the critical and scholarly landscape has changed. No longer can such an accommodation between the requirements of commerce and the summit of modernist formal achievement be dismissed as a momentary, adventitious accident — certainly not since the publication in 1983 of Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.<sup>1</sup>

In that celebrated, castigated, and still-underestimated account, Guilbaut documented the workings of a prior convergence between modernist painting and the propagandistic requirements of post-war American hegemony. The basic story he had to tell was how large political and commercial interests, avid for symbols of cultural legitimacy, captured a strain of art that had been conceived in isolation and neglect. In the service of Cold War polemic, a body of paintings was seized upon and projected globally as an emblem of American freedom and of the benign power liberated by that freedom. Cultural domination in the field of visual art was orchestrated as an accompaniment to America's new role as dominant world power.

This had already been observed by others in a retrospective way, but Guilbaut was the first to examine in any detail the inner workings of the process by which it came about.<sup>2</sup> Taking his investigation back to the 1930s in New York, he traced the ways that the artists had gradually made themselves vulnerable to this appropriation. By the early 1940s, they found themselves in flight twice over: firstly, from the constraints of their own past commitments to politically engaged art; secondly, from



6 Cecil Beaton, test shot of fashion shoot for American *Vogue* at Pollock exhibition, Betty Parsons Gallery, 1951.



7 Jackson Pollock, *Mural*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 604.5 x 246 cm. University of Iowa Museum of Art, Gift of Peggy Guggenheim.

provincial dependency on the great Parisian modernists, many of whom were then living in American exile and available for direct comparison. The resulting momentum threw their art into the embrace of official Americanism, and this alliance was sealed in 1947 and 1948 when resurgent nativist hostility to modern art prompted the cultural establishment to put its weight behind a home-grown avant-garde.<sup>3</sup> One public face of that alliance was the positive – if arm's-length – endorsement of Pollock by Henry Luce's *Life* magazine, a primary corporate voice of American triumphalism.<sup>4</sup>

The attentions of *Vogue* and *Life* depended equally on the one trait fundamental to virtually all New York School painting: the sheer wall-filling size of the paintings. Of the two appropriations, however, only one

can offer any insight into the origins of the American fixation on the big canvas. The official ideological projection of this new art as an American symbol – the *Life* version – was certainly predicated on that expansionist scale, but the artists in question were already moving in that direction well before the watershed years of 1947–48. It is more than doubtful that cultural managers outside the small avant-garde could even have imagined this development, still less could they have summoned it up on their own. By contrast, the *Vogue* use of the art as a backdrop for fashionable posing finds its source in the earliest genealogy of large-scale abstraction in New York.

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The definitive move to the big abstract canvas came with the making of Pollock's *Mural* (pl. 7), a canvas completed in 1944 but commissioned th

previous year by his new patron Peggy Guggenheim. As is well known, in order to accommodate the enormous size of the stretched canvas, the artist was obliged illegally to knock out a wall between his own studio and that recently occupied by his brother Sande. At a time when a modernist painting was considered large if it was four or five feet on a side, this one was to measure roughly nine by twenty feet. Pollock wrote to their oldest brother, Charles, with understandable elation that it looked "pretty big, but exciting as all hell," adding with understandable pride that he was bound by "no strings as to what or how I paint it."<sup>5</sup> But there was one respect in which he was very much bound, and that was the key, enabling factor in the whole equation: its physical size had been decided for him. The painting came to be called *Mural*, of course, because that was what its patron originally conceived it to be. The marriage of Peggy Guggenheim and Max Ernst had just ended, and she had established a new liaison with a wealthy and dandyish Englishman named Kenneth McPherson.<sup>6</sup> She marked the change by taking a new apartment, which had one architectural oddity: at its entrance was a long, shallow vestibule from which one ascended by stairs to the apartment proper. Guggenheim was appalled by McPherson's ideas for decorating this awkward, but symbolically important space: in her words, he "didn't seem to realize that a certain highly luxurious pleasure-seeking life was over and no longer fits in with our times."<sup>7</sup> Her career, in both entrepreneurial and social terms, depended on being in touch with the latest turn in taste. The older Surrealists, with their preciously wrought cabinet pictures, were to be relegated to that "luxurious, pleasure-seeking life" Guggenheim had known before but now wished to reject (in appearance at least), as unsuitable to a time of general scarcity and sacrifice.

The break with Ernst had accompanied a general estrangement from the exiled Surrealists whom she had sponsored at her Art of this Century gallery. There was a new group around her: Howard Putzel, the francophile American dealer; James Johnson Sweeney, the francophile Irish poet and satellite of James Joyce, who had found a place on the staff of the Museum of Modern Art; Roberto Matta, the Chilean-born Surrealist painter who was unique within the group in seeking to make strategic alliances with younger Americans.<sup>8</sup> It was they who turned Guggenheim toward sponsoring Pollock, a move which resulted in his 1943 one-man show and the extraordinary contract that granted the artist a regular monthly income.<sup>9</sup> Lee Krasner has forthrightly testified to this:

Howard Putzel really got Jackson his contract. Surely Peggy made the gesture, but the fact is I doubt that there would have ever been a

contract without Howard. Howard was at our house every night, and he told Jackson what to do and how to behave. Otherwise, I doubt would have ever happened. The whole thing was based on our friendship with Putzel.<sup>10</sup>

No American artist — virtually no artist at all — was the object of such speculative financial investment.<sup>11</sup> Sweeney took on the task of providing verbal accompaniment to this orchestrated change in taste. In well-known words from his own catalogue introduction to the first show he described Pollock's talent as "unpredictable... undisciplined... mineral prodigality not yet crystallized... lavish, explosive, untidy."<sup>12</sup> The same rhetoric — "smoldering... coarse in his strength... fury... animal nature" — reappeared the following year when he used the 1944 painting *She-Wolf* to illustrate an article in *Harper's Bazaar*: "Harmony, Sweeney declared, 'would never be a virtue in his work. An attempt to achieve it would necessitate toning down all his expression and lead to its final emasculation.'<sup>13</sup>

Pollock, for his part, was deeply irritated at this characterization and its implicit dismissal of his intense efforts to impose discipline on his compositions.<sup>14</sup> But he was at the same time indebted to precisely the mythology for his discovery of the large canvas. Through these interventions by members of the Guggenheim circle, *Mural* had become the focus of the incipient Pollock cult. Its size — which far exceeded the large formats on which he had yet worked — was part of their evolving notion of the scale that a quintessentially American painter ought to be using. If the idea may first have come from Putzel, who is said to have wanted to see whether a larger scale would release the energies contained in the small paintings,<sup>15</sup> But it was none other than Marcel Duchamp who may perhaps the most decisive contribution by suggesting to Guggenheim that it be painted on stretched canvas rather than directly onto the apartment wall.<sup>16</sup> His ostensible reasoning was that she could then take it with her when she moved, but the century's most original thinker on the portability and disposability of works of art doubtless had ideas that extended beyond simple practicality. He bestowed on the work its objective ambiguity, inaugurating a series of (as Pollock himself would later put it) "large, immovable pictures which will function between the easel and the mural."<sup>17</sup> For Guggenheim, Pollock's past associations with the common-man muralism of Thomas Hart Benton, the Federal Arts Project, and the workshop of the Communist painter David Siqueiros underscored his seemingly awareness of wartime realities (in other hands, such grandiosity of scale might have signified a careless, Baroque excess).

According to reports, Pollock started at the blank stretched canvas for six months before suddenly covering the entire field in a single night's painting.<sup>18</sup> Everything that would make Pollock's project so exceptionally productive came together in that one moment. He himself would take three or four years to catch up with its full implications in the canonical series of poured paintings made between 1947 and 1952 (that lag generating the effect of coincidence with Cold War culture). With the 1944 painting, however, he had already discovered how liberating it could be to work on such a scale, how it could force a new gestural rapidity and a broadening of physical movement in the handling of paint. Its demands engendered his new compositional logic, based on repetition of calligraphic figural notations, dispersed and accumulated to the point that they made their own non-figural and non-hierarchical order, coextensive with but not identical to the rectangular support. Its innovativeness is all the more striking because it was achieved on an upright surface, with conventional brushes and un-thinned paint.<sup>19</sup> (If the painting remains underestimated in the literature, it may be because of its remote location at the University of Iowa.)

The apparent spontaneity with which Pollock covered the vast canvas further confirmed the American myth, though the patrons of the enterprise were the least Americanized group imaginable. They had projected Pollock expressly into a space that was, to them, exotically other and promised an art that was as different as possible from Surrealism, but one which did not reject the terms of that movement altogether. While Clement Greenberg is normally the focus of any discussion of Pollock's critical reception and promotion as the leading American artist of his generation, the original conception of the Guggenheim group dictated the decisive terms of his admiration. His brief review of the 1943 show had spoken disapprovingly of certain paintings veering between "the intensity of the easel picture and the blandness of the mural."<sup>20</sup> But by 1947 he had assimilated Putzel's and Duchamp's vision of Pollock and would write in celebration of the fact that the artist "points a way beyond the easel, beyond the mobile, framed picture, towards the mural perhaps — or perhaps not."<sup>21</sup>

The most interesting of Greenberg's immediate responses to the moment of 1943–44 came not in any direct commentary on Pollock, but in an extended diatribe against Surrealist painting, first printed in the *Nation* in 1944, and then republished for a British audience in *Horizon*. There he attacked the "nihilism of the Surrealists," a condition for him most clearly exposed in their easy alliance with fashion. Surrealism had become, he argued:

a blessing to the restless rich, the expatriates, and the aesthete-flâneur in general who were repelled by the asceticisms of modern art. Surrealism subversiveness justifies their way of life, sanctioning the peace of conscience and the sense of chic with which they reject arduous disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

The object of this criticism was just such a person as Peggy Guggenheim but it also reproduced exactly the terms of her rejection of the decadent luxurious associations which Surrealism had come to carry in New York. To say that something has become mere fashion is really to say that it has just passed out of fashion. And it is implicitly to declare that something else is now in fashion, even if one chooses to describe it as asceticism or arduous discipline.

Greenberg was here doing his part in the same interested management of taste initiated within the Peggy Guggenheim circle, even if he kept his distance from Sweeney's Natty-Bumppo clichés. What that group has already perceived and acted on was a realization that the exiled Surrealists were objectively out of their element in New York. André Breton and the painters around him could sneer all they liked; they could continue to trade on past prestige; but all that was camouflage over the reality that they had lost the resources of their practice. Huddling together like a defensive group of immigrants, clinging to bygone rituals of solidarity they were in no position to exploit what America had to offer an innovative and ambitious artist (Mondrian being one of the only exceptions among the exiles). The really canny entrepreneurs like Putzel, Sweeney and Guggenheim herself knew that the avant-gardism in which they had invested their lives was in jeopardy unless the perception of a European monopoly was broken and artists capable of functioning in an American environment were given room and an aura of their own.

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There is a photograph of Peggy Guggenheim and Pollock standing in front of the installed *Mural* (pl. 8). It is a slightly angled, expressionist view shot through a piece of abstract sculpture by David Hare.<sup>23</sup> Pollock is on one side in an ill-fitting suit, and it is tempting to say that he looks drunk. Guggenheim is near the center in a tightly contained pose, clutching a lapdog in each arm. The unkind question one can ask is, who is the pood in this picture? The painting itself is Pollock's best reply to the unkind answer. She certainly knows that it is, and that knowledge is the source of her evident pride in the work.



8 Peggy Guggenheim and Pollock in front of *Mural*, 1944.

One can pair this photograph with any of the images in *Vogue* and see the latter as its late and accurate echo. The photographer sent out to Betty Parsons's gallery was, of course, Cecil Beaton. The dresses may have been American in origin but the allegiances of both photographer and journal remained firmly in the orbit of Paris and London. A famous English arbiter of high style, a considerable artist in his own right, was to determine how the art was to embellish the clothing.<sup>24</sup> Having discerned the unexpected elegance that Pollock conjured from his rude pourings and spatters, Beaton and his editors judged his colonial spontaneity exactly the right counter-

point to the refined flourishes of the gowns. A primitivizing fascination for native American art had helped Pollock and his contemporaries find their way to distinctive forms of abstraction, but the agents of Europeanize culture seem to have been allowed the last primitivist turn, deftly placing his paintings in a tradition of discriminating enthusiasm for America's prodigies going back to the ecstasies of the French over Benjamin Franklin and James Fenimore Cooper: "dazzling and curious," wrote the copywriter, they "almost always cause an intensity of feeling."<sup>25</sup>

The fashion photographs represented appropriation, even exploitation if one wants to choose that kind of moralizing language: Beaton cropped his backdrops at will; for several shots he placed a hidden light behind the model, directed toward the painting, adding his own literal dazzle to the metaphorical one discerned by so many admiring critics.<sup>25</sup> But the 1944 photograph shows that a parallel appropriation in the realm of style and fashion was inseparable from the very origin of this kind of object: the large-scale abstract painting with its "all-over" composition.

A freedom to manipulate the art for purposes of display began with the first hanging of Pollock's *Mural*, Duchamp continuing his role as midwife to the enormous canvas by agreeing to supervise its installation in Guggenheim's apartment. When it was discovered that Pollock's measurements had been too long for the actual space by almost a foot, the French artist took the decision to cut off the excess, and no one complained that the work suffered any significant violence.<sup>26</sup> And no sooner was the painting in place than the posing-in-front-of-it began, this being the very activity for which it had been conceived. It was one in which the artist himself participated, the price for the opportunity offered to him by his patron and her advisers. A further step in the analysis proposed here would be to look at the most famous Pollock photographs of all, the studio pictures of Hans Namuth, in which yet another European (with his own interests) deployed the large canvas — in process on the floor below or completed on the wall behind — as a framing device to define the American artist.

In analyzing the uses to which Pollock's capabilities have been put, it is important not to conflate those carried on at a distance — service in the cause of Cold War nationalism — with those which can be said to have constituted the effective conditions for his signature work. If one laments these prior uses, what exactly is the loss being mourned? If it is some deeper authenticity of experience, how does one know anything about it except by hopeful conjecture from the stylized gesture and movement that are actually registered in Pollock's big paintings? The gestures and movements

ments were his, to be sure, but the conditions that lent them a style, and thereby a legibility, were imagined for him.

If one is puzzled about the meaning of a Renaissance painting, one turns eagerly to the stipulations of the contract between artist and patron in the lucky event that one survives. This approach to interpretation, straightforward in its logic, proceeds from the specified materials of a work of art and the implied uses to which it is to be put, the interests it is to serve. In the case of *Mural*, one knows the exact terms of agreement between artist and patron; there is further a rich body of commentary by the middlemen who brought it into being, actual modern counterparts to the shadowy "humanist advisers" so often conjured up in iconographical interpretations of Renaissance art. Far from being intrinsically an expression of up-to-date conditions of American capitalism, the large canvas owes its origins to the needs of an improvised, latter-day court, one modelled on traditional European conceptions of enlightened and self-flattering patronage. Nor was it, seemingly, one that could remain transplanted in the New World for long, as Guggenheim permanently removed herself and her collection to Italy when it became safe to do so. Her advancement of Pollock had been the principal gesture of accommodation by a courtly culture toward its temporary, democratic surroundings.

Having been born from such terms of exchange, the big canvas would always carry the meaning of stage and backdrop, nor was it, by any means, the first type of art meant to be faced away from by its principal users. The pathos of the situation for the artists who adopted the format was that they could not afford to acknowledge such originary meanings in their own practice. That implicit conflict led to resolute forms of denial and perhaps to certain acts of protest. Rothko's famous anxiety about the conditions in which his paintings would be seen — his desire for low lighting, isolation and a hushed, reverent atmosphere — can be taken as an instance of the former. Pollock may have registered an internal protest through physically violating the integrity of the canvas: Peggy Guggenheim had thought to cut a figure in front of her *Mural*; Pollock gave the expression a mockingly literal twist in *Cut Out* of 1948. But these efforts were relatively small and inescapably read as peripheral commentary in relation to the commanding presence of the large canvases. The automatic impressiveness of the grand format was an addiction from which none among this generation could break free, and Beaton was there to record the cruel bargain entailed in that dependence.

## Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol

The public Andy Warhol was not one but, at a minimum, three persons. The first, and by far the most prominent, was the self-created one: the product of his famous pronouncements, and of the allowed representation of his life and milieu. The second consists of the complex of interests, sentiments, skills, ambitions, and passions actually figured in paint or on film. The third was his persona as it sanctioned experiment in non-elite culture far beyond the world of art. Of these three, the latter two are of far greater importance than the first, though they were normally overshadowed by the man who said he wanted to be like a machine, that everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes, that he and his art were nothing but surface. The second Warhol is normally equated with the first and the third, at least by historians and critics of art, has been largely ignored.<sup>1</sup>

This essay is primarily concerned with the second Warhol, though it will necessarily entail attention to the first. The conventional reading of his work turns upon a few circumscribed themes: the impersonality of his image choices and their presentation, his passivity in the face of a media saturated reality, the suspension in his work of any clear authorial voice. His subject-matter choices are regarded as essentially indiscriminate. Little interest is displayed in them beyond the observation that, in their totality, they represent the random play of a consciousness at the mercy of the commonly available commercial culture. The debate over Warhol centres around the three rival verdicts on his art: (1) it fosters critical or subversive apprehension of mass culture and the power of the image as commodity; (2) it succumbs in an innocent but telling way to that numbing power; (3) it cynically and metacritically exploits an endemic confusion between art and marketing.<sup>2</sup>





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