JACKSON POLLOCK IN NEW YORK AND LONDON: TWO MUSEUMS, TWO NARRATIVES

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The irony inherent in all retrospective exhibitions is that no artist intends his or her work to be experienced in its entirety. The artist creates the pieces one at a time, or in series, and often has little involvement with past work. Especially when a style or approach has been abandoned, there may be a feeling of discomfort for the artist to be confronted, so to speak, with the evidence of a previous life.

But who cares what would have pleased Jackson Pollock, who had been safely dead for 42 years by the time his retrospective exhibition opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in November 1998? He may have repudiated his teacher, Thomas Hart Benton—whom he called "a strong personality to react against" and credited only with getting him a job in the art school cafeteria—but MoMA gave us enough of the early landscapes to prove that Pollock's aesthetic indebtedness to Benton was profound and lasting. The museum also forced us to witness Pollock's struggles with draughtsmanship, his apprenticeship to José Clemente Orozco, his derivative borrowings from Miró and Picasso and, at the other extreme of his career, his sad decline into recapitulation and the fruitless search for a new direction. Like virtually all retrospectives—except perhaps Vermeer's, where only a few works survive to be assembled under one roof—Pollock's told us more about the artist than he would have wanted us to know.

It also told us more than we would normally learn from a museum display, because it collected together examples from many museums. It told us more than we would learn from visiting the home of even the most avid collector of Pollock's work, where, as it happens, the largest number of paintings we would see is five, all from the middle period of his career. Normally, whether in a public or a private collection, an artist is represented by a handful of examples at most. The Tate's magnificent Turner collection is a notable exception, but even at MoMA, which has the most comprehensive holdings of Pollock's canvases and works on paper, only about half a dozen pieces are on view at any one time. Surely the artist would cringe if he could see his juvenilia and the gropings of his decline paraded in the company of his masterpieces, which is precisely what the Pollock retrospective did.

Having posthumously ridden roughshod over the artist's feelings, was MoMA justified? I confess to ambivalence over the result, if only because it was done so brilliantly. Indeed at MoMA we did see the full range of Pollock's achievement—not, of course, the totality of his work, which numbers roughly 1,200 extant pieces—but a selection of 157 examples in the main exhibition and some 50 in a complementary show of prints, mostly from MoMA's own holdings. All the masterpieces were there, and if we missed the Peggy Guggenheim Collection's *Alchemy* of 1947, one of the first great all-over abstractions, and *Number 29, 1950,* the extraordinary painting on plate glass (in the National Museum of Canada, Ottawa), we could content ourselves with plenty of other paintings of the same periods and appreciate the fact that both of those works are far too fragile to travel. We could also be certain that the show's curator, Kirk Varnedoe, did not omit them by mistake, because he

and his assistant, Pepe Karmel, included everything worth having. This was a show for which MoMA pulled out all the stops, and for which the museum was rewarded with splendid press, awards for the accompanying Abrams book, and attendance of roughly 330,000 visitors during the show's three-month run. (By comparison, the Tate's version, which ran from March to June 1999, attracted just over 196,000 visitors.)

Let's briefly examine the installation, which occupied MoMA's entire third floor. The presentation itself goes a long way to explaining the favorable reaction, and it also illuminates—and I use that word somewhat sarcastically—the MoMA style, which in key respects was quite different from the Tate's, to which I want to compare and contrast it.

As a preamble to the exhibition, visitors were greeted by an 8-foot tall version of photographer Arnold Newman's color portrait of Pollock, posed with his 1948 canvas, *Summertime* (now in the Tate's collection), which appeared in the 8 August 1949 issue of *Life* magazine. This confrontational image established Pollock's public persona at the time, and as an introduction to the show it reaffirmed his own contention that the artist cannot be separated from his work. For better or worse, then—and in London, it was definitely for worse—the "brooding, puzzled-looking" Pollock, as *Life* described him, virtually dared the audience to enter his show. This image was absent from the Tate installation, but Pollock's problematic persona got heavy play in the British press, for whom, in spite of his Scottish surname and Scotch-Irish lineage, he was the quintessential American barbarian. Inescapably, then, Jack the Dripper was a force to be reckoned with at both venues.

At MoMA, the show itself led off with Pollock's earliest known painting, a self-portrait from the early 1930s that reinforces the impression of an emotionally troubled personality. But at that point the museum diverged from strict chronology and moved into the late 1930s, bypassing the Benton influence, which was relegated to a side gallery farther along. At the Tate, too, we jumped into Pollock's career when he picked up on Orozco and Native American art, as in the Tate's *Birth*, circa 1941, and *Naked Man With Knife*, circa 1938-40, in the first gallery—which incidentally, and in my view disgracefully, was entered through a specially created shop. At least at MoMA the sales pitch was saved until the exit, and was discretely limited to the Abrams book, a few posters, and a compact disc of selections from Pollock's jazz record library. Also at MoMA, one had the sense that the galleries had been designed around the artworks, and indeed that was the case. Plenty of space was given to each piece, while at the Tate the hanging was tighter, in spite of the fact that the show comprised only 122 works, compared with more than 200 at MoMA. Rather than reconstructing its galleries, the Tate used existing modules, sometimes sympathetically and sometimes not.

Two of the most hotly debated comparisons of the installations are the relative scale of the gallery spaces vis à vis the works, and the two different approaches to lighting. The differences are evident in the presentation of *Number 32, 1950*. This black enamel painting on unprimed canvas, one of Pollock's boldest and most emblematic poured paintings, looks dingy when it isn't lighted quite intensely. The canvas has darkened over the years, and a little washout effect paradoxically plays down its background dullness in favor of the flashing black gestures. Unfortunately, the Tate's combination of natural and artificial lighting created spotty effects, especially where the shadow of the deep ceiling coffers fell across a canvas, as it did on *Number 32, 1950*. In and out

went the English sun, up and down went the light level, and works like this one looked like victims of a brownout.

That said, many people complained that MoMA's strong artificial lighting, lowered only for the works on paper, was too uniform and intense. There were audible mutterings especially about the high light level on *Blue Poles*, which some people felt made its orange and silver garish enough to justify T.J. Clark's questionable opinions about Pollock's vulgarity. Personally I felt that the presentation was stunning, especially coming from a relatively monochromatic area—a gallery containing black enamel paintings of 1951—so the canvas hit with all the force with which the artist must have applied his two-by-fours slathered with ultramarine. The impression at the Tate was far more sedate, complete with a bench in front of the painting to encourage contemplation. Again the high coffers worked against the canvas' human scale, which came across far more effectively in MoMA's relatively low-ceilinged galleries.

Where that scale fell utterly flat, however, was in the re-creation of Pollock's East Hampton studio, a space with which I am intimately familiar. This aspect of the show was eliminated at the Tate, with, I think, no detrimental effect—except that Hans Namuth's famous photographs of Pollock at work in that space, displayed in the studio replica at MoMA, were instead installed completely out of context in, of all insensitive places, the dreadful entrance-cum-shop. At MoMA, the effort was made to represent faithfully Pollock's actual workspace, which was quite small, in contradiction of the impression given by the photographs, which appear to show a spacious barn studio. Unfortunately the replica perpetrated a distortion of its own by making the space seem claustrophobic. The floor area was in fact correct, but MoMA's ceilings are too low for an accurate reconstruction. Nor was a duplicate made of the actual floor, with its fascinating tapestry of Pollock's colors and gestures. Instead we had a photograph of it on the wall outside—not, believe me, an adequate substitute for the real thing, but an intriguing document nonetheless.

Another missing element at the Tate, but this time a regrettable omission, was MoMA's technical display, in which Pollock's materials and methods were analyzed. Since one of the clichés about his work is how easy it is to do, anyone seriously interested in assessing its merits could have learned a lot from the revealing investigations in this unobtrusive didactic display. Scoffers at the Tate might well have come away converted, but sadly they never got the necessary background.

What they did get at both venues was a shock at the conclusion. As many viewers remarked, the final gallery, following *Blue Poles*, looked like a group show, demonstrating as it did Pollock's loss of direction in the last three years of his life. The Tate skimped a bit here by not including the 1953-55 canvas, *Scent*, and *Search*, 1955, presumed to be Pollock's last painting. Neither museum had the Chicago Art Institute's enigmatic *Greyed Rainbow*, 1953, which was the one piece really missed in New York, but without *Search* the Tate's show never really ended; it just stopped. For, unlike the retrograde *White Light* of 1954, which rounded out the London selection, *Search* truly shows Pollock on a quest for new impetus but literally mired in his medium.

Both exhibitions highlighted Pollock's so-called heroic middle period, which formed the bulk of each. That focus was entirely appropriate, since his earlier work—even the extraordinary pictographic

canvases of the early to mid 1940s—was largely a prelude to the great breakthrough of 1947, when Pollock reinvented abstract painting. After 1952, his production was drastically curtailed. If the end seemed truncated, it could hardly have been otherwise.

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