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THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF JACKSON POLLOCK - A VIGNETTE

by
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The Pollock Family
From left to right: Sanford, Charles, LeRoy, Stella, Frank, Marvin Jay, Jackson

Though much has been written about the life and work of Jackson Pollock, little is known about his roots or the years preceding his success. In texts, we usually first encounter him in New York towards the early 1940s, when he met his future wife Lee Krasner and his first art dealer Peggy Guggenheim. In the following decade, Pollock's life was shaped by success and conflict. As his recognition in the art world increased, so did his struggles with depression and alcoholism. It is this dichotomy that has formed the public's perception of him as a groundbreaking talent yet a tormented soul. Though not a cliché per se, it still is an image based on the headlines rather than knowledge. In fact, considering the extent of Pollock's fame, we have surprisingly little information regarding his origins. Where did Pollock come from? Who were his family, his mentors and early supporters? What were his personal, historical, and emotional realities while struggling to find his voice? For the first time, *American Letters 1927-1947: Jackson Pollock & Family*, a new compilation of the personal correspondence between the five Pollock brothers, their parents and wives, offers intimate insight into the artist's formative years – much of it conveyed in his own words. Conceived as a vignette rather than a historical analysis, this exhibition takes inspiration from the content, as well as the deeply personal tone provided by this singular source material.

The story that unfolds in *American Letters* tells the tale of a family who, despite financial hardships and geographical separation, did their best to remain united and engaged with the world. They struggled, but with their eyes wide open. They were interested in the culture and politics that promised social change and ultimately, a better future for all. In a family this intellectually and emotionally invested in current events, passivity would have been a weakness. In a time when this was even more unusual, the Pollock children were encouraged by their parents to seek their own paths according to their own ideals, dreams, and expectations.

The Pollocks included the parents, Stella (1875-1958) and LeRoy (1877-1933), who had married in 1903, as well as their five sons. Charles (1902-1988) was the firstborn, then came Marvin Jay (1904-1986), Frank (1907-1994), Sanford (1909-1963) and the youngest, Jackson (1912-1956). From the beginning, the family moved constantly. In a matter of only a few years, they resided in Tingley, Iowa, Cody, Wyoming, Southern California, Phoenix, Arizona, Northern California, again in Phoenix, and as of 1928, in Los Angeles. Stella would remain there throughout the 1930s, even after her husband's premature death. From Los Angeles, she would watch her sons grow up and scatter throughout the country. She was used to spending long periods of time alone with the boys as LeRoy frequently took jobs on surveying and road construction crews. While the father's prolonged absences must certainly have pained the whole family, it also caused strong bonds to form between Stella and her sons, as well as between the brothers. Throughout her life, Stella's wellbeing remained a constant concern to her children, whether they lived close by or thousands of miles away on the East Coast. They always, if not always frequently, checked in at home.

As the eldest, Charles certainly took on the quintessential big brother role. For Jackson, who was ten years his junior, he might even have embodied a father figure of sorts. Charles certainly became his mentor after he left for New York in 1926. At the Art Students League, he studied, as Jackson later would too, with Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975). Benton's passion for social concerns and the American landscape impacted Charles profoundly and both soon became friends. In 1927, Benton urged Charles to always seek truth through experience: *"To see America you have to get down in the dust, under the wheels, where the struggle is."* Charles began to share his experiences and new interests with his brothers. The tone in his letters suggests that he must have felt responsible for encouraging them to pursue their dreams. They too belonged to a new generation of Americans that needed to be enlightened and awakened. He wrote home: *"Now the one hope in this country for improvement in the quality of our national life is the increasing body of protest in the youth and the critical concern of the liberal thinkers and artists and the earnestness with which they accept responsibility for sound and clear thinking on the many aspects of contemporary life."* To Charles, it was clear that it would be due to the *"artists and thinkers, to direct the expending of [America's] vast wealth and energy."*

Following Charles' example, Frank, Sanford, and Jackson soon arrived in New York as well. The latter two joined his artistic pursuit and subsequently grew close to Benton, his wife Rita and his extended circle. Though the brothers embraced cultural life in the city wholeheartedly, they would still return to California regularly through the mid-1930s. Money was always scarce and they usually traveled cross-country by hitchhiking or hopping freight trains. It was during these journeys that they would experience both the vastness of the American landscape and the unrest that rippled through the Depression-torn country. They studied mining towns, observed the cotton pickers and characteristics of the ever-changing scenery. Searching for inspirational material, both Charles and Jackson captured their impressions in their sketchbooks.

Meanwhile back in New York, Charles, Sanford, and Jackson became increasingly engaged in local politics, leaning left and opposing fascism. In addition to Benton, they met other likeminded artists during the mid-to late-1930s while working for the government's Federal Arts Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which commissioned unemployed artists to create public artworks. All three belonged to the Artists Union and attended the American Artists' Congress, which was founded in 1936 and aimed to unite progressive artists in the fight against war and fascism. According to their conviction that art could effect radical political change, they applied their skills in whatever capacity was needed. In that context, the work of the Mexican muralists sparked their idealism. In 1929, Charles wrote Jackson:

“Are you familiar with the work of Rivera and Orozco in Mexico City? This is the finest painting that has been done, I think since the sixteenth century. Here are men with imagination and intelligence recognizing the implements of the modern world and ready to employ them.” In 1930, before picking his youngest brother up to bring him to New York, Charles traveled with Jackson to Pomona to see Orozco’s recently completed “Prometheus” fresco (1930).

Jackson had been increasingly restless before his move to the East Coast. He had trouble staying in school and formulating his purpose in life. Sharing his inner turmoil with Charles only months before his move, he wrote to New York: *“Although I feel I will make an artist of some kind, I have never proven to myself nor anybody that I have it in me. This so called happy part of one’s life, youth, to me is a bit of damnable hell.”* Trying to encourage him to enjoy life rather than to question its purpose, his father advised: *“The secret of success is concentrating interest in life, interest in sports and good times, interest in your studies, interest in your fellow students, interest in the small things of nature, insects, birds, flowers, leaves, etc. In other words to be fully awake to everything about you & the more you learn the more you can appreciate, & get a full measure of joy & happiness out of life.”* Though Jackson’s soul-searching continued in New York, his pensive energy also became a catalyst for his artwork. Nevertheless, as he drastically wavered between confidence and self-doubt, he continued to rely on his family for self-assurance. In 1932, for example, he reported to his father that by going to the Art Students League every morning, he had *“learned what is worth learning in the realm of art.”* That statement was quickly followed by the confession that the workload and task before him was immense: *“It is just a matter of time and work now for me to have that knowledge a part of me. A good seventy years more and I think I’ll make a good artist—being an artist is life itself—living it I mean.”*

By the late 1930s, Jackson’s brothers, in particular Sanford who lived with him, became increasingly concerned with his frail emotional state. In 1938, Sanford wrote to Charles that Jackson had been *“in serious mental shape,”* adding that he had been *“worried as hell about him.”* While listing the symptoms of the problem as including irresponsibility, depressive mania, over-intensity, and alcoholism, Sanford also stressed his unwavering belief in his younger brother’s talents: *“On the credit side we have his Art.... His thinking is...related to that of men like Beckman, Orozco and Picasso. We are sure that if he is able to hold himself together his work will become of real significance. His painting is abstract, intense, evocative in quality.”* Sanford’s letter makes apparent how intently the family felt that they had to protect Jackson, who had always been somewhat fragile and ill-equipped to cope on his own. The bond formed in childhood between the brothers, survived the years of hardship and geographical separations. It also remained strong after Jackson became famous and his career began to overshadow his brothers’ achievements. For Jackson, his close relationship with his family had always provided him with an emotional but also practical safety net. His parents encouraged him, his brothers guided him towards his career, picked him up in California, helped him to find a school, took him in and continued to find him work in the city. It is safe to say that without his family, Jackson Pollock might never have arrived in New York City; the question is whether he would have arrived at art.