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From Mythic Narrative to Abstract Automatism: Jackson Pollock, Andre Masson, and Stanley William Hayter

In working towards his mature abstract poured paintings, Pollock not only learned from Masson's abstract linear automatism, but was challenged by Masson's mythological narratives: *Mythology of Being* 1942 and *Anatomy of my Universe* 1943. Pollock's response to these narratives of male descent into the female labyrinth in search of harmony is evident in his *Male and Female* 1942, and later in his exploration of these same themes using an increasingly abstract automatist line in prints made at Hayter's Atelier 17 in 1944-45. In addition to Masson's example, what Hayter taught Pollock about the ability of an engraved line to move in the "space of the imagination" anticipates the three-dimensionality of Pollock's future poured gestures.

In "From Automatic Drawing to American Abstract Art: André Masson, Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly" Wimmer explores the role that the surrealist tradition of automatism plays in the rejection of traditional painting characterized by the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, and later by the automatist works of Cy Twombly. Especially noteworthy is her emphasis on the cultural transfer that took place when the greater part of the European Surrealist group, Andre Masson and Stanley William Hayter among them, was transplanted to New York, bringing with them the lessons of Surrealist automatism. I would like to add to this discussion by developing the relationship of Pollock and Masson, and of Pollock and Hayter that I explore in my book on Pollock and his art, *Jackson Pollock: Kunst als Sinnsuche* (Hewel Verlag, Wallerstein, 2013). First let me correct Wimmer's statement that Pollock himself never spoke about the influence of Masson. When John Bernard Myers, an editor of *View* 1940-45 one of the small magazine in which much Surrealist art and thought was published, asked Pollock how much the Surrealist movement had affected him, he replied: "The only person who really did get through to me was Masson."¹ With her illustrations Wimmer points to the abstract linear

automatism that Masson practiced in the early 1920s and in the early 1940s. But Pollock was attracted not only to such work but also to Masson's numbered and scripted mythological narratives presented in serial fashion, for example *Mythology of Being* published in 1942 and *Anatomy of my Universe* published in February 1943. Matta, who also had an impact on Pollock's developing abstract automatist language, commented about Pollock's unusual manner of working in serial fashion which distinguished him from the other young Americans who were looking for a "new image of man." Questioned about Pollock's work before 1943, Matta replied, "My feeling was that it was very Masson."² The relationship between Pollock's *Male and Female* 1942 (fig. 1) and the frontispiece of *Mythology of Being* (fig. 2) is a case in point.³

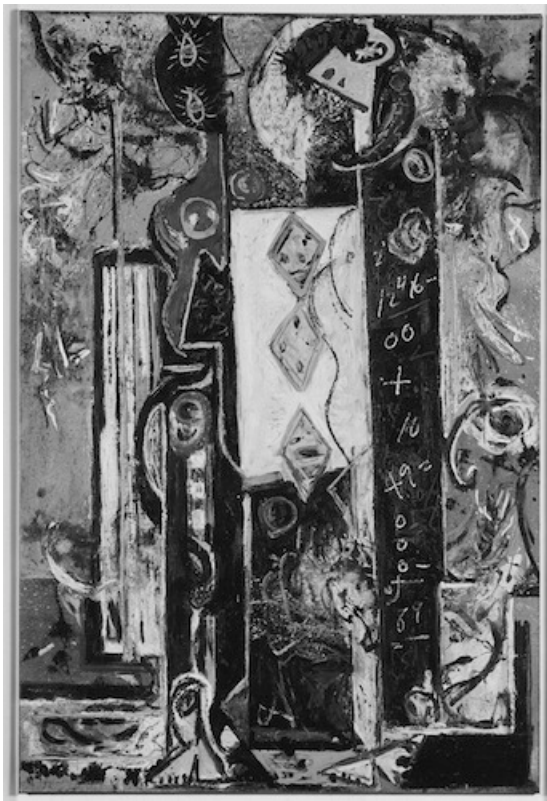


Fig. 1: Jackson Pollock, *Male and Female*, 1942 © 2015 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



MYTHOLOGIE DE L'ÊTRE

Fig. 2: Andre Masson, *Mythology of Being*, 1939, Frontispiece © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Even these titles suggest the important themes being addressed in this time of war, as artists struggled to envision a new image of man, and argued the role of myth.⁴ Wimmer

stresses that Masson made important contributions in conveying contemporary French culture to America. Masson's visual mythologies were such contributions. In *Anatomy of my Universe* Masson elaborated on his version of the Theseus myth with a Nietzschean Ariadne who dreams that she is the labyrinth in whose depths the minotaur, the primal and bestial force of nature's cycle, resides; the male must descend into this labyrinthine depth, female in character, to attain the life force. Pollock's response to this mythic challenge helped lead him to a greater and a more abstract automatism in his art in 1944-45.⁵

Turning to the role of Stanley William Hayter and his Atelier 17 where Pollock in the fall of 1944 and the spring of 1945 engraved eleven plates (not the seven Wimmer suggests), Wimmer continues to stress the important influence of Masson's abstract automatism on Pollock.⁶ She juxtaposes Pollock's print, *Untitled (7)*, 1945, printed 1967, with Masson's drypoint *Abduction (Rapt)*, 1942, which Hayter tells us hung in the Atelier 17 studio where Pollock would have seen it. With this juxtaposition we see that Pollock by 1945 achieves a similar degree of abstraction as Masson in his linear automatist work. Here I wish to make an additional point that the conjunction of mythic narrative and of abstract automatism can also be seen in some of these prints. When Wimmer first refers to the relation of figuration to the development of abstract automatism, she is right to assert that Pollock uses his automatism to consciously negate figuration; in other words, Pollock moves from figuration to an abstract automatism. But rather than compare Pollock's *Echo*, a late work of 1951, with a 1924 automatic drawing by Masson to point out Pollock's move from biomorphic figuration to a more abstract linear automatism, I suggest turning to another of Pollock's prints done in Hayter's studio. This is a crucial point in Pollock's career when he consciously does seek to move from figuration to greater abstraction. About his painting *There were 7 in 8*, 1945 he made his famous remark, "I choose to veil the images."⁷ The special place of CR 1077 (fig. 3) among the engravings, and indeed in Pollock's entire oeuvre, is signaled by his inscription of the letters "A" (upside down), "R" (in reverse), "T" next to each other in the print's lower left. This inscription, reversed in the printing process, is unique in Pollock's work and suggests that he felt that he had hit on something he wished to celebrate as an embodiment of his understanding of "art." On the left of the print we see that a luminous male, his head pierced by a downward pointing feathered arrow, his phallus an animated creature with two eyes, presiding over and seeming to orchestrate the passage of the automatic linear

rhythms, in the flickering shadows of which lurk Pollock's various symbols for the female, whether bestial maw, serpent, crescent moon, or female figure. The theme is a union of male and female, a theme that preoccupied him ever since *Male and Female* 1942, but now achieved with the rhythmic web of an abstract all-over automatist line.



Fig. 3: Untitled (P16), CR 1077, ca. 1944-45, Engraving and drypoint, printed in black, second state, Printed by Pollock and S. W. Hayter at Atelier 17 © 2015 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The movement from figuration to abstract linear automatism is, we now realize, less negation, than fulfillment of a Pollock's figurative and mythic narrative of descent into the female labyrinth, the mythic challenge that Masson had proposed in *Mythology of Being* (Fig. 4).⁸

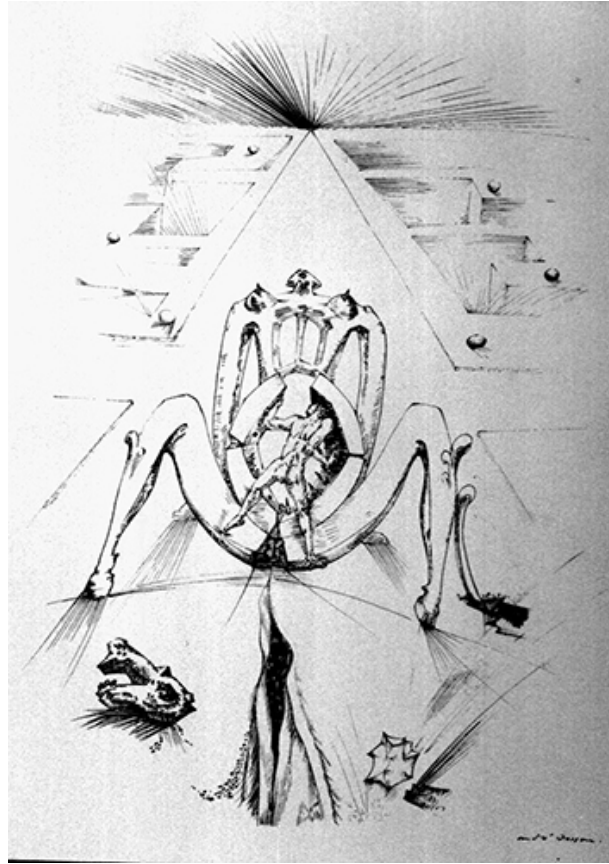


Fig. 4: Andre Masson, *Mythology of Being*, 1939, plate VII: "You burst from your vein stone - You become a dancing god." © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Here we gain some insight into abstract linear automatism as an expression of inner feeling, stressed by Wimmer, and here distinctly erotic, whether in Pollock's "art" print or in Masson's *Abduction (Rapt)*.

In stressing the importance of Masson to Pollock, one should not neglect the equally important role of Hayter himself. Hayter remembers "Jackson Pollock always claimed that he had two masters, Benton and me."⁹ Whether in the workshop, or while drinking beer together at neighborhood bars, or through the five articles that Hayter wrote in 1944-46, Pollock had ample opportunity to learn Hayter's ideas as well as techniques.¹⁰ For a discussion of what Pollock learned regarding the open, transparent, ambiguous "space of the imagination," so different from Renaissance or even Cubist space, and the ability of line to convey movement within this realm of fluxing space and time, see *Jackson Pollock: Kunst als Sinnsuche*.¹¹ Wimmer points to the speed and body movement that

characterizes Pollock's action painting. The very process of digging into the metal plate with a burin and rotating the plate as one works anticipates the later role of motion and involvement of the body in the making of Pollock's abstract poured paintings. Even what Pollock manages to learn of the three-dimensionality of an engraved line, already evident in halting fashion in the linear trace found in CR 1079, moving left to right, down to up and in and out of the plate, producing a thick to thin line (fig. 5), is an intimation of the three-dimensionality of Pollock's future fluid poured gestures.

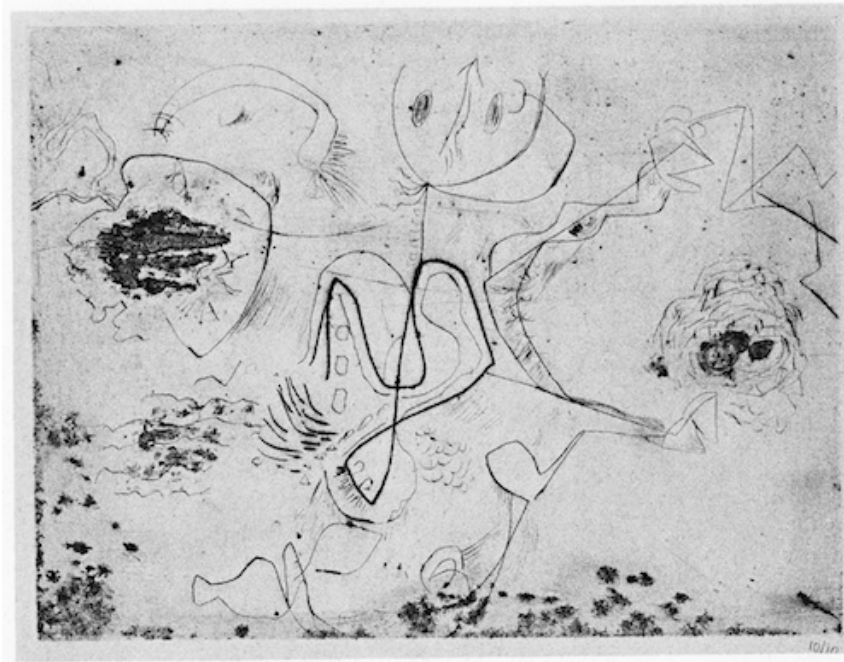


Fig. 5: Jackson Pollock, Untitled (P17), CR 1079, ca. 1944-45 (printed posthumously 1967), Engraving and drypoint, printed in brown ink © 2015 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Hayter as Pollock's teacher deserves yet greater recognition in the history of the transfer of the surrealist tradition of automatism to American soil.

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CR followed by a number refers to the number assigned to each work in Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, eds., *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works*, 4 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), abbreviated as CR.

Fig. 1 Jackson Pollock, *Male and Female*, 1942, Oil on canvas, 186.1 x 124.3 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd, 1974. (The Philadelphia Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY).

Fig. 2 Andre Masson, *Mythology of Being*, 1939, Frontispiece to illustrated book, Wittenborn and Company edition, New York, 1942, 47,0 x 37,0 cm. (book itself).

Fig. 3 Jackson Pollock, *Untitled*, CR 1077, ca. 1944-45, Engraving and drypoint, printed in black, second state, Printed by Pollock and S. W. Hayter at Atelier 17. 38 x 44.8 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Lee Krasner Pollock, 1969. (Jackson Pollock Catalogue Raisonné Archives, Pollock-Krasner Study Center).

Fig. 4 Andre Masson, *Mythology of Being*, plate VII: "You burst from your vein stone- You become a dancing god." (book itself).

Fig. 5 Jackson Pollock, *Untitled*, CR 1079 (P17), ca. 1944-45 (printed posthumously 1967), Engraving and drypoint, printed in brown ink, 22.3 x 30.2 cm, Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Lee Krasner Pollock. (Jackson Pollock Catalogue Raisonné Archives, Pollock-Krasner Study Center)

About the author

ELIZABETH L LANGHORNE is a Professor at Central Connecticut State University, where she teaches modern and contemporary art history. She has taught at the University of Richmond, where she was also Director of the Marsh Gallery, at the University of Virginia, and at Tulane University. While at the University of Virginia she organized a symposium, Abstract Expressionism: Idea and Symbol. Her 1977 PhD dissertation for the University of Pennsylvania, "A Jungian Interpretation of Jackson Pollock's Art through 1946," sparked a scholarly discussion with William Rubin, then Director of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in the pages of *Art in America* in 1979-80. In the Fall of 1986 she became an Ailsa Mellon Bruce Visiting Senior Fellow, National Gallery of Art, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts. Her articles on Pollock include "Jackson Pollock's The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle" *Arts Magazine*, 1979, reprinted in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Interviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel, The Museum of Modern Art, 1999; "Pollock, Picasso and the Primitive," *Art History*, 1989; "The Magus and the Alchemist: John Graham and Jackson Pollock," *American Art*, 1998; "Evolution and Revolution," *Art Journal*, 1999; "Jackson Pollock und das Sakrale: Das Kirchenprojekt," in *Sakralität und Moderne*, ed. Peter Hawel, Hawel Verlag, Dorfen, 2010; "Pollock's Dream of a Biocentric Art: The Challenge of His and Peter Blake's Ideal Museum," in *Biocentrism and Modernism*, ed.

Oliver Botar, Ashgate Press, 2011; "The Effort of the Dance': Gravity and Levity in the Poured Paintings of Jackson Pollock," in *Gravity in Art: Essays on Weight and Weightlessness in Painting, Sculpture and Photography*, ed. Mary Edwards and Elizabeth Bailey, McFarland and Co, 2012; "Jackson Pollock: The Sin of Images," in *Meanings of Abstract Art*, ed. Paul Crowther and Isabel Wünsche, Routledge Press, 2012; "Art as 'Organizer' of Life: the Case of Jackson Pollock," in *Politics of Practical Reasoning: Integrating Action, Discourse and Argument*, ed. Ricca Edmondson and Karlheinz Hülser, Rowman and Littlefield. Her monograph on Pollock, *Jackson Pollock: Kunst als Sinnsuche* was published by Hawel Verlag, Wallerstein, in 2013.

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¹ Interview with John Bernard Myers, Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989) p. 417. See also Myers, "Surrealism and New York Painting, 1940-1948: A Reminiscence," *Artforum*, April 1977, p. 56.

² Sidney Simon, "Concerning the beginnings of the New York School: 1939-1942; An Interview with Peter Busa and Matta," *Art International*, vol. 11, Summer 1967, p. 19.

³ See Elizabeth Langhorne, *Jackson Pollock: Kunst als Sinnsuche* (Wallerstein: Hawel Verlag, 2013), p. 117.

⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 120-23.

⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 155-57, 189, 328.

⁶ On number of plates, see Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, eds., *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works*, 4 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978) vol. 4, p. 142.

⁷ Lee Krasner, quoted in B.H. Friedman, "An Interview with Lee Krasner Pollock," *Jackson Pollock: Black and White*, exh. cat. (New York: Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, 1969), p. 7. Lee Krasner, when questioned by William Rubin, confirmed that Pollock made the remark, "I choose to veil the imagery," referring to *There were 7 in 8*. See William Rubin, "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism, Part II," *Art in America*, Dec. 1979, p. 86.

⁸ See Langhorne, *ibid.*, p. 204

⁹ Piri Halasz, "Stanley William Hayter: Pollock's Other Master," *Arts Magazine*, November 1984, p. 73.

¹⁰ Stanley William Hayter, "Techniques of Gravure," *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, August 1944, vol. 12, no.1, pp. 6-13; "Line and Space of the Imagination," *View*, vol.4, no. 4, Dec. 1944, pp. 126-28, 140; "The Convention of Line," *American Magazine of Art*, March 1945; "The Language of Kandinsky," *American Magazine of Art*, May 1945; "Paul Klee: Apostle of Empathy," *American Magazine of Art*, April 1946.

¹¹ Langhorne, *ibid.*, pp. 200-04.