

Pollock, Hayter, & The Seeds of Abstract Expressionism

by Lanier Graham

ABSTRACT: Documentation for Pollock's newly recovered first engravings of 1944 in Hayter's New York workshop, and how they were a key point-of-departure for the development of Pollock abstract style. Based on recent interviews with Bill Hayter and Pollock's printer Reuben Kadish.

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During the 1980s, while serving as Curator of Prints & Illustrated Books at the National Gallery of Australia, I was working on three books at the same time. The first book was published in 1987 as *THE SPONTANEOUS GESTURE: PRINTS & BOOKS OF THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST ERA*. The second book was published in 1991 as Volume One of *THE PRINTS OF WILLEM DE KOONING: A CATALOGUE RAISONNE*. The third book was to be *THE PRINTS OF JACKSON POLLOCK: A HISTORY & CATALOGUE RAISONNE*. For a number of technical reasons, that manuscript was not completed. However, the research I was able to do with S. W. Hayter and Reuben Kadish shed new light on the legendary prints that Pollock made at Hayter's workshop between 1944 and 1945.

I met Hayter at his home in Paris during the summer of 1985. We spent much of the day taking about Pollock and those famous prints of 1944-45 that Pollock made in Hayter's workshop. We continued to correspond for some time. I reported the essence of what Hayter told me in *THE SPONTANEOUS GESTURE*. He was happy to learn that I was updating Lieberman's catalogue of Pollock prints, and wondered why Lieberman had not contacted him when compiling that catalogue. Hayter expressed the hope that I would locate more of the early lithos Pollock made under the influence of Benton (whom Pollock called his first "master.") Why? Because they would show how much he changed once he found himself. That took place under the influence of Hayter (whom Pollock called his second "master." Hayter also said he hoped I would locate the small, two-sided practice plate that Hayter described as Pollock's "breakthrough moment." He knew Kadish kept this little plate and thought he might still have it. He said: "A catalogue raisonné would not be complete without it."

Hayter often is described as the "father of modern printmaking." During his years among the Surrealists in Paris at his famous Atelier 17 he guided the printmaking efforts of Arp, Calder, Fini, Giacometti, Miró, Masson, Tanguy, and Picasso, and many, many others.

For Hayter, and for most of the Surrealists, the practice of Automatism involved entering a light trace in order to leave behind the usual grip of the rational mind. Using automatism, Hayter taught artists to enter a state of mind within which the art that one produces will emerge from what Hayter described to me as "spontaneous unreasoning."

After he moved to New York City in 1940 and set up Studio 17 in Greenwich Village, he guided the printmaking efforts of a number of Americans who would become famous members of the New York School, e.g., Pollock, de Kooning, Motherwell, and Rothko.

MoMA presented an exhibition of the work being done at Studio 17 in the summer of 1944. It was organized by Monroe Wheeler with a brochure written by J. J. Sweeney. The show went on to tour the US and South America for two years. At this time, American printmaking was dominated by rather traditional figuration. What came out of Hayter's workshop opened the eyes of many Americans to the fact that abstract work of considerable quality could be done as prints. Seeds of a new era in American printmaking were being planted.

Among those struck by the 1944 MoMA show was Pollock. He wanted in on the action, and Hayter's Greenwich Village workshop was right across the street from Pollock's apartment. Hayter set him up with Rube Kadish as his printer. Pollock had made lithographs before, but not engravings or etchings. Rube was a trusted master of printing techniques who had worked with Hayter earlier in California.

It turns out that Rube printed all of Pollock's plates during that 12 month period of 1944-45. There was no editioning. These were all trial plates, with only a few proofs ever pulled. Those plates disappeared until they were unearthed from a storage unit by Lee Krasner and Bill Lieberman who decided they were so important that editions should be made of the best plates. That editioning was done by Gabor Peterdi in 1967. It was an impression from one of these posthumous printings that in 2011 reached the auction level of \$100,000 US. Why so much for a posthumous print? In part because it is a very beautiful example of Pollock's Surrealist style. In part because it marks the critical transition from the Surrealist style to the Abstract Expressionist style, not only as a printer but as a painter, the most influential American painter of the 20th century.

The heated markings he carved into these metal plates formed the boiling cauldron inside of which his abstract style began to brew. The unconscious mind was not new to Pollock. He already was undergoing Jungian analysis. In terms of style, he was still slashing away at the rendering of semi-shamanic figures. But he was exploring his unconscious mind with a new level of confidence.

The lines being used to articulate the figures was taking on a life of their own. In the dance of these abstract rhythms, Pollock was starting to see the basic elements of what would become his totally abstract style.

Bernice Rose, Curator of Drawings at MoMA, in 1969, was the first to write a length about the special importance of printmaking in this critical transition from mythological figuration to mystical linearity. In her MoMA exhibition catalogue of that year, Rose wrote (with the full approval of Lee Krasner and Bill Lieberman) that:

...it seems probable that the central experience in the changing structure, in fact, his discovery of the overall linear configuration...is in the automatism of the printmaking.

This is exactly as Hayter remembered it. Following Hayter's suggestion, I looked up Kadish as soon as I could and began corresponding with him in 1986. Happily, he did still have the practice plate that Hayter said was such an important "moment." Moreover, Kadish's sharp memory provided many new details of the chronology of all the Pollock prints during 1944-45. (Most of the letters we exchanged are now in the Archives of American Art.) The Pollock information became even more detailed when I went to visit Kadish in 1989.

Lieberman's vague chronology of "1944-45" for the entire series can now be refined, thanks to new information from Kadish. Kadish told me that the smaller plates, the figurative and semi-figurative plates (that seem to incorporate influences from Miró and/or Klee), were done during the second half of 1944, starting during the autumn. The better-known, larger plates were made during the first six months of 1945 and printed on Hayter's larger press. The last work on this series was completed just before the summer of 1945. During that summer of 1945, Rube reported that the Pollocks, the Hayters, and Kadishes, and the Rosenbergs spent many happy days together on Long Island made joyful by knowing the long, horrible war in Europe would soon be over.

After Rube checked my notes at the end of this conversation, to be sure I had recorded the chronology correctly, he revealed from under a cloth the little copper plate that was the "breakthrough moment." On the first side of the plate is a sketch of a bird-like figure that seems to have been born from a vague memory of Miró and/or Klee. Pollock engraved it on a practice plate that Kadish had lying around and already had made a few squared-off marks to test a tool. So we see two different moments from two different hands "on top" of each other. Pollock got a feel for the tool. He returned to the plate a few days later to do the other side.

On the second side of the plate is an entirely abstract composition, a creative explosion. It can be said with confidence that this is the very first fluid linear abstract composition Pollock ever made. Kadish remembered how excited all three artists (Pollock, Kadish, & Hayter) were when this image was created early in the autumn of 1944. They all called it a "new beginning." Here was something new, something profound. Here was total freedom from the past. Here was the pulsating present within the fluid rhythms of which his unqualified *Self* could dance to life from the deepest levels of the unconscious mind. Pollock would make many more abstract compositions, compositions of much more complexity. But here was the first flowering of a new vision.

FLG, 1987 (revised 1991)

NOTE: Pollock had worked at the edge of abstraction before, notably in the Peggy Guggenheim mural from New Year's Eve of 1943-44 [now in Iowa]. But hidden under those great abstract lines was Pollock's vision of a stampede of wild animals. Krasner put a 1943 date on a totally abstract Pollock painting ["Composition with Pouring," in the Hirshhorn], a date both Hayter and Kadish did not believe. They were certain they would have known about an earlier fluid abstraction if there had been one, because the three of them talked about abstraction a good deal during 1944-45, and were very excited about this practice plate as the "breakthrough moment" and then about his follow-up abstract Christmas card of 1944. Pollock took a while to absorb the implications of this "breakthrough" to fluid total abstraction, both as a printmaker and as painter. He combined semi-surrealist figuration and highly energetic abstract rhythms for a while. 1944 and 1945 saw explosive explorations of this visual potential. In 1946 he began his legendary run of evenly balanced, all-over, totally abstract paintings such as "Eyes in the Heat" and "Shimmering Substance." It was the 1946-47 technique of pouring paint that finally enabled the realization of the full rhythmic potential inherent in the "breakthrough moment." In 1989 Kadish decided to print an edition of three sets ("for posterity"), and kindly gave one of those sets to me so it could take its place in the Pollock catalogue raisonné.

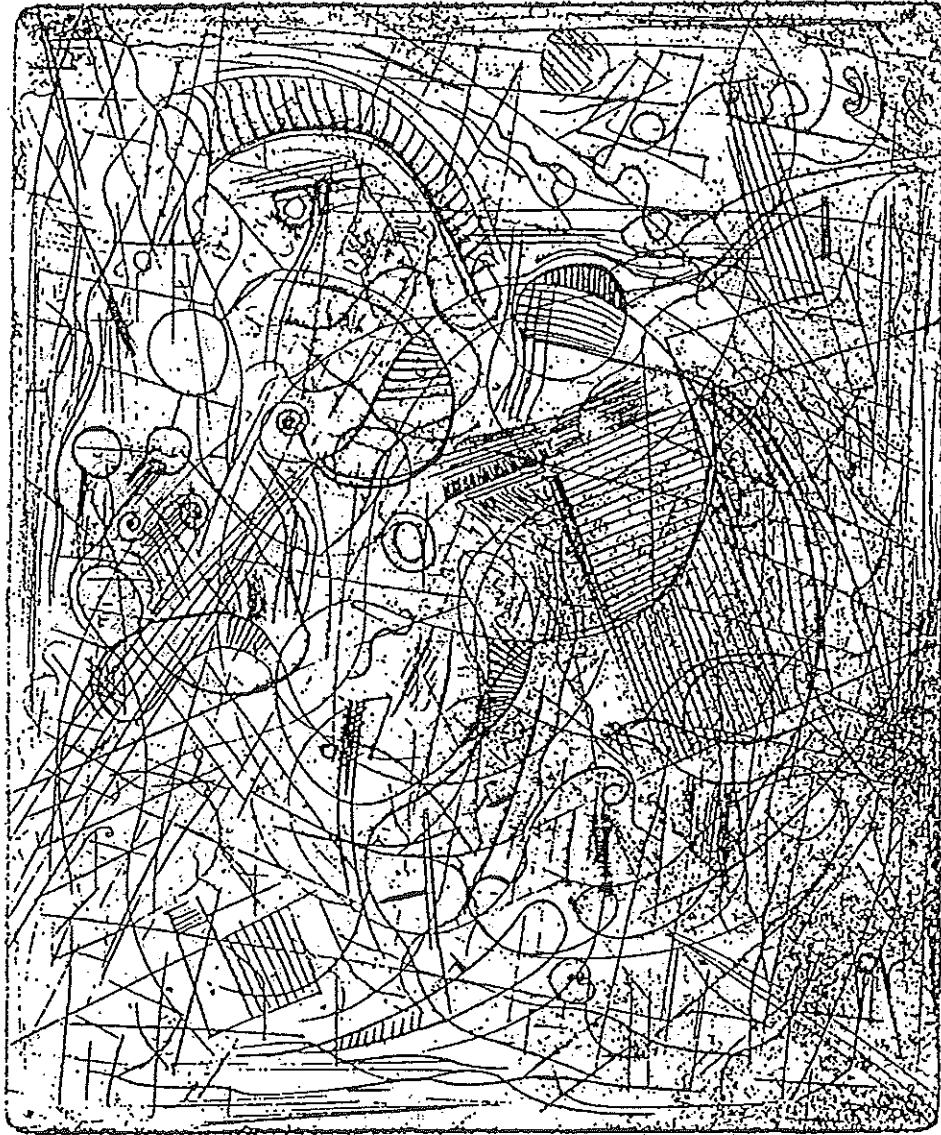


Figure 1



Figure 2