

**Unveiling the Unconscious: The Influence of Jungian Psychology on Jackson
Pollock and Mark Rothko**

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Introduction

Jack Kerouac, famed writer and pioneer of the Beat Generation, once wrote, “I want to work in revelations, not just spin silly tales for money. I want to fish as deep down as possible into my own subconscious in the belief that once that far down, everyone will understand because they are the same that far down.”¹ The importance Kerouac placed on the subconscious is rooted in Jungian and Freudian psychology, which slowly infiltrated American thought after Carl Gustav Jung’s visit to America in 1909. By the 1950s, the topic of the unconscious, often discussed by Jung, was prevalent in artistic circles ranging from Kerouac and the other writers and poets of the Beat Generation to the Abstract Expressionist and Surrealist painters of New York City. Two Abstract Expressionists, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, displayed a significant amount of influence from Jungian psychology in their works. Through their paintings and drawings, these artists explored the unconscious mind.

Abstract Expressionism is often divided into two categories: action painting and color field painting. The mature works of Jackson Pollock are representative of action painting, a term coined by art critic Harold Rosenberg. In “The American Action Painters,” Rosenberg writes that, in action painting, the canvas is “an arena in which to act.”² The paint drips in Pollock’s mature works required the use of large gestures. Mark Rothko’s paintings, however, are representative of the color-field paintings of the New York School. Rothko’s use of gesture is less evident; his mature paintings, instead,

¹ Cited by Steve Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster: A Life of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Viking Books, 1996), 117.

² Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News*, December 1952, <http://homepage.newschool.edu> (accessed July 10, 2008).

consist of simple blocks of color, ranging from bright reds to cool blues to the darkest black. Despite the differences in style between Pollock's and Rothko's paintings, Jungian influence is clear. These artists were influenced by Jung during the spread of psychological thought during the first half of the 20th century as well as personal experiences with Jungian psychotherapists in Pollock's case and Jungian-inspired Surrealist artists in both Rothko and Pollock's case.

The first chapter of this thesis provides a brief overview of Jung's theories regarding the psyche, as well as a description of the rise of Jungian thought in America. The second chapter moves into a discussion of the early works of both Pollock and Rothko. These works are more figurative in nature; however, they clearly reflect a Jungian influence through the use of automatist processes as well as through the use of Jungian iconography. The third chapter details the importance of theories regarding the psyche in Pollock's mature works. The majority of these paintings, which earned Pollock the name "Jack the Dripper," are indecipherable in terms of subject matter. Through Pollock's process, however, it is clear that the Jungian influence found in his early works continued on to his later paintings. The final chapter shifts to a discussion of Rothko's mature works, which, it will be argued, are "projective spaces." This theory, rooted in Jungian psychology, states that these paintings are tools that allow viewers to delve into their unconscious mind. It should become clear that both Rothko and Pollock were profoundly influenced by Jung in their mature as well as their early work. Much like Kerouac, these artists wished to "fish as deep down as possible" into their unconscious minds.

Chapter One – Jungian Psychology: An Overview

The influence of psychological thought on the New York School artists Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko cannot be fully appreciated without a basic understanding of Carl Jung's theories and the rise of these theories in the United States. Jung, a Swiss psychologist, was influential in a number of 20th century art movements, including Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism. His ideas were studied by many intellectuals, including some artists.

Jung (1875-1961) was originally a follower of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the famed Viennese developer of psychoanalysis. Freud began studying the unconscious when he theorized that dreams were filled with "latent content, which is [the dream's] hidden and symbolic meaning."³ He believed that dreams are a form of wish fulfillment; they reveal the dreamer's deepest desires and wants. Freud's theories, however, were mostly related to human sexuality. He posited that humans develop through a series of "psychosexual stages." According to Schultz and Schultz, the term "Freudian slip" describes how "in the everyday behavior of the normal person, as well as in neurotic symptoms, unconscious ideas are struggling for expression and are capable of modifying thought and action."⁴ Freud usually considered these "slips" sexual in nature, which implies that the unconscious is generally focused on sex.

It was the emphasis placed on sexuality that turned Jung away from Freudian theory. After Jung read Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* published in 1899, he began

³ Duane P. Schultz and Sydney Ellen Schultz, *A History of Modern Psychology* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 437.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 431.

corresponding with Freud and, eventually, met him in Vienna in 1907.⁵ In 1912, however, Jung released his *Psychology of the Unconscious*, which as Schultz and Schultz observe “deemphasized the role of sex and proposed a different conception of the libido.”⁶ Tension between the two psychologists grew and Freud and Jung severed ties. This led to the development of analytical psychology, Jung’s version of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Jung contested Freud’s idea of a purely sexual libido, an energy through which life instincts are manifested.⁷ Instead, as Ludy Benjamin writes, Jung referred to the libido as a “generalized life energy... not just concerned with sexual pleasures.”⁸ Sexuality, according to Jung, was only one of the many driving forces in life. Instead Jung explored other forces. Thus, Jung argued that Neurosis was not necessarily caused by sexual problems.

Jung also broke with Freud by placing greater emphasis on the unconscious. His interest in the unconscious was apparent even before he came in contact with Freud’s work. Before he started university, Jung used his dreams to interpret what he should study. Dreams of excavating the earth in search of prehistoric fossils and bones led to his interest in science, and, years later, his decision to pursue a medical degree in psychiatry.⁹ The importance he gave to unconscious thought was essential to the formation of his theory of different levels of consciousness.

⁵ Ibid., 464.

⁶ Ibid., 465.

⁷ Ibid., 439.

⁸ Ludy T. Benjamin Jr., *A Brief History of Modern Psychology* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 129.

⁹ Schultz and Schultz, *A History of Modern Psychology*, 464.

The levels of consciousness and unconsciousness, according to Jung, were all a part of a single unit called the “psyche.” In *Man and His Symbols*, Jung wrote that the “psyche is a part of nature, and its enigma is as limitless.”¹⁰ He determined that the psyche consisted of three separate parts: the conscious, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. Despite their differences, these parts of the psyche all play a part in determining human behavior. The conscious is comprised of “perceptions and memories... it is the avenue of contact with reality that enables us to adapt to our environment.”¹¹ The center of consciousness, in Jungian theory, is the ego, which is essentially how one views one self. Jung, however, did not place much importance on the conscious mind. He believed this area was explored too frequently and chose, instead, to delve into the study of the unconscious. The unconscious mind, in Jung’s opinion, influenced behavior more than the conscious.

The first level of the unconscious, the personal unconscious, is far easier to access than the deeply-rooted collective unconscious. The personal unconscious consists of experiences or thoughts that at some point were conscious, and have since become unconscious. According to Schultz and Schultz, these include “all the memories, impulses, wishes, faint perceptions, and other experiences in a person’s life that have been suppressed or forgotten.”¹² The conscious mind can only contain so much information at a certain time. The personal unconscious is, thus, a type of storage space in the human psyche. The thoughts and memories held in the personal unconscious can be easily retrieved with a conscious decision. Jung stated that, although essentially in

¹⁰ Carl G. Jung, “Approaching the unconscious,” in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung and M. -L von Franz (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1964), 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 467.

¹² *Ibid.*

storage, these “subliminal sense perceptions play a significant part in our everyday lives. Without our realizing it, they influence the way in which we react to both events and people.”¹³ These past experiences and memories shape a series of complexes, or aspects of personality which comprise a total personality, that can determine how one might act in certain situations and the emotional response that arises from specific events in a person’s life.

The collective unconscious, like the personal unconscious, also influences human behavior. The collective unconscious is deeply ingrained in the minds of all humans, according to Jung, and as Ludy Benjamin describes it, it is “a kind of racial ancestral memory in which the cumulative experiences of generations past [are] embedded deep in the psyche.”¹⁴ Jung considered the collective unconscious the most powerful aspect of the psyche, though humans remain unaware of it. From the collective unconscious, Jung theorized that

In addition to memories from a long-distant conscious past, completely new thoughts and creative ideas can... present themselves from the unconscious – thoughts and ideas that have never been conscious before. They grow up from the dark depths of the mind like a lotus and form a most important part of the subliminal psyche.¹⁵

This is essentially the reverse of the personal unconscious, in which conscious material sinks down to the unconscious level. Jung attributes artistic, philosophical, and scientific bursts of inspiration to ideas stored in the collective unconscious.¹⁶ According to Jung,

¹³ Carl G. Jung, “Approaching the unconscious,” 34.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *A Brief History of Modern Psychology*, 129.

¹⁵ Jung, “Approaching the unconscious,” 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

those who are able to receive information from the collective unconscious and form new ideas on a conscious level should be considered geniuses. Most people, however, only connect with the collective unconscious through their dreams, in which a dreamer experiences an event or a feeling that is not connected to his own past experience.

In order to explain fully the connection between the different levels of the psyche, Jung drew the following analogy:

A number of small islands rising above the surface of the water represent the individual conscious minds of a number of people. The land area of each island that is just beneath the water, which from time to time is exposed by the action of the tides, represents each individual's personal unconscious. The ocean floor, on which all the islands rest, is the collective unconscious.¹⁷

The analogy illustrates the importance for Jung of the collective unconscious. Without the ocean floor, the individual islands would have nothing on which to rest. In other words, the personal unconscious and the conscious mind could not exist without the collective unconscious. The islands would lack a base.

Jung theorized that the collective unconscious is the most important part of the mind because it provides the human race with archetypes, described by Jung as "an instinctive trend, as marked as the impulse of birds to build nests, or ants to form organized colonies."¹⁸ Archetypes are human tendencies inherited from generation to generation that influence how a person feels in a certain situation. They mostly control the emotions or state of mind. According to Jung, these archetypes cause us to cry in

¹⁷ Schultz and Schultz, *A History of Modern Psychology*, 468.

¹⁸ Jung, "Approaching the unconscious," 69.

response to death, or to feel happy in response to a birth. Archetypes also determine a specific response when a human comes face to face with a threat to his or her life. Jung makes it a point, however, to separate archetypes from instinct. In *Man and His Symbols*, he writes that:

What we properly call instincts are physiological urges, and are perceived by the senses. But at the same time they also manifest themselves in fantasies and often reveal their presence only by symbolic images. These manifestations are what I call the archetypes. They are without known origin; and they reproduce themselves in any time or in any part of the world.¹⁹

Archetypes could be summed up as a predisposition that is present in humans of every race and era.

Jung described many archetypes. Four, he believed, are the most common: the persona, the anima, the shadow, and the self. The persona is the personality that a human shows to others. It is how a human wants to be seen, rather than what he truly is. It can be described as “the mask each of us wears when we come in contact with others.”²⁰

Another archetype, the anima, is somewhat hidden from others, as opposed to the persona. Jung posited that the anima was the “female aspect in every male... in other words, though an individual’s visible personality may seem quite normal, he may well be concealing from others – or even from himself – the deplorable condition of ‘the woman within’.”²¹ Jungian psychologists have extended this idea to include the animus, which is the presence of masculine qualities in females. A third archetype is the shadow, which is

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Schultz and Schultz, *A History of Modern Psychology*, 468.

²¹ Jung, “Approaching the unconscious,” 31.

essentially the darker side of a person. Jung associated this side with primitive and animalistic tendencies that allow one to give in to immoral or dark urges.²² He also believed that the shadow side was the storehouse for creativity and passion, necessary qualities for the creation of art. Jung, however, felt that the most important archetype in human personality was that of the self. When the self is fully developed, a connection is formed between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. This leads to individuation, a process through which a person, as Jung put it, can “accept her or his archetypes into a unity of personality.”²³ This process is often referred to as self-actualization in modern psychological practice.

As previously stated, Jung believed that archetypes are given shape through symbolic images. Jung defines symbols as “a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning.”²⁴ Symbols can be seen in everyday life. For example, a cross is a representation of the Christian religion, though it is nothing more than a simple shape. The cross, however, is a meaningful, and sometimes even powerful, image for billions of people around the world. Jung explains that symbols are used in order to define concepts or ideas that the human mind cannot easily grasp.²⁵ Symbolic images, however, can be viewed differently by different people. The image of the cross, for example, may provoke an image of Jesus’ death in the mind of a devout Christian, which would create strong emotion. A member of an African tribe may, however, see an image of a cross and simply view it as a shape, if he has no previous knowledge of the

²² Schultz and Schultz, *A History of Modern Psychology*, 469.

²³ Benjamin, *A Brief History of Modern Psychology*, 129.

²⁴ Jung, “Approaching the unconscious,” 20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

Christian religion. His experience with the cross would thus be different from the experience of the devout Christian. This example illustrates Jung's statement that "when we attempt to understand symbols, we are not only confronted with the symbol itself, but we are brought up against the wholeness of the symbol-producing individual."²⁶

The "symbol-producing individual" creates a dilemma in Jungian psychological study. The differences in the interpretation of symbols make it impossible to create a set list of the meanings of symbols. If a man dreamed of the image of a cross, a psychologist could not automatically state that the man is dreaming of Jesus' death because the man might have a different interpretation of the cross from other patients, though he might not fully realize it. In *Man and His Symbols*, Jung writes that this problem can only be resolved by "learning the language of the individual patient and following the gropings of his unconscious toward the light. Some cases demand one method and some another."²⁷ The study of symbolism, thus, must remain mainly subjective.

These subjective symbols, Jung writes, can be produced "unconsciously and spontaneously, in the form of dreams."²⁸ Through dreams, one is able to connect with the collective unconscious and pull up a series of symbols, including symbols that might be unfamiliar to the dreamer. The symbols that appear in dreams, however, are more likely to be natural symbols than cultural symbols. Jung writes that natural symbols are derived from the unconscious contents of the psyche, and they therefore represent an enormous number of variations on the essential archetypal images. In many cases they can still be traced back to their archaic roots – i.e., to ideas and images that we meet in the most ancient

²⁶ Ibid., 92.

²⁷ Ibid., 66.

²⁸ Ibid., 21.

records and in primitive societies. The cultural symbols, on the other hand, are those that have been used to express ‘eternal truths,’ and that are still used in many religions. They have gone through many transformations and even a long process of more or less conscious development, and have thus become collective images accepted by civilized societies.²⁹

The cross could thus be termed a cultural symbol. If that symbol were to appear in a dream, it would most likely be a result of a cultural influence, rather than a result of the emergence of an image from the collective unconscious.

Though Jung believed that the collective unconscious could mostly be accessed through dreams, the Surrealists believed that one could coax out images from the collective unconscious through artistic creation. The Surrealists employed a technique called automatism, in which they allowed themselves to draw without conscious control. They relied on chance and accident in their artistic process and believed that they were simply products of the unconscious. The French poet André Breton, a leader of the Surrealist movement, became interested in the unconscious and dreamlike images after studying the works of Sigmund Freud. Breton wrote, “I believe that the apparent antagonism between dream and reality will be resolved in a kind of reality – in surreality.”³⁰ Through their art, the Surrealists hoped to highlight the unconscious mind. Jung’s theories of the unconscious were brought to the attention of the Surrealists in 1936 with the publication of Jung’s *Psychology and Alchemy*, which “created quite a stir in

²⁹ Ibid., 93.

³⁰ Cited in Aniela Jaffe, “Symbolism in the visual arts,” in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung and M. – L von Franz (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1964), 257.

analytic and Surrealist circles.”³¹ The beliefs of the Surrealists and their interest in psychology later spread to other artistic circles, including the Abstract Expressionists.

The Surrealists were mostly European, and thus had more direct contact with the ideas of European intellectuals, such as Jung and Freud. Many Surrealists, however, fled to the United States during World War II. These included Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, Marc Chagall, Pavel Tchelitchew, Kurt Seligmann, André Breton, and André Masson.³² These Surrealists influenced artists such as Pollock and Rothko to embrace psychology and, specifically, Jungian theory.

Before the Surrealists settled in the United States, Jungian theory was slowly becoming a part of American culture. In 1909, Freud spoke at a conference in the United States. He was accompanied by Hungarian psychologist Sandor Ferenczi and Carl Jung, his protégé at the time. Freud gave a total of five speeches entirely in German during the course of the trip while Jung gave three about his word-associate method.³³ Many influential psychologists, such as Joseph Jastrow, Edmund Sanford, and Henry Herbert Goddard, were also in attendance.³⁴ The psychologists in attendance helped spread Jungian and Freudian theory around the psychological community. Two years after the conference, the American Psychoanalytic Association was formed, and theories of the unconscious began to play a more important role in psychological study. Such psychoanalytic tests as the Rorschach Inkblot test and the Thematic Apperception Test entered psychological practice.

³¹ Ellen G. Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 175.

³² Claude Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock: “Psychoanalytic” Drawings* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1992), 5.

³³ Benjamin, *A Brief History of Modern Psychology*, 122.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

With time, Americans took a greater interest in the unconscious as a result of the spread of Jungian and Freudian theories. According to Benjamin, theories of the unconscious would soon “have a profound impact on American culture as expressed in art, literature, drama, films, and the language of everyday life.”³⁵ The artists, including Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, were only a small fraction of Americans who were influenced by Jung.

³⁵ Ibid., 126.

Chapter Two – Early Works

The influence of Jungian psychology can be found in the early works of both Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Through a variety of sources, Pollock and Rothko learned about Jungian symbolism and theories regarding the unconscious mind. Their knowledge of Jung, combined with inspiration from Surrealism, prompted both artists to employ automatist techniques in order to create works connected to the unconscious. Automatism and Jung were essential to the development of these artists' careers, from their early mythology-based early works to their psychologically-centered mature works.

Pollock became closely acquainted with Jungian analytical psychology when he attended therapy sessions with Doctor Joseph Henderson, a psychotherapist from New York City, from 1939 to 1940. According to Claude Cernuschi, it is likely that Pollock “was familiar with basic Jungian ideas such as archetypal symbolism and the collective unconscious” before he began attending sessions with Henderson.³⁶ At these sessions, Pollock rarely spoke. Consequently, Henderson urged the artist to bring in some of his drawings for analysis. Over the course of 18 months, Pollock provided Henderson with 83 images, 13 of which were drawn on opposite sides of the same paper.³⁷ In *Jackson Pollock: “Psychoanalytic” Drawings*, Cernuschi described the drawings Pollock produced for Henderson:

Some are carefully and deliberately finished, with particular attention to detail, while others were produced more rapidly, with agitated lines, and with little attention to the precise definition of specific forms. Some display a single layer of linear drawing, while others betray a tendency to

³⁶ Claude Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock: The Psychoanalytic Drawings*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1992), 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

densely rework either specific areas or all areas of the paper surface. Some are rectilinear, and some conspicuously Cubist-inspired, while others are curvilinear, organic, and more conspicuously Surrealist-inspired.³⁸

Despite the myriad differences in these drawings, it can be argued that they all represent images from Pollock's psyche. Henderson himself wrote that Pollock was "portraying the unconscious in these drawings."³⁹

The drawings done during this period contain a wealth of Jungian imagery. One sketch in particular, not titled or dated by Pollock, can be interpreted as Jungian due to its color symbolism. The colors yellow, blue, green, and red are predominant in the drawing. These colors correspond with Jung's theory of the four human functions, namely, intuition, thinking, sensation, and emotion or feeling.⁴⁰ This drawing is particularly important because it is similar in coloration to a gouache Pollock gave to Henderson as a going-away gift.⁴¹ This undated picture, entitled *Crucifixion* (Marisa del Re Gallery, New York), shows a man, colored yellow, on a greenish-black cross. The figure is surrounded by a number of other contorted, semi-abstract figures, colored blue, red, and green. Considering that this work was made specifically for Henderson, it is likely that Pollock imbued it with symbolism that he learned from the psychotherapist.⁴² Pollock would have been sure that Henderson would understand the significance of the gift.

Henderson, however, was not the only Jungian in Pollock's life. After Henderson moved to California in 1940, Pollock continued Jungian therapy with Doctor Violet Staub de Laszlo. During the two years he saw Doctor de Laszlo, Pollock completed a

³⁸ Cited in Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock: The Psychoanalytic Drawings*, 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

number of Jungian motivated paintings, including *Bird* (1941, The Museum of Modern Art, New York). *Bird* is often interpreted as Pollock's desire to complete the process of individuation. The focal point of the painting is the eye located in the uppermost portion of the picture. This eye, according to Ellen G. Landau, can be

interpreted along Jungian lines... This "third eye" might stand for enlightenment (i.e., self-discovery); an equally credible Freudian explanation would identify this image as phallic. Whatever its import, the overstated eye contributes a great deal to the fierce intensity of the painting, whose meaning was clearly bound up with Pollock's urgent need to achieve psychological control. It has been suggested that he may have intended in *Bird* to represent the successful synthesis of his anima and animus, which Henderson had recognized as a confused aspect of his personality.⁴³

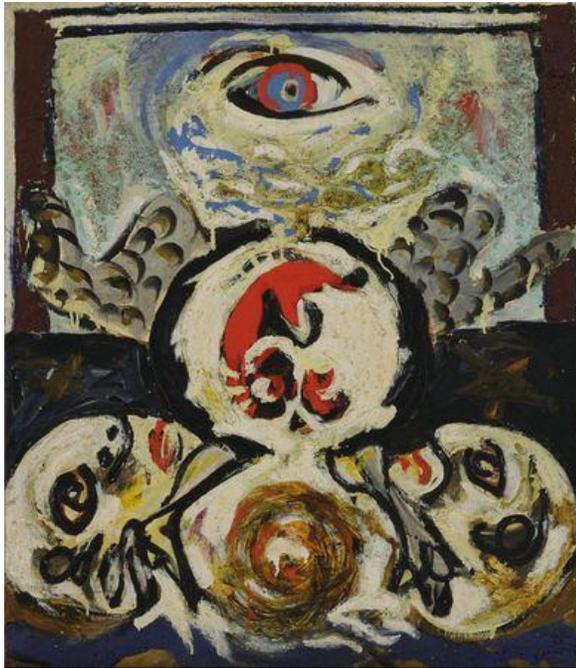
Of course, Pollock's use of symbolism remains subjective, due to the dilemma of the "symbol-producing individual" discussed in the first chapter. It remains apparent, however, that Pollock had what Jung would call a negative anima, which can be determined from Pollock's biography.⁴⁴ Pollock's mother, Stella Mae McClure Pollock, was described by Jackson's brothers as an intimidating woman.⁴⁵ Stella supposedly cultivated such a fear in Jackson that Henderson wrote that he observed "a hell of a

⁴³ Ellen G. Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 67.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth L. Langhorne, "Jackson Pollock's 'The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle,'" in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 206.

⁴⁵ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 109.

mother problem” in Pollock.⁴⁶ Pollock’s problems with women resulted in a conflicted anima which, very likely, influenced works such as *Bird*.



Jackson Pollock, *Bird*, 1941, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

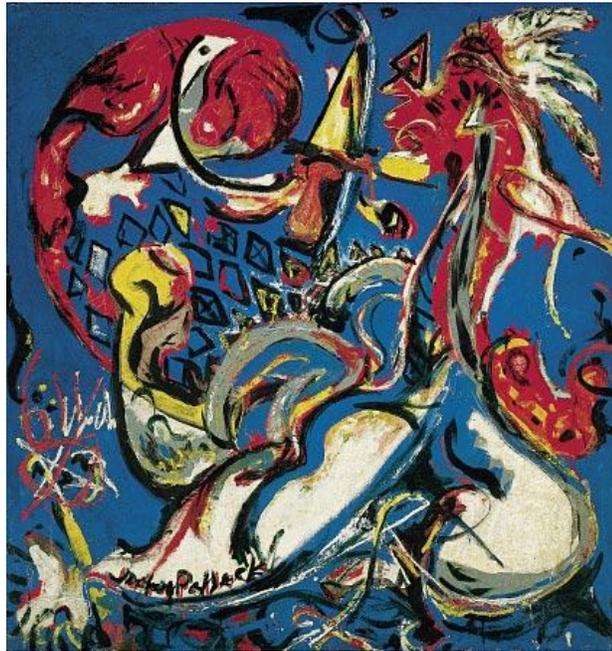
Along with *Bird*, Pollock created a number of other works expressive of his “negative anima” and problems with women, including *Moon Woman Cuts the Circle* (1943, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris). Pollock created a number of paintings and drawings associated with the moon, which is generally assumed to symbolize women in Pollock’s works. Henderson himself theorized that Pollock associated women with the moon after studying the works Pollock submitted during therapy sessions. Elizabeth L. Langhorne writes:

Dr. Henderson reveals that Pollock associates the crescent moon with female. The yellow crescent appears in the pubic area as one of the many female symbols in a composite image of woman. This assignation of sex

⁴⁶ Ibid.

to the celestial bodies, female moon and therefore male sun, occurs throughout world myth, and is often pointed out by Jung.⁴⁷

It could easily be assumed that the “moon woman” in the painting represents Pollock’s mother. However, a deeper understanding of Jungian psychology informs one that, in order to cure a negative anima, there must be a “union of opposites.”⁴⁸ In *Moon Woman Cuts the Circle*, the moon represents the female, which is further associated with the unconscious, according to Jung, and the circle represents the male, which, in turn, is associated with the conscious.⁴⁹ Thus, *Moon Woman Cuts the Circle* illustrates Pollock’s own desire for individuation, the process through which the conscious and the unconscious become connected. Pollock, arguably, reveals his desire to accept his archetypes in both *Bird* and *Moon Woman Cuts the Circle*.



Jackson Pollock, *Moon Woman Cuts the Circle*, 1943, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

⁴⁷ Langhorne, “Jackson Pollock’s ‘The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle,’” 204.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

In addition to the moon and the circle, a number of other symbols recur throughout Pollock's early works. The bull and the horse are two of the most common images in Pollock's early work. Cernuschi writes that, in Pollock's drawings, "the horse and bull act out a tense symbolic relationship between the active and the passive, the weak and the strong, the aggressor and the victim."⁵⁰ It is likely that the works of Pablo Picasso influenced Pollock to use images of these animals. When he was a student of Frederick Schwankovsky, Pollock first came in contact with Picasso's work through articles in various art magazines.⁵¹ Pollock's interest in Picasso peaked when John Graham, a surrealist artist and friend of Pollock, wrote an article connecting Picasso to Jungian psychology and primitivism.⁵² Picasso's painting *Guernica* (1937, Museo Reina Sofia), which Pollock probably viewed when it was on display at the Valentine Gallery in New York in 1939, includes images of both a horse and a bull.⁵³ The extent to which Picasso and his animal imagery influenced Pollock, however, remains unclear. While Pollock's use of animal imagery possibly derives from Picasso, one cannot assume that Pollock intended these animals to be interpreted to have the same meaning as Picasso's bull and horse. For Picasso, the bull is used as an "exclusively negative symbol."⁵⁴ Pollock, however, used the bull in a number of different contexts; it is sometimes the aggressor, but, in some drawings, the bull plays a more passive role.⁵⁵ This difference in meaning places Pollock in the Jungian role of the "symbol-producing individual" discussed in the first chapter. Thus, while Pollock may have borrowed images from

⁵⁰ Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock: The Psychoanalytic Drawings*, 14.

⁵¹ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 77.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁴ Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock: The Psychoanalytic Drawings*, 14.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Picasso, these images are imbued with Pollock's personal interpretation, possibly arising from his unconscious.

The use of symbols raises questions concerning their origin in Pollock's mind. It can be argued that the use of the bull and horse symbolism was simply a tribute to Picasso, but that would only lead to a neglect of the other images in Pollock's early works. Besides the horse and bull, Pollock depicted snakes, humans, mandalas, and many unrecognizable and unidentifiable forms. Naturally, these images can not all be designated as a tribute to another artist. These images are possibly products of Pollock's psyche. There is a debate, however, as to whether Pollock consciously created these symbols, or whether they arose from the unconscious. Some scholars, such as Elizabeth Langhorne, argue that Pollock consciously illustrated "erudite psychological principles" in order to create a "preplanned... iconography" influenced by the study of Jungian theory.⁵⁶ While it is obvious that Pollock had knowledge of Jungian principles through interaction with his psychotherapists, many scholars take the opposing side and argue that it can not be determined whether Pollock consciously let Jungian symbolism influence his work. For example, Cernuschi writes:

Indeed, Langhorne and other Jungian critics of Pollock, by assuming Jungian symbolism to be conscious, have, in a sense, misunderstood Jung. They have confused unconscious psychology with deliberate iconography, or, in psychoanalytic terms, latent content with manifest content. As [Donald] Gordon stated, somewhat ironically: "It was not Jung after all

⁵⁶ Ibid., 22.

who invented the mythic image in the first place, it was instead the autonomous *unconscious* of practicing artists.”⁵⁷

Thus Cernuschi argues that Pollock had no intention of creating an image with a specific meaning. Any symbolism in his work arose without a conscious intention, much as images arise from the unconscious during dreams.

The unconscious creation of symbolism in Pollock’s early works is supported by the presence of primitive symbolism and designs in many of his paintings and drawings. Many of his works created between 1938 and 1941 are “painted in intense, shrill colors reminiscent of Mexican and American Indian folk art, and arrows, zigzags, lightning and other ideographic symbols abound in their more schematic designs.”⁵⁸ Pollock, however, claimed that any reference to primitive art in his work was unintentional. These symbols, Pollock stated, were most likely “the result of early memories and enthusiasms.”⁵⁹

Pollock here implies that the indirect Native American and Mexican influence in his art comes from his own unconscious. A Jungian, however, would argue that these images arise from the collective unconscious. Jung believed that “primitive” people, as well as children, were more closely connected to the collective unconscious than “civilized” man.⁶⁰ Pollock, it could be argued, tapped into the collective unconscious through his artistic process, thus unconsciously producing primitive mythical images.

Pollock’s artistic process was predominately automatist, a technique inspired by the Surrealists. Robert Motherwell introduced Pollock to Roberto Matta Echaurren, a Chilean Surrealist, in 1942. Matta, who employed automatism in his own works,

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 51.

⁵⁹ Cited in Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 56.

⁶⁰ Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock: The Psychoanalytic Drawings*, 7.

introduced the future Abstract Expressionists to the Surrealist game *Cadavre Exquis*, or Exquisite Corpse, a game invented by André Breton, Marcel Duhamel, Jacques Prévert, and Yves Tanguy.⁶¹ Pollock, his wife Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, and other Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists spent summers in Provincetown playing this game in which each player would write down a word or a series of words in order to create a sentence or poem when combined.⁶² This game, designed to coax out responses from the unconscious, was automatist in nature. One poem that resulted in one of Pollock's games states: "thick thin/ Chinese American Indian/ sun snake woman life/ effort reality/ total."⁶³ This poem includes many of the same symbols found in Pollock's early work.

The Surrealists clearly influenced Pollock's art. Pollock himself admitted that he was "particularly impressed with the Surrealist concept of the source of art being the unconscious."⁶⁴ His use of the Surrealist automatist techniques allowed him to work in an uncontrolled and spontaneous manner that, arguably, led to his depiction of images from the collective unconscious. Mark Rothko, similarly, was greatly influenced by Surrealist automatism. In a draft of a statement for the catalogue *Painting Prophecy*, Rothko referred to surrealist art as his "roots."⁶⁵ According to Anna C. Chave, in the early 1940s, Rothko gained a "respect for the basic tenet of surrealism that artists should work in an unguarded or 'automatic' way, fueled by the fresh, undiluted juices roiling in their unconscious minds."⁶⁶ Gordon Onslow-Ford, a surrealist who greatly valued automatic drawings, was particularly inspiring. Onslow-Ford gave a series of lectures in New York

⁶¹ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 89.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Langhorne, "Jackson Pollock's 'The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle,'" 211.

⁶⁴ Cited in Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 89.

⁶⁵ Mark Rothko, "I adhere to the reality of things," in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006), 44.

⁶⁶ Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989), 8.

in 1941 attended by Rothko that influenced him to employ automatic artistic processes.⁶⁷ Not interested in automatic drawing, Rothko explored his unconscious through large-scale painting. In the late 1940s, Rothko used house-painters sized brushes to make large, sweeping strokes on canvas.⁶⁸ These strokes followed procedures Onslow-Ford discussed; they were not pre-meditated or sketched in advance.

John Graham is another surrealist who influenced Rothko's early works. Graham stated that he promoted a connection "with the primordial racial past" by connecting "with the unconscious (actively by producing works of art)."⁶⁹ This clear reference to the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious inspired the use of such titles as "Ancestral Imprint" and "Archaic Fantasy" in Rothko's surrealist-inspired early works.⁷⁰

Rothko was less directly influenced by Jungians than Pollock. Unlike Pollock, Rothko did not meet with Jungian psychotherapists. Rothko, however, admired the surrealist style, which caused Jungian theory to permeate his belief system. The surrealists placed great importance on myth, mostly due to Jung's belief that mythical symbols arise from the collective unconscious. Chave states that Rothko, following the surrealists' lead, "turned to myth and to Greek tragedy in search of the weighty subjects called for by the cataclysmic times."⁷¹ These so-called "cataclysmic times" are marked by World War I and World War II, events that revealed the brutality of mankind. Michael Leja, writes that artists such as Rothko turned to primitivism and myth in order to "address and contain the barbarism of twentieth-century history" through an understanding of the primitive, which "centered on the experience and expression of

⁶⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁶⁹ Cited in Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, 63.

⁷⁰ Ibid..

⁷¹ Ibid., 59.

terror and brutality.”⁷² Leja argues that Rothko and other artists of the period attempted to understand man’s savagery during World War II by exploring the barbaric themes associated with primitive man and the epic battles that appear in ancient myth. In order to understand the inner brutality of humans, the Abstract Expressionists turned to their unconscious, which, according to Jung, contains memories of primitive ancestors.

Though Rothko’s surrealist works contain indecipherable images, the presence of mythology becomes clear through the use of mythological references in his choice of titles. During a radio broadcast on October 13, 1943 with Adolph Gottlieb, Rothko stated:

If our titles recall the known myths of antiquity, we have used them because they are the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas. They are the symbols of man’s primitive fears and motivations, no matter in which land or what time, changing only in detail but never in substance, be they Greek, Aztec, Icelandic, or Egyptian. And modern psychology finds them persisting still in our dreams, our vernacular, and our art, for all the changes in the outward conditions of life.⁷³

Rothko’s use of the phrase “primitive fears and motivations” connects back to Leja’s theory that the use of mythological symbols was a response to the brutality of the era. Through his art, Rothko tried to understand what motivated men to commit atrocious acts. This is seen especially in Rothko’s painting *The Birth of the Cephalopods* (1944, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.). In this painting, two bird-like creatures

⁷² Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 82.

⁷³ Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, “The Portrait and the Modern Artist,” in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006), 39.

surround a group of octopi. Rothko related a story in his discussion of the painting. “A sharp-eyed eagle,” wrote Rothko, “who saw an octopus from the clouds and seized him, but fell, unhappy bird, entangled by his tentacles, into the sea, losing both its prey and its life.”⁷⁴ This story symbolizes the barbarism of modern times. The cephalopods, or octopi, represent the predators; they are Rothko’s way of expressing “basic psychological ideas” of violence and destruction. Chave writes that the “cephalopods may signify – after a Jungian model – the survival into modern times of primordial elements capable of menacing or even undoing civilization.”⁷⁵ Consciously or unconsciously, Rothko was clearly preoccupied with the brutal nature of man and turned to the Jungian theory of myth in order to express his ideas.

In 1943, Rothko and Gottlieb wrote a letter to the art critic of *The New York Times*, Edward Alden Jewel. This letter provided Rothko and Gottlieb with an occasion to relate facts about their artwork; it also shows the pervasive influence of Jungian and the surrealists in Rothko’s art. The two artists wrote:

To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks... There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.⁷⁶

The “unknown world” is arguably the unconscious or, more specifically, the collective unconscious. Through the collective unconscious, Rothko, like many other artists at the

⁷⁴ Cited in Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, 69.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, “Rothko and Gottlieb’s letter to the editor, 1943,” in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006), 36.

time, obtained his subject matter, Landau writes, through a “rudimentary and instinctual” approach to art.⁷⁷

Unlike Pollock, Rothko was unconcerned in his paintings with his own conscious or unconscious. He was, instead, interested in “the human drama” as a whole.⁷⁸ Rothko did not attempt to sort out his own psychological problems in his work. Rather, he chose to express human emotions and feelings through the “universal mythic unconscious,” which, Chave writes, was “a summoning into modern times of a cherished vision of a long-lost, whole, and integral community with shared monsters and gods, shared beliefs, and values.”⁷⁹ It could be argued, the “monsters and gods” depicted by Rothko in his works from the 1940s arise from Rothko’s studies rather than through his own unconscious. In 1940, Rothko took a break from painting in order to study myth.⁸⁰ Afterward, his works contained many mythological references. In this time, according to his first wife Edith Sachar, Rothko studied works by Nietzsche, Aeschylus, Sir James George Frazer, and even Freud and Jung.⁸¹ Thus, Rothko’s use of symbols were very likely conscious productions. Either way, his use of myth and automatist technique demonstrates the influence of Jungian psychology. Appalled by the violence of war, Rothko chose to look inward to the human psyche.

This inward-looking approach is clearest in Rothko’s “portraits.” Rothko argued that

the artist’s real model is an ideal which embraces all of human drama rather than the appearance of a particular individual. Today the artist is no

⁷⁷ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 120.

⁷⁸ Rothko and Gottlieb, “The Portrait and the Modern Artist,” 38.

⁷⁹ Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, 81.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

longer constrained by the limitation that all of man's experience is expressed by his outward appearance. Freed from the need of describing a particular person, the possibilities are endless. The whole of man's experience becomes his model, and in that sense it can be said that all of art is a portrait of an idea.⁸²

Thus, Rothko attempted to depict the inner self in his portraits, rather than a specific likeness. He felt that by abandoning the human figure, he could create a more realistic image of a person's true being.⁸³ *Slow Swirl by the Edge of the Sea* (Museum of Modern Art, New York), one of Rothko's paintings from 1944, is a double portrait, presumably of Rothko and his second wife, Mell.⁸⁴ This portrait represents a change from Rothko's portraits of the 1930s, before he was influenced by Surrealism, which contain recognizable human figures. In *Slow Swirl*, the humans are depicted as a series of odd shapes, curved lines, and spirals. Though unidentifiable, these figures are drawn from Rothko's instincts; they represent how his psyche truly identifies itself with his wife.



Mark Rothko, *Slow Swirl by the Edge of the Sea*, 1944, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁸² Rothko and Gottlieb, "The Portrait and the Modern Artist," 38.

⁸³ Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, 59.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

Like many of Rothko's early works, *Slow Swirl* contains an abundance of mythological symbols. These symbols, whether they arose from his unconscious or from his studies were inspired by Jungian psychology. As in Pollock's early works, Rothko's art shows clear evidence of Jungian influence. After interacting with the Surrealists, Rothko wrote that he "uncovered the glossary of myth and... established a congruity phantasmagoria of the unconscious with the objects of everyday life."⁸⁵ The Surrealists motivated Rothko, as well as Pollock, to explore their own unconscious in order to draw forth ancient symbols. This exploration prompted both Pollock and Rothko to become modern-day mythmakers.

⁸⁵ Rothko, "I adhere to the reality of things," 44.

Chapter Three – Jackson Pollock

When Jackson Pollock was still experimenting with Surrealist-influenced symbolic imagery in the winter of 1942, he attended meetings at the studio of Gerome Kamrowski, a surrealist living in New York City.⁸⁶ Ellen Landau writes that, at one of these meetings, also attended by Abstract Expressionist William Baziotis:

Kamrowski recalled that... he, Pollock, and Baziotis were “fooling around” with quart cans of lacquer paint. Baziotis asked if he could use some “to show Pollock how the paint could be spun around,” He then looked around the room for something to work on, and a canvas that Kamrowski had “been pouring paint on and was not going well” was handy, so Baziotis began to “throw and drip” white paint on it. He gave the dripping palette knife to Jackson, who “with intense concentration” started “flipping the paint with abandon.”⁸⁷

This incident resulted in the creation of an untitled painting, somewhat reminiscent of Pollock’s famed mature works. While it is unknown which segments of the painting are Pollock’s work, there are clear areas that foreshadow the drip technique that Pollock began to employ in the years to come. Only a year later, in 1943, Pollock created *Composition with Pouring II* (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.), a painting comprising blue, green, brown, and red swirls covered in black and white drippings. Though it does not consist entirely of drippings, this painting demonstrates the effect of the “throwing and dripping” lesson at Kamrowski’s studio.

⁸⁶ Ellen G. Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 96.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Pollock did not create his first drip painting until 1947, about a year after he left New York City. With his wife Lee Krasner, Pollock moved to a farmhouse in Long Island in November 1945. This change in scenery marks a definite shift in Pollock's style. According to Landau, "Pollock wrote that the change of light and space on Long Island was forcing him to reorient his artistic thinking."⁸⁸ After the move, Pollock's alcoholism disappeared for many years; in fact, the end of his alcohol addiction coincided with the creation of his mature works.⁸⁹ Pollock, however, did not immediately turn to his drip technique after he settled in Long Island. *The Tea Cup* (Collection Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden), *The Key* (The Art Institute of Chicago), and *The Water Bull* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) belong to a series of paintings that Lee Krasner termed the "Accabonac Creek Series" of 1946.⁹⁰ In these paintings, Pollock continued to depict the abstract symbols, such as swirls and eyes, present in his works from the early 1940s, though to a lesser degree. The "Accabonac Creek Series" differs from his earlier works, however, due to Pollock's use of color. Bright reds, lime greens, royal blues, light purples, and intense yellows are prevalent throughout his paintings from this period. Previous to the move, Pollock's paintings were subdued, almost neutral, in color. His early preference for muddy colors is arguably a result of his lessons with Thomas Hart Benton, who supported the use of line rather than color in order to create great art.⁹¹ Long Island, however, brought about a change in Pollock. A Jungian would opine that the new environment was therapeutic. It is possible that the artist's mental problems were quieted.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 157.

⁸⁹ William Rubin, "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism," in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 227.

⁹⁰ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 161.

⁹¹ Ibid.



Jackson Pollock, *The Tea Cup*, 1946, Collection Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden.

While Pollock's new found use of bright color was short-lived, the effects of his new lifestyle continued to transform his work. This transformation is clearly seen in *Galaxy* (Joslyn Art Museum), one of Pollock's paintings from 1947. This painting is included among Pollock's first set of drip paintings; however, it contains some remnants of the style employed in the "Accobonac Creek Series" beneath the splatters, presumably added later.⁹² Amorphous, brightly-colored shapes are veiled by a series of drips, mostly white. In the same year, Pollock created *Reflection of the Big Dipper* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) and *Full Fathom Five* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York), both of which were entirely covered with the drips that appeared in *Galaxy*. Specific shapes reminiscent of those used in the "Accobonac Creek Series" or in his earlier works, however, are not present on the surface of these two drip paintings.

⁹² Ibid., 169.



Jackson Pollock, *Galaxy*, 1947, Joslyn Art Museum.

Pollock's sudden return to the "throwing and dripping" technique he learned four years earlier in Kamrowski's apartment cannot be explained. It is clear, however, that Pollock embraced the direct nature of this painting process. In a draft of his 1947 statement published in *Possibilities*, Pollock, referring to his new technique, wrote, "I approach painting the same way I approach drawing, that is, direct... the more immediate, the more direct – the greater the possibilities of making... a statement."⁹³ This "statement" could have a number of different meanings. Viewed in a Jungian light, the "statement" is Pollock's expression of his unconscious. This implies that Pollock's desire to delve into both his personal unconscious and the collective unconscious carried over from his early myth-based works to his more abstract mature works. Many scholars avoid discussing the continued influence of Jungian psychology on Pollock's mature

⁹³ Cited in Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 169.

works due to the complete lack of recognizable symbols in these paintings.⁹⁴ Jung's influence, nevertheless, is evident in Pollock's drip paintings, especially if one analyzes Pollock's artistic process.

The drip technique, as stated previously, originated with experiments with Baziotes and Kamrowski. Gerome Kamrowski was known for his surrealist "image-coaxing techniques," namely, processes automatist in style.⁹⁵ He, essentially, coaxed out different images, presumably from the unconscious, through the use of chance and instinct. Pollock's drip process, which evolved from experiences in Kamrowski's studio, naturally contains the same impulsive character as Kamrowski's image-coaxing. Michael Leja writes that

an impulse arises in the unconscious and proceeds to the conscious part of the mind, where it is experienced as emotion. From there the impulse ideally is transformed into action, that is, the spontaneous expenditure of energy upon the environment... Pollock's mature practice could be viewed as... the making visible of inner forces, energy, and motion.⁹⁶

Thus, Pollock's impulsive drip technique allowed him to depict "inner forces," or the unconscious. Though Pollock discontinued his use of specific Jungian symbolism, his method of painting was still Jungian in nature. He relinquished his conscious control of the painting in order to express his psyche through gesture. Pollock explains that this gesture was unconscious in his final draft of his statement "My Painting" for *Possibilities* in which he wrote: "When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is

⁹⁴ Rubin, "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism," 222.

⁹⁵ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 96.

⁹⁶ Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 187.

only after a sort of ‘get acquainted’ period that I see what I have been about... I try to let it come through.”⁹⁷ It appears that for Pollock, painting was an activity through which he could explore his unconscious; it was a tool of self-discovery and reflection. Leja writes that Pollock’s “canvases are popularly seen as arenas in which mental demons were exorcised and expressed, the unconscious faced, grappled with, stared down.”⁹⁸ Thus, it could be argued that painting was, for Pollock, a method of Jungian therapy. This therapy was, however, more personal than his early works due to the lack of recognizable figures. In his works from the late 1930s and early 1940s, particularly the psychoanalytic drawings analyzed by Henderson, Pollock simply created symbolic images through the use of automatist technique. In his mature works, however, Pollock abandoned the weight of symbolism. Unhindered by a specific iconography, Pollock allowed his unconscious gesture to take full control, thus permitting a more evolved Jungian influence to permeate his artwork.

Pollock’s mature technique also contains an element of primitivism reminiscent of the use of Native American and Mexican iconography in his works from the early 1940s. Though his later works do not necessarily contain specific primitive symbols, Pollock painted them in a process similar to Native American shamanistic practice. In a description of the creation of Pollock’s *Mural* (1943, University of Iowa Museum of Art), Landau wrote: “Pollock seems to have attacked this composition (which was finally created in a single night) in a frenzy of inspiration. Like the Indian shamans he admired, he meditated first, then moved rapidly into action.”⁹⁹ Even after he left New York City

⁹⁷ Jackson Pollock, “My Painting,” in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 18.

⁹⁸ Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, 202.

⁹⁹ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 147.

and began his mature style, Pollock continued to employ the same shamanistic process.¹⁰⁰

In *Possibilities*, Pollock confirmed the influence of Native American process on his mature works. He wrote:

My painting does not come from the easel. I hardly ever stretch my canvas before painting. I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or the floor. I need the resistance of a hard surface. On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be *in* the painting. This is akin to the method of the Indian sand painters of the West.¹⁰¹

Therefore, Pollock's mature works retained an aspect of primitivism, despite their completely abstract nature. Jung emphasized the connection between the primitive mind and the collective unconscious. Through Pollock's use of a primitive artistic practice, he demonstrated the influence of Jungian theory on his work through the employment of primitive methods. Of course, it could be argued that it was Pollock's upbringing in Wyoming and appreciation of the West that led to his use of Native American processes. It remains, however, that Pollock revealed the importance of primitivism in his art, thus displaying a connection with Jung's theory involving the relation of primitivism to the unconscious.

Pollock ceased creating his all-over drip paintings after Hans Namuth created a film in 1950 documenting Pollock's artistic process. This film had a tremendous effect on Pollock's lifestyle, and, in turn, his artwork. In a description of an event that occurred after the film's debut, Landau wrote:

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 182.

¹⁰¹ Pollock, "My Painting," 17.

To everyone's shock, Jackson Pollock immediately walked into the house and poured himself a succession of stiff drinks. A few hours later, after having been stone sober for two years, he was so out of control that he overturned the dinner table, in an appalling reprise of many an earlier drunken rage.¹⁰²

The reason for Pollock's sudden return to alcoholism after the premiere of Namuth's movie has been debated. Supposedly, Pollock admitted to a friend, Jeffrey Porter, that he "agreed with primitive peoples who believe that when a photographer takes your picture he steals your soul."¹⁰³ Another friend of Pollock's, James Brooks, said that Pollock was overwhelmed by the sudden realization of his fame.¹⁰⁴ Pollock became self-conscious and insecure, according to Brooks. The painter feared for his privacy. This level of fame, when mixed with Pollock's already unstable mental condition, resulted in a breakdown that caused him to spiral out of control.

Pollock's paintings changed dramatically after his return to drinking. While he continued to use the drip technique on occasion, his paintings regained some of the symbolism that dominated his works from the early 1940s, when he was still visiting his psychotherapists. Images such as eyes, totems, and guardians once again became apparent in his work.¹⁰⁵ In these paintings, Pollock abandoned the use of color from his drip paintings as well as his "Accabonac Creek Series." Usually consisting of black pouring on a simple white canvas, these works are eerie in nature and representative of Pollock's once again unstable mental condition. One painting in particular, *Number 7*,

¹⁰² Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 204.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

1951 (1951, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.), created completely in black, displays a series of long poured lines interspersed with blotches of paint. A dense square of interwoven drips is situated under this series of blotchy lines. The right side of the painting shows the greatest departure from Pollock's all-over drip paintings. The figure of a woman can be easily discerned amongst a cluster of curvilinear lines and splotches. The woman has a face with two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. Her breasts and torso are prominent in the painting. This sudden return to the depiction of the female form can be explained in Jungian terms. It is likely that with the return of his alcoholism and mental problems, Pollock's mother complex, as described by Doctor Henderson, returned in full force. Thus, the repressed terror that Pollock harbored in regard to his mother, Stella, was unleashed once again in his art.



Jackson Pollock, *Number 7, 1951*, 1951, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

In these new works, he retained his automatist technique, thus allowing himself to draw directly from his unconscious. Landau confirms that “his process was as totally automatic as it had been in his all-over abstractions, and he therefore did not perceive

these pictures as constituting a true break or disruption in his development.”¹⁰⁶ Though Pollock changed his style many times, he always retained Jungian influences from his psychotherapists and surrealist friends. Specific Jungian symbolism is, indeed, present in these works, done near the end of his life. The painting *Portrait and Dream* (1953, Dallas Museum of Art) displays clear references to Jung’s archetypal theories. This work is, according to Pollock, a self-portrait.¹⁰⁷ A head with a very distinct eye, nose, and mouth appears to the right of the image. Surprisingly, Pollock used colors such as blue, red, and yellow in this portrait. These colors fill in the spaces between a series of black drips that comprise the shape of the head. On the left side of the painting, next to the face, as Landau writes, “Pollock... depicted several figures engaged in a savage and distinctly erotic confrontation, explaining to Krasner that this part of the picture was meant to reprise the dark side of the moon.”¹⁰⁸ The “dark side of the moon” could be interpreted as the shadow archetype discussed in the first chapter. John Clay, author of “Jung’s Influence in Literature and the Arts,” wrote that

The shadow side is a particular concept central to the Jungian view of artistic creation. The shadow is the darker side of ourselves, the part not exposed to light, the inferior side, the side of ourselves we do not like and often project on to others.¹⁰⁹

Portrait and a Dream could thus be a depiction of Pollock’s lighter side, as seen in the recognizable face, and Pollock’s darker, more unstable side, as seen in the massive jumble of black drips. Even the title suggests a Jungian influence. While the use of the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 214.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 218.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ John Clay, “Jung’s Influence in Literature and the Arts,” in *Jungian Thought in the Modern World*, ed. Elphis Christopher and Hester McFarland Solomon (New York: Free Association Books, 2000), 238.

word “portrait” is obvious, the dream displays Pollock’s knowledge of Jung. Archetypes are, according to Jung, produced by the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious, however, is usually only reached through dreams or art. Though Pollock, arguably, gained contact with the collective unconscious through his art, he displays a recognition of the ability to connect with the collective unconscious through dreams, as seen through the use of the word “dream” in the title.



Jackson Pollock, *Portrait and Dream*, 1953, Dallas Museum of Art.

In 1956, Pollock succumbed to his alcoholism and stopped painting and drawing altogether.¹¹⁰ Landau wrote that “on an ineluctable downward spiral, he could duplicate neither the instances of furious passion, nor the intermittent periods of tranquility that had made possible his former greatness.”¹¹¹ Pollock, clearly, worked through instincts from his psyche, as seen by the domination of the automatist process throughout the most of his career. Once Pollock lost himself, he could no longer pull images and gestures from his psyche; he could no longer create. Pollock recognized the role of the unconscious in his artwork. In 1947, he stated, “The source of my painting is the unconscious.”¹¹² He clearly understood the influence of Jung on his career. Even in 1956, a decade later,

¹¹⁰ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 223.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Cited in Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, 185.

Pollock admitted, “I’ve been a Jungian for a long time.”¹¹³ Jung’s influence was, thus, prevalent from Pollock’s early psychoanalytic drawings to his famous drip paintings to his final black poured works. Under the influence of Jungian theory, Pollock unveiled his unconscious to the eyes of the world.

¹¹³ Cited in Langhorne, “Jackson Pollock’s ‘The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle,’” in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 202.

Chapter Four – Mark Rothko

In the years following the American victory in World War II, many New York artists including Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko turned away from the depiction of the figure and mythological symbols in their surrealist-inspired early works. As William Baziotes, the artist with whom Pollock interacted in Kamrowski's studio, wrote in "The Artist and His Mirror":

And if the artist's guardian angel should ask him, "Why such desperation, my friend? why such a heaving of the breast?" the artist could very truthfully answer, "I am a strange creature, and strange most of all to myself"... And when the demagogues of art call on you to make the social art, the intelligible art, the good art – spit down on them, and go back to your dreams: the world – and your mirror.¹¹⁴

In the late 1940s, many New York School artists adopted an abstract style, possibly resulting from "a repulsion from political art."¹¹⁵ It is possible that these artists chose not to depict the current social situation and avoided the use of the figure in order to prevent a political interpretation of their work. Rothko's abandonment of his surrealist style occurred in 1947, two years after the end of the World War II. It is unknown, however, whether this shift was a result of the effects of World War II or Rothko's own desire, according to Anna C. Chave, "to separate himself more decisively from the surrealists' nonliteral but still legible modes of figuration."¹¹⁶ Whatever the case, Rothko was

¹¹⁴ Cited in Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 329.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹⁶ Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989), 71.

prompted to move in the direction of his dreams, his world, and his mirror; he chose to search for a style more directly connected to the “human drama.”

In 1947, Rothko was on the brink of creating the compositional format of his mature style. The paintings in this intermediary period consist of a series of spontaneous shapes that foreshadow his future use of the rectangle. These paintings, Chave wrote, “have an undirected but searching quality – with their amorphous, often splotchy, puffy or wispy shapes drifting almost aimlessly about.”¹¹⁷ It is likely that these shapes are a result of his automatist technique, though somewhat evolved. As stated in the second chapter, Rothko used housepainter-sized brushes to create large-scale automatic paintings, rather than small-scale automatic drawings like the Surrealists.¹¹⁸ The paintings from the late 1940s represent this large-scale abstraction. Rothko’s use of the automatist technique simply shifted his focus away from the figure. There is, however, still some allusion to a living presence in these paintings. Rothko referred to the shapes as “organisms.” This reference implies that these paintings were not entirely abstract.¹¹⁹ Indeed, it could be argued that the shapes in some of these paintings blend together to create specific images. Chave has argued that many of Rothko’s works, such as an untitled painting from 1949, refer to religious paintings from the past. The untitled work, for example, is similar in composition to Roger van der Weyden’s *Holy Family* from the 15th century.¹²⁰ A large rectangular shape on the left topped with a smaller circular shape represents the Virgin Mary. A smaller rectangle represents the Christ child and a dark spot on the right side represents Joseph. Of course, Rothko did not necessarily intend a

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 169.

resemblance to any specific painting. It is unknown if Rothko had ever seen Roger van der Weyden's *Holy Family*, which currently resides in the Museum of the Royal Chapel in Grenada. It is clear, however, that Rothko's compositional format had not yet reached a point where it was completely devoid of reference to the human figure.

Rothko did not arrive at full abstraction until 1949. The paintings from this period usually consist of one or two rectangular sections of various colors and sizes that are "frayed or softened at the edges."¹²¹ The soft nature of these rectangles often causes observers to view the shapes as floating or even pulsating. These rectangles, however, exist for functional rather than aesthetic reasons. In 1967, Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell wrote, "I remember some years ago talking to Rothko about automatism. When he developed the style in the late 1940s for which he is now famous, he told me that there are always automatic drawings under those larger forms."¹²² The rectangles in these mature paintings are, essentially, disguises meant to veil Rothko's surreal figures. Rothko was so satisfied with this compositional format that he used it to create hundreds of paintings until his death in 1970.¹²³



Mark Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

¹²¹ Ibid, 12.

¹²² Cited in Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, 75.

¹²³ Ibid., 74.

When Rothko adopted this new composition, critics ceased comparing his works to images of humans. Instead, these works were often described as “doorways,” “voids,” or “landscapes” due to either the blocks of color or the horizontal sections in this format. These interpretations are based on formal qualities that did not interest Rothko and thus should be deemed invalid. Instead, Rothko, in a discussion of his mature paintings with Selden Rodman in 1956, noted:

I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on – and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I *communicate* those basic human emotions. I communicate them more directly than your friend Ben Shahn, who is essentially a journalist with, sometimes, moderately interesting in surrealist overtones.¹²⁴

Rothko here rejects a political interpretation of his work. He was more interested in the inner turmoil of the human being, rather than the turmoil of government or society as a whole. Through the absence of the human figure in his works, Rothko was, paradoxically, able to connect with the human on a deeper level.¹²⁵ In these mature works, Rothko displayed the importance of the human psyche rather than the importance of the human body. This relates directly to Jungian theory due to the emphasis on the emotions. According to Jung, emotions stem from both the conscious and the unconscious mind. Rothko believed he would be able to connect more deeply with his audience by painting in a compositional format that displayed his own interpretation of the inner psyche rather than by painting forms resembling the human figure.

¹²⁴ Mark Rothko, “Notes from a conversation with Selden Rodman, 1956,” in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006), 119.

¹²⁵ Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, 59.

In *The Portrait and the Modern Artist*, Rothko emphasized the importance of the “human drama.”¹²⁶ Though this statement was from the early 1940s, the human drama continued to play a role in Rothko’s art, despite his change in style. Rothko simply refined the method through which he portrayed this drama. His emphasis on human drama represents another aspect of Jungian psychology that continued in his mature works. The human drama is, possibly, a reference to the collective unconscious. In his conversation with Selden Rodman, Rothko implied that there are certain emotions that all humans experience; these emotions comprise the human drama. Jung wrote that these emotions are instinctual in humans; they are connected to archetypes that stem from the collective unconscious.¹²⁷ Thus, though he veiled his surrealist symbolism, Rothko continued his references to the collective unconscious simply by focusing on human emotions. According to Chave, Rothko’s new compositional format was “an icon for the entire ‘human drama.’”¹²⁸

Rothko’s mature works, as well as his early works, were always more for the viewer than for the artist himself. In “The romantics were prompted,” which was published in *Possibilities* in 1947, Rothko wrote:

Pictures must be miraculous: the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation,

¹²⁶ Mark Rothko, “The Portrait and the Modern Artist,” in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006), 38.

¹²⁷ Carl G. Jung, “Approaching the unconscious,” in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung and M. -L von Franz (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1964), 69.

¹²⁸ Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, 161.

and unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.¹²⁹

Indeed, Rothko was most satisfied with his work when his paintings evoked revelations or emotions in others. In 1959, Rothko affirmed, “a painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience.”¹³⁰ Two years later, in 1961, Rothko continued his discussion of these experiences when he stated: “If people want sacred experiences, they will find them here. If they want profane experiences, they’ll find those too. I take no sides.”¹³¹ These experiences, according to Rothko, could vary by viewer and could entail anything from an emotional or physical reaction to a spiritual realization. This implies that the meaning of a painting is found in the viewer’s conscious or unconscious mind, rather than in the artist’s psyche. Steven Poser, author of “The Life and Death of the Unconscious in Modern and Contemporary Art,” described Rothko’s “entire pictorial field” as a “luminous, infinitely deep projective space suffused with the grandeur, poignancy, and tragedy he seemed to distill from the ancients in himself.”¹³² In *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, “projective” is defined as “designating or of a type of psychological test, as the Rorschach test, in which any response the subject makes to the test material will be indicative of personality traits and unconscious motivations.”¹³³ Thus, a projective space or image is one that can cause a psychological response that could, potentially, bring an observer’s unconscious thoughts to the surface. Rothko believed that the compositional format of his mature works allowed for this sort of

¹²⁹ Rothko, “The romantics were prompted,” in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006), 59.

¹³⁰ Cited in Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, 172.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 180.

¹³² Steven Poser, “The Life and Death of the Unconscious in Modern and Contemporary Art,” *Art Criticism*, 2005, <http://www.hwwilson.com> (accessed July 13, 2008).

¹³³ *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, ed. David B. Guralnik (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1972), 1,136.

experience. If meditated upon, these colored spaces have the potential to bring a viewer's unconscious thoughts to a conscious level.



Interior view of the Rothko Chapel in Houston. Courtesy of Houston Museum District.

This meditative aspect of Rothko's works was realized by John and Dominique de Menil in 1964 when they commissioned Rothko to create works for their non-denominational chapel in Houston, Texas. By 1967, Rothko had created fourteen paintings, ranging in color from deep purples and dark reds to black. These paintings were hung in a simple octagonal structure furnished only with a set of wooden, backless benches. In his article "Rothko Chapel – the painter's final testament," David Snell observes

the chapel drew doubters. "You gotta be kidding!" was a frequent comment. Some people would look around and ask a guard where the paintings were. But for every visitor who came to pray but remained to

scoff, as it were, there were others who plainly were awed or overwhelmed.¹³⁴

Those who were “awed or overwhelmed” had some sort of experience. This is most likely because they remained open to the paintings before them. Through reflection, they used these paintings as a tool to evoke emotions; they were able to dig into their unconscious mind and reveal aspects about themselves and the world that, it is possible, they never understood before. These “projective spaces,” Snell wrote, when used properly, caused viewers to be “confronted with themselves.”¹³⁵

Rothko stated on a number of occasions that color was unimportant in his work. The changes in Rothko’s use of color during his lifetime, however, highlight the influence of Jungian theory. Beginning in 1948, Rothko started creating “intense color juxtapositions.”¹³⁶ Colors he used were warm and included varieties of reds, oranges, yellows, and bright pinks. In 1954, however, Rothko began to mix these bright colors with dark colors. By the 1960s, Rothko began to use dark colors, blues, purples, and even black, as in his Houston Chapel paintings. Many art historians have suggested that this change represents a shift in Rothko’s mood. Chave has written that the artist’s “friends and acquaintances have recalled that by the late 1950s, Rothko was increasingly depressed. They have speculated, too, that his beclouded emotional state was instrumental in the darkening of his palette.”¹³⁷ While this is likely and shows a connection between Rothko’s psyche and his paintings, Chave points out that his use of

¹³⁴ David Snell, “Rothko Chapel – the painter’s final testament,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 1971, 49.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹³⁶ Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, 181.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

brighter colors was one of the reasons for his depression.¹³⁸ Rothko was disappointed in the praise he received from critics regarding these paintings; they thought of his paintings as decorative and beautiful rather than tragic and evocative. Rothko thus shifted to darker colors because they are more difficult to see. He wanted his paintings to “arrive slowly in one’s consciousness.”¹³⁹ The use of darker colors, Rothko believed, would cause viewers to take more time to look at and attempt to decipher his paintings. They would have a longer time to contemplate them and therefore viewers would have a greater chance of experiencing a connection with their inner psyche.

Throughout his career, Rothko emphasized the importance of emotion and its connection to art. His desire to evoke emotions in his viewers led to the creation of a compositional format that has baffled and awed viewers for many decades. This format shows a connection to Jungian psychology due to the stress it places on both the conscious and the unconscious. Rothko, who was influenced by Jungian-inspired surrealists in the early part of his career, clearly carried an aspect of this Jungian thought through to his mature works.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Cited in Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, 183.

Conclusion

Jungian theory played an important role in the work of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. A question remains, however, concerning the role of the unconscious in their art. As Cernuschi writes, there is a debate as to whether Pollock consciously or unconsciously produced his iconography, especially the symbols used in his early works.¹⁴⁰ This debate extends to Rothko as well. If one argues that these artists unconsciously produced Jungian symbolism, it would imply that they were not influenced externally. Pollock, however, was externally influenced by his Jungian psychotherapist Doctor Henderson and Rothko was influenced by the Surrealists.

These artists lived in an era in which psychological thought was rapidly growing. The new field of Jungian psychology brought the topic of the unconscious to the forefront of American culture. Intellectuals and artists helped spread theories of the unconscious from Beatnik poetry and Abstract Expressionism in New York City to *noir* cinema in Hollywood. It is likely that Pollock and Rothko actively responded to the sudden expansion of psychological thought in the United States. While they employed automatist processes in order to draw from the unconscious, they consciously decided to use these processes. Thus, though their work is internally focused, Pollock and Rothko were influenced to incorporate Jungian theory into their work by external forces.

The incorporation of Jungian theory in art raises a number of issues, including the role of the artist and the viewer. Pollock's works were more oriented to his self, rather than to the viewer. He allowed his feelings to guide his work. Rothko, on the other hand, expressed a greater interest in the viewer. He intended his works to elicit certain

¹⁴⁰ Claude Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock: The Psychoanalytic Drawings*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1992), 22.

emotions. Though Pollock and Rothko took different approaches, both were concerned with emotion. Emotions, according to Jung, stem from archetypes in the collective unconscious. The fact that these artists dealt with emotionality in the creation of their art shows the extent to which Jung's theories pervaded American culture. Before the 20th century, the majority of artists depicted religious scenes, still-lives, and landscapes. The rise of psychological theories, such as Jung's, turned the focus of the artist to the individual. Art, especially during the 1940s and 1950s, evolved into a form of self-expression.

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