

art & man

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JACKSON POLLOCK

WORKING WITH ABSTRACTION



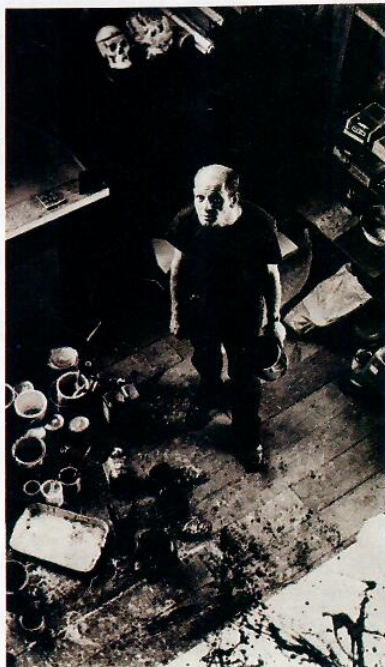
A PIONEER IN PAINT

Self-portrait, c. 1930. Private Collection.



Jackson Pollock did this self-portrait at 18.

Photo by Rudolph Burckhardt

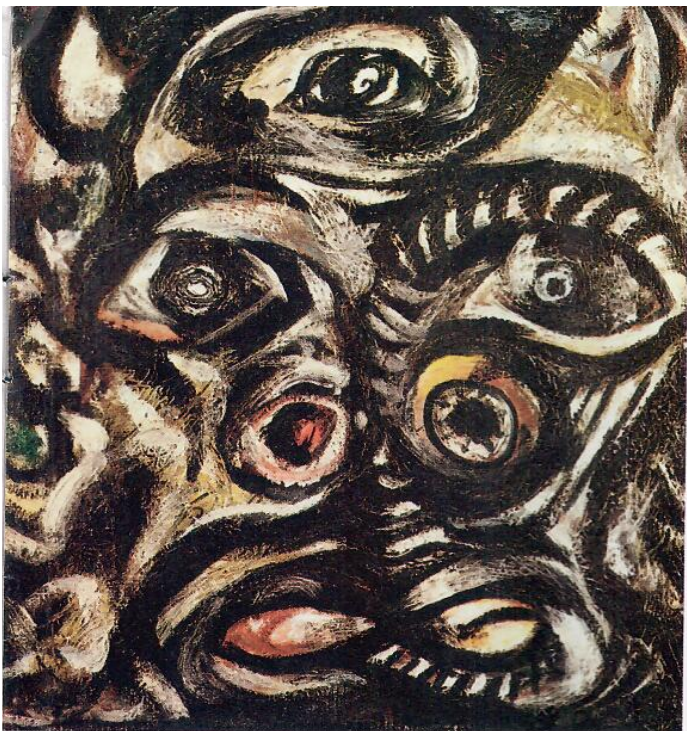


In October 1948, *Life* magazine published an article on “modern art.” In it, a young painter from Wyoming was said to have invented a substitute for a paint brush—he “drooled” on the canvas. A little while later, *Time* magazine wrote stories about “Jack the Dripper,” a “wild man” who called himself an artist. These articles were written during the years immediately following the end of World War II. At that time, Paris was the art capital of the world and Picasso was the most famous living artist. American art was considered to be a pale imitation of European. In the late 1940s, few people reading these stories realized that this outrageous young painter, Jackson Pollock, was developing a new American art that would eventually change the history of modern art.

Paul Jackson Pollock, the youngest of five sons, was born in 1912 in Cody, Wyoming. The family, who worked on small truck farms, moved frequently, and the boys changed schools every few years. When he was 18, young Jackson moved to New York City to join his two older brothers who already had design jobs there. His teacher at the Art Student’s League later said Pollock had little drawing talent, but his “intense interest” in art made up for what he lacked.

In the early 1930s, the country was in the midst of the Great Depression, few people had jobs, and Pollock had to leave school to support himself. He worked building highways, as a stone cutter, and as a janitor until he finally got a government-supported job painting murals for public buildings. He then had a chance to meet other artists such as Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Pollock’s future wife, Lee Krasner, as well as to attend classes and workshops.

In 1938, Pollock went into psychoanalysis to help him with a drinking problem. Since he had difficulty talking about his feelings, he did a series of drawings in which he tried to



Head, c. 1938. Private collection.

“The modern artist cannot express the age of the airplane, the atom bomb, and the radio in the old forms of the Renaissance.”

—Jackson Pollock



Eyes in the Heat, 1946. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection, NY, NY.

When he did this painting some years later, Pollock said, “Every good artist paints what he is.”

The artist painted this “head” while he was in his twenties and searching for a style.

express them visually. He used these autobiographical doodlings to create a series of paintings of distorted heads (left) in which eyes, noses, teeth, and mouths become expressive, rhythmic patterns.

In 1943, Pollock was painting designs for neckties and lipsticks to support his art work when he met a well-known collector, Peggy Guggenheim. She bought some of his paintings, gave him a one-man show and, soon, Jackson Pollock’s work began to sell. Now he was able to concentrate on some new ideas he was trying to put on canvas. He no longer wanted to paint “illustrations” but rather to express feelings that couldn’t be seen. Instead of painting a representation of an angry man, Pollock wanted to somehow visually *recreate* the actual feeling of anger. What do you think of the painting at the lower left? Why would this be on a page with two self-portraits? Could it, in a way, also be a self-portrait?

The year Pollock did this work, *Eyes in the Heat*, he married the artist Lee Krasner and they bought a small farmhouse on Long Island, NY. The painting might reflect Pollock’s reaction to the natural world that now surrounded him—plants, insects, the ocean, the seasons. It was one of the first of his “overall” paintings in which the picture surface is flat—broken up by layer on layer of short, thick strokes squeezed right out of the paint tube—almost giving the effect of a brilliant, blinding white light.

Paintings like *Eyes in the Heat* were controversial enough, but in the next few months Pollock was to develop a new technique that would at first outrage most people, but eventually was to change the course of 20th-century painting. In this issue, you’ll see some examples of this famous technique and you’ll learn more about abstract art. You’ll meet a young artist who works abstractly and, finally, you’ll use a natural object to develop your own unique abstract pattern.

A NEW KIND OF SPACE

***“Today painters do not have to go to a subject outside of themselves. They work from within.”
— Jackson Pollock***



At the end of 1946, Jackson Pollock had gotten rid of subject matter entirely and was painting his feelings directly on the canvas. But even this wasn't enough. He wanted *direct* contact with his unconscious mind. He felt that using a brush inhibited him. During the time it took him to mix the paint, load the brush, and paint the stroke, Pollock felt his unconscious mind had been “censored” by his conscious mind. And, the layers of paint he had been using became so thick they would crack and fall off the canvas. He also felt that brushstrokes were too “painterly” to be truly free.

Years ago, when Pollock had been traveling around the West with his family, he had seen Navaho artists doing *sandpaintings*. They would stand above the ground, drop colored sand on it, and create a painting as they went along. Pollock also remembered the experimental workshops he had attended ten years before, where he had worked with new materials and techniques—includ-

How could Jackson Pollock do a painting like this in 1932 and, 20 years later, paint a work like the one on the right?

ing sprayguns, airbrushes, glue, etc.—to create “controlled accidents.” He rolled his canvas out on the floor, got some buckets of paint, and began to pour. Now he could work quickly and directly—all he had to consciously think about was which bucket of color to use. He could put layer on top of layer, work on the entire painting at once, and, best of all, draw unbroken lines of paint that never had to end. Now Pollock's unconscious images could emerge as the painting was being created.

Pollock said, “My work is a continuous development of the same themes and obsessions.” Compare the early *Camp with Oil Rig* (above, left) with one of Pollock's most famous “dripped” paintings, *Blue Poles* shown above right (sold ten years ago for a record two million dollars). The clothes posts, oil rigs, and flagpoles of his early work have be-

An art critic of the time said of Pollock's work,
"All profoundly original art looks ugly at first."



Blue Poles, 1952. Australian National Gallery, Canberra.

come, in *Blue Poles*, abstract lines of force, obscure symbols for male and female, or, perhaps, just pure blue lines. The feeling of being in a bleak, windswept landscape like that shown in the painting on the left, might be suggested in the swirling rhythms of the large work above. The realistic landscape contains many vertical objects, all located on a different shallow plane, all painted with little perspective or modeling. Is this in any

way like the painting above? In *Camp with Oil Rig*, there is no single focal point—all the objects in the painting are of about the same size and importance. And compare the color combinations Pollock has used. Can you find the same reds, tans, browns, and dark blues in both paintings?

During the next seven years, Pollock did his most famous poured paintings. In 1950, a film was made showing his technique,

and the artist became as famous as his creations. While some praised his methods and results as a major artistic breakthrough, most people thought of Pollock's paintings as a joke on the art world. From about 1953 on, Pollock painted less and less. He said, "I feel like an oyster without a shell." On August 11, 1956, while speeding down a dark road late at night, the artist's car crashed into a tree. Jackson Pollock died at the age of 44.

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LANDSCAPES OF THE MIND

*How did these
three artists
create unusual
abstractions
from everyday
scenes?*

REFLECTIONS OF NATURE

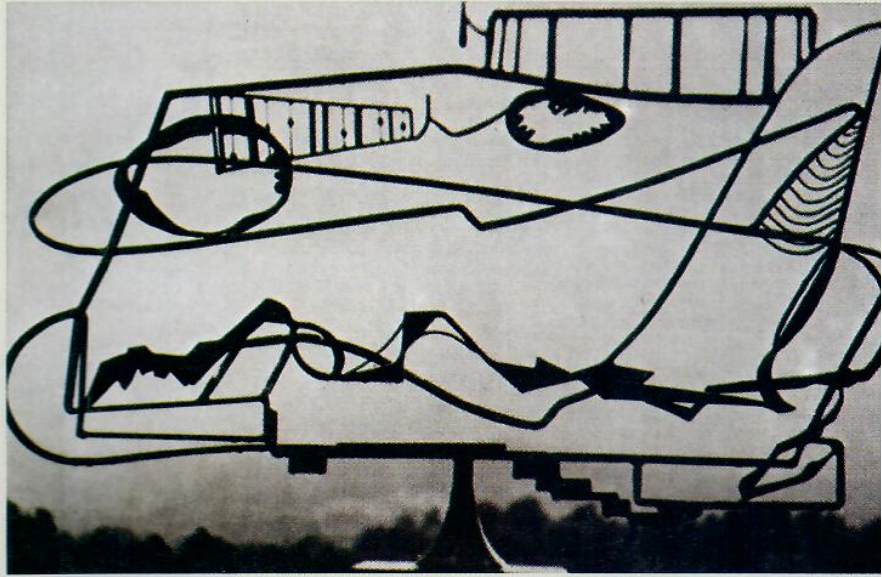
The 19th century French Impressionist Claude Monet painted the landscape, above, right in his own back yard. But does it look *real*? Can you tell exactly what it is? Is the subject blue sky with strange-looking clouds floating in it? And why does everything seem to shimmer and change and almost be in motion? Above all, Monet wanted to recreate in paint a momentary “impression” of a scene. So he did a series of paintings of water lilies on a pond behind his house, in which he used strokes of color to capture the effects of light on water. Because there is no horizon line or perspective and, because the blue of the sky is reflected in the water, the feeling of three-dimensional *reality* disappears. The surface of the water, the reflections, and the plants growing under the water all blend together into one *flat* surface. Monet was one of the first painters to work with paint in an *abstract* way, rather than trying to reproduce a *realistic* scene from nature. Compare this painting to those of Jackson Pollock.

A WORLD IN LINE

How could an artist possibly capture an entire landscape—wind-blown clouds, rocky cliffs, river currents, sailboats, trees and bushes—in a small metal sculpture? American sculptor David Smith describes how he took elements from nature and *abstracted*—selected, simplified, and rearranged them—to create the work at the right. “*Hudson River Landscape* started from drawings made on a train between Albany and Poughkeepsie, NY...As I began, I shook a bottle of India ink and it flew over my hand. I placed my hand on the paper and from the image this left, I made additions and subtractions which flashed past too fast to tabulate, but which are all in the finished sculpture. Is my work the Hudson River, or is it the travel, the vision, the ink spot . . . or does it matter?” How many kinds of *line* can you find in this sculpture? What is unusual about it? Could you walk around it and get a different view from each angle? How is this kind of abstraction similar to that in Jackson Pollock’s paintings?

NATURE UP CLOSE

Other 20th century American artists working at the same time as Pollock were also creating *abstractions*, but they worked in many different ways. What do you think of the painting on the right done by Southwestern artist Georgia O’Keeffe? Do you think it is based on a natural object and, if so, can you tell which one? In the 1920s, O’Keeffe’s abstractions also shocked people. She painted flowers, but not a kind anyone had ever seen before. She did enormous close-ups of blood-red poppies, fierce, jagged orchids, and bleached skulls. She painted a series of bones she found around her desert home, getting so close that the image filled the entire space of



David Smith (1906-1965). *Hudson River Landscape*, 1951. Photograph by the artist.



Georgia O’Keeffe (b. 1887). *Pelvis Series*, 1945. Private Collection.

the canvas and became difficult to recognize. Unlike Pollock, O’Keeffe works with *shapes*, retaining perspective, modeling, and a feeling of depth. But her paintings are also abstract. Have you figured out which natural object O’Keeffe used in this painting? And how has she changed the object even further? She says,

“When I started painting the pelvis bones, I was most interested in the holes—particularly the blue ones obtained from holding them up as one is apt to do when one seems to have more sky than earth in one’s world. They looked wonderful against the Blue that will always be there after all man’s destruction is finished.”



CONVERGENCE #10 BY JACKSON POLLOCK

“Let the painting float into your mind and try to receive what it has to offer. An abstract painting should be enjoyed just as music is enjoyed — after a while you may like it or you may not, but at least give it a chance.”

MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH #5

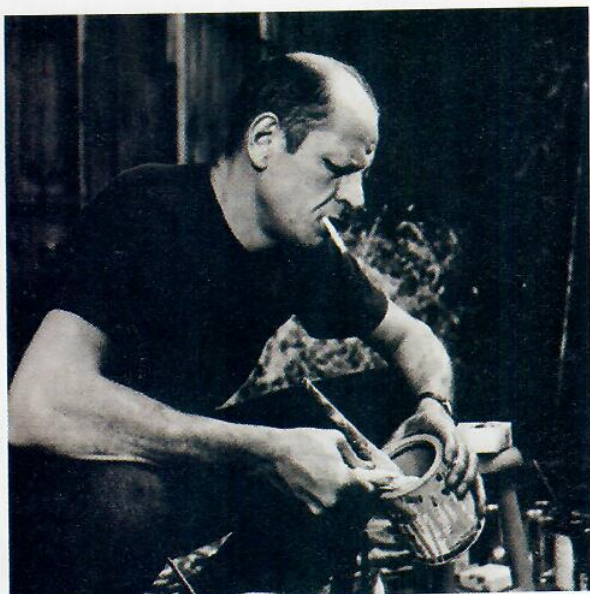
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Jackson Pollock (1912-1956). *Convergence: Number 10*, 1952. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, 1956.



Jackson Pollock

TRACES IN TIME



“Working on the floor I feel like a part of the painting. When I am in it, I’m not aware of what I am doing—the painting takes on a life of its own. I just try to let it come through.”



For about seven years, from late 1946 to 1953, Jackson Pollock was working completely on his own. Very few people understood what he was trying to do. A few artists were making *action* paintings, but no one produced anything that was at all like Pollock’s layers of dripped paint. From the first moment of their creation, no one ever mistook Pollock’s poured paintings for those of any other artist.

Pollock was trying to do something in paint that no one had ever done before. He considered the *act* of creation to be the important event. The paintings were simply a *result* of that action. Each painting was a *sign* of his creative ability, and the time spent between them was only a *pause* before the next painting. So in a sense, Pollock’s paintings are a record of his life and, as each one is only a part of the whole, they should really all be seen together.

Since Pollock considered his paintings to be an extension of himself, he had to work in a certain way. When he felt he was ready, he would begin, usually late in the afternoon, working steadily all night. Sometimes this went on for months—he would sleep or eat only because he had to. Then, to “recharge,” Pollock wouldn’t paint for long periods—spending the time gardening, clamming, or listening to records (it was said he could listen to one record over and over for weeks at a time).

“Jackson would roll out about 20 feet of canvas on the studio floor,” Lee Krasner recalled, “then he would open dozens of cans of

industrial enamel. He would walk around 'the arena' as he called the canvas, and throw, drip, pour, and squirt the paint using sticks, hardened paint brushes, tubes of paint, or his hands. His control was amazing. Using a stick was difficult enough, but he would use basting syringes like giant fountain pens. Sometimes he would finish a painting, then cut it in half. He'd have long editing sessions, asking, 'Should I cut it here? Is this the bottom, or the top?'"

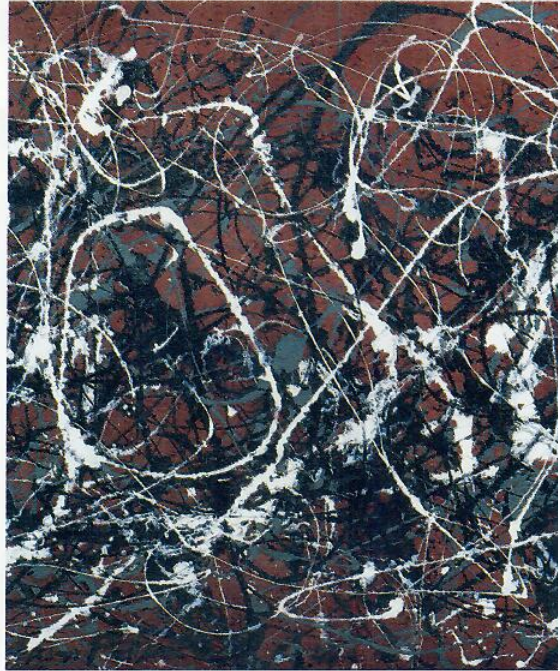
Using this kind of technique, it would be easy for a less gifted artist to paint works that looked very much the same. But Pollock never repeated himself. *Convergence* (What does the word mean? Now what does it mean when you look at Pollock's painting on pages 8-9?) was originally made up only of complex black lines. Pollock then trailed spatters of bright, primary—red, blue, yellow—colors on top. All the paints, including the white, which was applied last, are very thin and wet so they dissolve and blend into each other. What visual effect does the *speed* and *force* of these bright lines have?

Compare *Convergence* with details of the three Pollock paintings shown on the right. All are done with the same materials and techniques, and they are all about the same size and shape. (In fact, each fills an entire wall, so you feel almost hypnotized by the texture and pattern surrounding you.) The painting at the top, *Arabesque* (does the name remind you of anything?), is made up of thick black, white, and gray *lines* moving rapidly across the dark red canvas. In the work in the center, what do the delicate *spatters* of pastel colors look like? Do you see any shapes and lines in this airy, "all-over" web? Does its name *Lavender Mist* bring back any of your own feelings of a particular place or time of day? And, in the painting at the bottom, what do the definite *shapes* and angular black smears of *Frieze* mean? How about the *earth* colors—red, orange, tan, brown, and green? Does this work remind you of any season or activity?

Jackson Pollock and the group of American artists called *Abstract Expressionists* moved art away from conventional *realism* and toward another form of visual expression that was particularly American. Through the use of abstract and non-representational art, they could express the new forces of the 20th century that were developing most rapidly in the United States—the anxieties of the post-war era, the mysteries of outer space, the growing complexities of science, and the tensions and rhythms of modern cities. Jackson Pollock's totally individual style and behavior seemed to symbolize a new American art of the future.

"We already have a mechanical way of representing objects in nature . . .

Arabesque: Number 13A (detail), 1948. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.



. . . so the modern artist expresses feelings rather than illustrating.

Lavender Mist: Number 1 (detail), 1950. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



Painting is a state of being. Painting is self-discovery. Every good painting is its artist."

Frieze (detail), 1953-55. Private Collection.



Tom Frohnapfel: Abstract Artist



Photos by Janet Soderberg

How did this month's artist create an award-winning abstraction from an ordinary object he found in his home?

For nineteen-year-old Tom Frohnapfel, abstract art grows out of realistic art. Can you see the real object in his drawing, top right? How has it changed in the next two prints? The artist describes the process this way: "I see something around me. It might be a shoe, a faucet, a part of a radiator—it doesn't have to be that significant. I look at the forms in the object and try to break it down into its basic shapes. I distort it. I use the energy inside myself—good feelings and bad, whatever's on my mind—and I try to channel it into the work."

Tom Frohnapfel grew up in Akron, Ohio. "I guess I first started doing art in my mom's art

studio. When I was little, she'd let me draw on the floor." By the time he got to junior high, he knew he would be an artist. Now he's in his first year at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, majoring in industrial design—which he says can mean designing anything from toys and small appliances to cars.

We asked Tom if he had any advice about doing abstract art. He told us, "It's difficult to jump right into abstraction. You really need that background in realism. It's important to know the fundamentals of drawing. As one of my teachers said, you have to be tamed before you can become wild."



BEGINNING WITH AN EVERYDAY OBJECT

I was looking for objects I could use in a series of prints and paintings. I started thinking of the old fixtures in the bathroom of our house—the faucets, the legs of the bathtub, the radiator. So I went up one night and did a lot of sketches. In this drawing (top left), I started out using the whole radiator mostly because I liked the repetition of the vertical lines. But, when I got going, I found the round shape of the water pressure valve more interesting—especially the way it contrasted with the geometry of the floorboards, which had a lot of strong, straight horizontal and vertical lines.



NEXT: BREAKING DOWN THE SPACE

Now came the hard part. I wanted to do a series of silkscreen prints of the valve, and I'd never done printmaking before. But I love experimenting, working with different media, and that's what this allowed me to do. Eventually I had all these black prints of the radiator valve done on different pieces of colored paper. I hung them around the art room, and started adding to them. I'd emphasize highlights or repeat the curved lines of the contours. I added pieces of brown paper to this one (left, center). I was trying to give the viewer a hot or cold feeling in each of the prints. This was the first time I'd really worked with color, and I wanted to jump right in and make it come alive. I like to work energetically, standing up, moving around. I'd work on one print for a while, then move on to the next. And as I went along, the prints got more abstract. By then, I had a lot of prints on the wall. And some of the paintings I'd seen recently and liked, had grids in them, so the two ideas seemed to go together.



THE FINAL RESULT

When I used the grid, I could break the shapes up even more. The individual squares could become very different, because the grid held them all together. Each square became like a little painting, and I'd move from one to the other, like I did with the prints. Sometimes the colors would carry over, because the paints would get mixed together. I wanted the whole thing to have a kind of energy, so the lines and brushstrokes are sketchy, not precise. The final print (below, left) has a loose feeling, even though it's enclosed in a grid. In fact, I think the grid keeps it from becoming too wild. Maybe it helped that I was doing the piece in a classroom. I had a lot of my friends around me, so I was in a pretty high-spirited mood. It may have helped give me that feeling of freedom.

Abstracting an Everyday Object

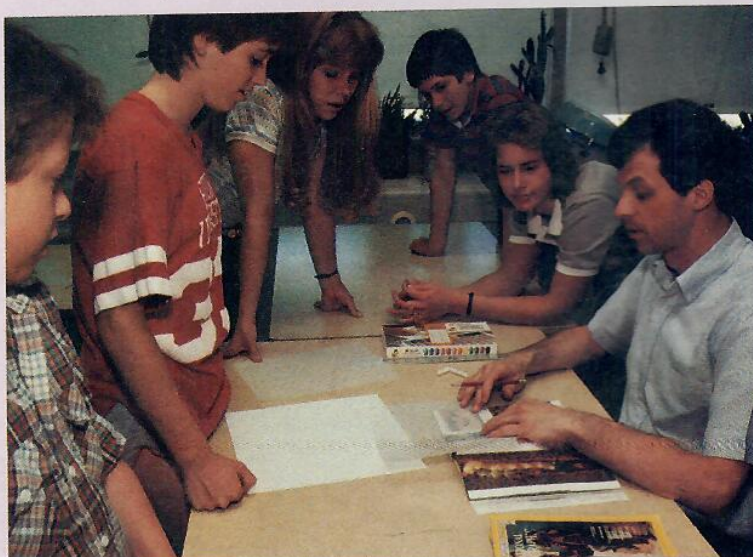
Even when Jackson Pollock did his most “abstract” painting, it was still tied to the “real” world in some way—the colors, the rhythms, and especially, the title. Even Pollock had to start somewhere with abstraction. In this workshop, you’ll begin with a photo of a familiar object and, step by step, transform it into a pure abstraction.

MATERIALS

- 12" x 12" 80 lb sulfite paper
- 5" x 5" oak tag with 2" x 2" window cut in center
- Tracing paper
- Watercolor markers
- Ruler
- School pencils
- 12" x 18" newsprint
- Magazines (those with nature theme — *National Geographic* — work best)

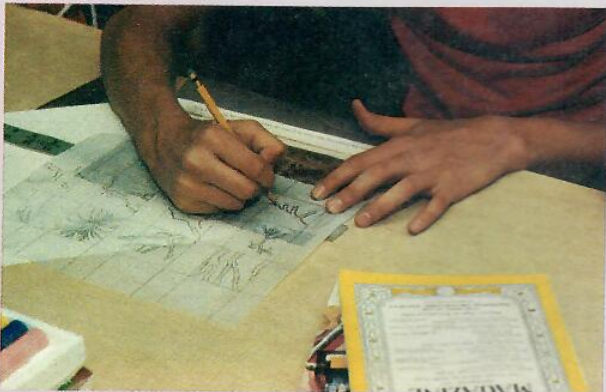
STARTING OUT

1 Go through old magazines, pick out interesting photos and isolate compositions with your 2" x 2" frame. Grid a piece of tracing paper (2" x 2" squares), and trace the outline of a different area in each square.

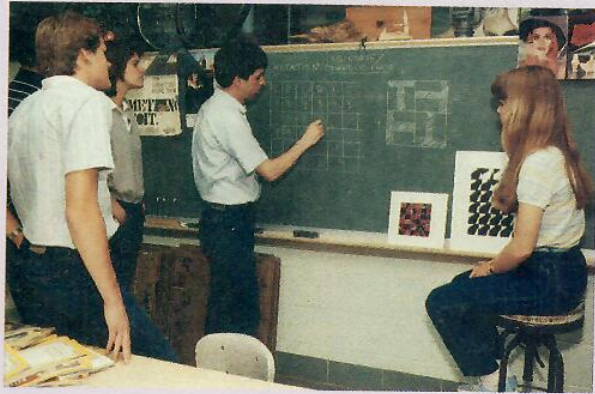


Prepared by Ned J. Nesti, Art Instructor, Morrison (IL) High School. Photos by Janet Soderberg.

2 You may twist or turn the window to get the best composition. Try cropping in or eliminating small details. Make a sheet of tracings, then choose only *one* drawing.



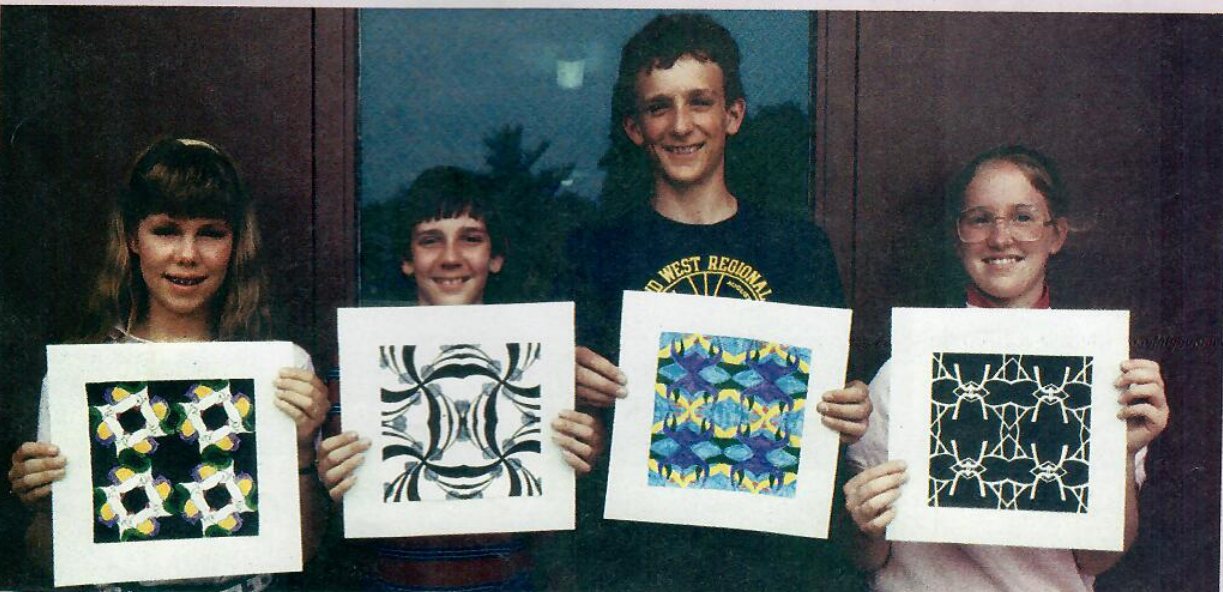
3 Divide the newsprint into 16 2" x 2" squares. Using the method shown below, *repeat* your composition by tracing it in different ways in the squares. Transfer final design to sulfite paper.



4 You could repeat the original unit clockwise, counterclockwise, 1,2,1,2, etc., or just repeat one square throughout. Try reversing your design (a mirror-image), or develop your own pattern.

SOME SOLUTIONS

Remember, your design should work as a whole, and not be a group of separate units next to one another. And, you should no longer be able to see the grid you started out with. Can you find the original unit in each of these abstract patterns? How many times is each repeated? Which are rotated (clockwise—counterclockwise), and in which are the patterns used in a mirror-image? Which use positive, and which negative space? Which ones contain shapes; which lines? Which are “organic”; which more geometric? Which designs look three-dimensional and which look “flat?” Try the same pattern in black and white, then in color. You could use warm or cool colors, light or dark, bright or tints, or complementary (red-green, blue-orange, purple-yellow) combinations.



AMERICAN SCULPTURE

At the same time that Jackson Pollock was doing abstract paintings, American sculptors were creating three-dimensional abstractions. Before you look at its title, what does this work (right) by David Smith (see page 7) remind you of? You can see this piece and many others in a new show, *The Third Dimension: Sculpture of the New York School*, now at the Whitney Museum in New York City until March 3. It will then go to the Fort Worth Art Museum, May 12-July 21; the Cleveland Museum, Aug. 21-Oct. 17; the Newport (CA) Art Museum, Nov. 7, 1985-Jan. 5, 1986.



David Smith (1906-1965). *Wagon I*, 1963-64. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

AMERICAN FIGURES

Jackson Pollock's friend, artist Willem de Kooning, was the other "giant" of American Abstract Expressionist painting. Together, these artists, with works like de Kooning's *Woman* (right), changed the way we look at the "real" world. You can see paintings by these two artists, as well as some more conventional works, in the exhibition *The Figure in 20th Century American Art* now at the Jacksonville (FL) Museum until April 14. The show travels to the Oklahoma City Museum, Evanston, IL, Sept. 22-Nov. 10; Arkansas (Little Rock) Art Center, Dec. 1, 1985-Jan. 19, 1986; Colorado Springs Museum, Feb. 8-Mar. 30, 1986; Minnesota Museum (St. Paul), April 20, 1986.



Willem de Kooning (b. 1904). *Woman IV*, 1952-53.

AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

Before the 20th century, American artists worked very "realistically." Compare this landscape with the paintings by Jackson Pollock in this issue. A large show of works by one of America's leading 20th-century landscape painters, *George*



Inness: An American Landscape Artist, is opening April 1 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. It will close June 9, and in 1986, will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.