Reevaluating “Peripheral Sources”: The Impact of David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco on Jackson Pollock

In Honor of Professor Pam Simpson

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Navajo Dry Painting:
Art as a Remedy

Unlike the shamans of many other American Indian tribes who treated the symptoms of disease with herbal preparations—many of them highly effective—Navajo centered themselves with healing what they considered to be the causes of illness: the spells of witches, ghosts, Holy People, or the effects of contact with non-Natives. To exercise the evil magic that had caused the sickness, Na-vaño shamans conducted elaborate ceremonies. One of the most common of these rituals was and is the construction of dry paintings—designs made up of ground minerals or vegetable matter laid on a bed of sand. The paintings, which can take as many as 25 men up to a full day to complete, fill into literally hundreds of categories, depending on the nature and source of the spell. For example, a Navajo may have one of his assistants in contact with someone outside the tribe, the dry painting. Incidentally, might be performed as a cure for illnesses such as those which cause the baby to fall ill, like the baby who has been put to sleep at night, a special shaman, the singer, and the helpers are assembled outside the hogan. On a large bed of sand the artists use finely ground sand and add it to the hogans flour to make a uniform back- ground for the dry painting they will later create. The shaman and his assistants begin the design, using white, red, yellow, black, and blue powders made from ground sandstone, charcoal, cypress, and other. The shaman or his assistant begins the dry painting by picking up a small amount of the desired color by hand and, using his thumb and forefinger, sprinkles the mat- terial onto the sand, forming the design as it works. The process is then repeated with the various powders until the paint- ing is completed.

The dry painting at right pertains a figure known as the Slayer of Unseen Vils. A benefactor in the world who wields weapons are free to move, which they stand on and hold in his hands. When the shaman and his assistants have completed the picture, the mother, holding her sick infant, sits in the design so that the healing power inherent in the work will be transferred to them. The shaman shakes a rattle, prays, and chants; in a curative gesture he will touch both mother and baby with his hands. When the ceremony is finished, the painting is immediately destroyed, and each person in the hogan is permitted to help himself to a pinch of colored powder that now has healing power. A person with a headache may touch some of this powder to his head, others will place it in fresh bags to be used in future ceremonies for curing illness. Finally, what rem- nants of the painting is swept up into handfuls and dumped nearby, to the north of the hogan.
Introduction: When Jackson met José and David: The Biographical Connections between Pollock and Orozco and Siqueiros

In the 2000 biopic titled *Pollock* starring Ed Harris, a photographic reproduction of José Clemente Orozco’s *Prometheus* is prominently displayed in Jackson Pollock’s studio (Figure 1). Harris, who also directed the movie, recognized the significance of Orozco and even David Alfaro Siqueiros as stylistic influences on Jackson Pollock. If, in fact, this connection is a part of the popular consciousness then why has there been limited scholarship on Orozco and Siqueiros as forbearers to Pollock’s “American Style Modernism” from the art historical community? It is true that even introductory art history textbooks cite Los Tres Grandes as early sources of inspiration for Pollock.¹ And, Stephen Polcari in his essay *Orozco and Pollock: Epic Transformations* examines Pollock’s internal psychological affinity for Orozco. But, these discussions fall short in garnering the true pervasive nature of the effect of two Mexican muralists upon both Pollock’s early as well as his mature works. The traditional notion that Pollock sought inspiration from European Modernists is an undisputable fact. However, with further examination of these so-called “peripheral sources,” most notably Orozco and Siqueiros, it is becomes clear that they are central to Pollock’s artistic development.

To ground this argument in fact and to enhance the sometimes ambiguous practice of tracing stylistic developments, Pollock’s life must be examined to solidify his connections with Orozco and Siqueiros. Jackson’s interest in and relationship with Orozco and Siqueiros are undeniable. Through his circle of WPA artist friends, his older

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brothers, and his own work/mentor experiences, Pollock came into contact with the pair on numerous occasions throughout the 1930’s.

Jackson’s first exposure to the muralists came at a precarious time in his life. Jackson channels the emotional and cathartic nature of the works of Orozco and Siqueiros during times of personal tumult. In 1929, while attending high school in Los Angeles at Manual Arts, Jackson sent a brooding, melancholy letter to his eldest brother, Charles, who was an established artist in New York City. As an adolescent, this letter is one of the first signs of his depression and tortured psyche. The one glimmer of optimism was Jackson’s budding artistic ambition. As Jackson’s role model, Charles attempts to counter his sadness by encouraging his artistic enthusiasm. Charles urges Jackson to consider “the works of Rivera and Orozco in Mexico City” and states “[t]his is the finest painting I have seen done, I think since the sixteenth century.”² He also tells Jackson to read an article in The Arts from October of 1927 on Orozco and goes on to say that “these men recognize the implements of the modern world and are ready to employ them.”³ Jackson responded to his brother’s suggestions and subscribed to Creative Arts Magazine in 1930.⁴ He scoured the publications for articles on the Muralists and Charles’ mentor Thomas Hart Benton. Although Charles was the first to expose Jackson to the Muralists, throughout his later career Jackson himself took advantage of every opportunity he had to view their works and participate in their commissions and workshops.

As of 1930, Jackson had only seen reproductions of the works of Orozco, Siqueiros, and Rivera. It was not until Charles returned from New York to Los Angeles

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³ Ibid 145.
⁴ Ibid 146.
and began attending the Otis Institute of Art when Jackson first saw one of their works in person. Later in that same year, the Pollock brothers drove from Los Angeles to Claremont, California, to see Orozco’s newest work, *Prometheus*, (Figure 2) at Claremont College.\(^5\) Jackson was immediately drawn to the emotional intensity and commiserated with Orozco’s “un-naturalistic mistakes.”\(^6\) *Prometheus* had a lasting effect on Pollock. He would later refer to it as the “greatest painting done in modern times.”\(^7\)

This exposure appears to be an emotional event solidifying Jackson’s internal drive to become a professional artist. Just months after viewing *Prometheus* in the fall of 1930, Jackson dropped out of high school and joined Charles and their other brother, Frank, on a return trip to New York City.

Jackson followed in the footsteps of Charles in New York City enrolling in his alma mater, the Art Students League. There, he developed a close relationship with Charles’ mentor Thomas Hart Benton who was the life-drawing instructor at the time. Jackson quickly became Benton’s favorite student, often babysitting his young son and accompanying Benton as an assistant and model for his commissions.\(^8\) Benton’s most notable commission from an Avant Guard patron was for Alma Reed’s The New School in Manhattan in the fall of 1930. Although Benton’s work at the New School, *America Today*, is a seminal mural in his career, its contribution to Pollock’s aesthetic career is relatively minimal. The singular importance of this commission to Pollock was his exposure as Benton’s model and assistant to Orozco who was commissioned to paint the dining room of The New School (figure 3). Orozco’s five-cycle fresco tackled major

\(^5\) Ibid 154.
\(^6\) Ibid 154.
\(^7\) Ibid 298.
\(^8\) Ibid 187.
social issues and embraced Alma Reed and her Delphic Circle’s ideal of universal brotherhood. But, for Pollock, the subject matter and social statements were subordinate to the expressive style, ambitious compositional choices, and emotional content of the work. Orozco’s use of Dynamic Symmetry, a perspectival device built on the relative proportions of areas, allowed him to create a decentralized narrative. Orozco’s reaction against the traditional linear narrative and elimination of hierarchy had a direct effect on Pollock and his mature all-over composition.

In the summer of 1932, Jackson returned to Los Angeles to reconnect with his family. During his west coast stint, Pollock spent time with an acquaintance, Rueben Kadish, with whom he had earlier met during a strike against US troops in Nicaragua. Kadish, who was also a leftist artist, participated in a small workshop of Siqueiros’s disciples in Los Angeles during the previous summer. As an outspoken proponent of Siqueiros and his radical politics, Kadish set up a meeting between the two and pushed Jackson to view Siqueiros’ murals about labor organization at the Chouinard School of Art (figure 4). Jackson’s other artist brother, Sande, would eventually participate in this mural project. After losing his job as a layout artist in New York at the height of the Great Depression in 1932, Sande returned to Los Angeles and enrolled in a fresco class taught by Siqueiros. Siqueiros emphasized on the job learning and immediately put his students to work on his Chouinard School mural project. Pollock’s biographers believe Kadish played a major role in convincing Sande that this was a worthy endeavor.

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10 Ibid 219.
11 Ibid 260.
Although Kadish recalls that “Jackson dismissed Siqueiros” instead claiming that “Orozco is the real artist and his *Prometheus* is really something to look at,” it is important to note that Pollock would join Siqueiros’ Experimental Workshop in 1936 (figure 5). Additionally, Pollock’s sketches and drawings at this point turned decidedly more spontaneous. When viewing his second sketchbook (from the mid-1930s) chronologically there is a marked change corresponding to his exposure to the Muralists. *Sketch Number 5* (figure 6) is characterized by Benton-esque semi-cubist forms. The individual figures are composed of a series of geometric shapes. They are posed in strong diagonals indicating movement and contrasting the overall swirling oval arrangement. *Sketch Number 25* (figure 7) is significantly more organic. Figures and inanimate forms are intertwined in a totem-like composition, showcasing Pollock’s increasing originality and references to the Muralists. Kadish, as if anticipating Pollock’s later breakthrough, recalls reading him a quote written by Paul Gauguin that said “one day somebody is going to come along and work with color and tone—and without any image that has a reference point in nature.”

Jackson’s culminating experience with the Muralists came when he joined the ranks of Siqueiros’ syndicate of painters who participated in the 1936 experimental workshop in New York (figure 8). Siqueiros’ ultimate goal of the project outlined in its manifesto was to create a “laboratory of traditional and modern techniques in art.” The written speech went on to assert that “we shall experiment with all the modern tools,

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13 Ibid 220.
14 Ibid 284.
which can be employed by the artist.” Pollock was no doubt drawn to the last line as he constantly searched for a new modern vocabulary that would help him express his tortured psychological demons.

This new expression came when the workshop began experimenting in earnest with new paint, applicators, and other products made possible by the Industrial Revolution. One of the workshop participants, Alex Horn, recalled that lacquer in particular opened up enormous possibility. As a collective, they “poured it, dripped it, sputtered it, and hurled it at the picture surface.” In his opinion, “what emerged was an endless variety of accidental effects.” Siqueiros later dubbed this as his theory of “controlled accidents.” The implications of these sessions draw direct parallels to Pollock’s mature drip painting style. One work in particular, Collective Suicide (figure 9), produced communally by the workshop will be a major subject of discussion in subsequent chapters. It is important to note that the new stylistic developments in Collective Suicide and Pollock’s mature works were not isolated breakthroughs. Subsequently, they will be examined through a semiotic lens. Beyond the artistic education that Siqueiros and the workshop offered, Kadish reported that Jackson and his teacher “had a great rapport.” “They seemed to reflect one another in some strange way. Each felt the other’s intensity.” On both an emotional and stylistic level, Jackson’s stint, albeit brief, at Siqueiros’ Experimental Workshop was a pivotal experience in his artistic life.

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15 Ibid 284.
17 Ibid 241.
18 Ibid 242.
20 Ibid 285.
Finally, in the summer of 1936, Jackson along with his brother Sande took a road trip to see Orozco’s mural, *The Epic of American Civilization* (figure 10), in Baker Hall at Dartmouth College. *The Epic of American Civilization* was similarly a compelling moment in Pollock’s life. For the first time in Pollock’s life, he witnessed and was overcome by the galvanizing force of a work that did not rely on academic traditions. Instead of tight compositional rules like Benton’s “bump and hollow,” figures like Orozco’s Christ in *Modern Migration of the Spirit* (figure 11) were painterly, hieratic in scale, and distorted to accentuate Christ’s refusal to submit to his fate symbolized by the cross. The visual force of this panel and the rest of *The Epic of American Civilization* resonated with Pollock as evidenced by *Sketch Number 13* (figure 12), *Sketch Number 17* (figure 13), and *Sketch Number 18* (figure 14) from Pollock’s third sketchbook, which dates from the late 1930’s. According to a close friend, Peter Busa, this trip brought back that emotion he felt six years earlier at Pomona College. As a result, Jackson began to display a large photographic reproduction of *Prometheus* in his studio, the same reproduction that is prominently displayed in Ed Harris’ *Pollock.*

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21 Ibid 298.
Chapter 2: The Lost Scholarly Legacy Connecting Pollock and the Muralists

It is abundantly clear that Orozco and Siqueiros were cornerstones in the artistic development of Pollock. Themes in Pollock’s work can be directly traced to specific elements in the Muralists’ work. Specifically, Pollock was introduced to new techniques and materials in Siqueiros’s Experimental Workshop, incorporated ingenious socialist ideals exposed in Siqueiros’s Painter’s Manifesto, and discovered through Orozco that expressive power could overcome technical shortcomings. Despite the obvious connection, art historical scholarship has recognized but has never appropriately highlighted the significance of these links.  

The absence of scholarship is, in part, related to the traditional western art historic narrative that downplays the significance of contributions by non-western as well as artists from developing countries. Despite the inconceivably large number of Modern Artists who drew inspiration from non-western sources, many art histories continued to maintain the notion of the artist as an isolated genius. Obvious and well-publicized examples of these Modern Artists include Picasso and his interest in African masks,

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From modern art texts to essays from the foremost critics, discussions of Orozco and Siqueiros are largely lacking in connection with Pollock. Erika Doss in her Oxford History of Art text, entitled Twentieth Century American Art, recognizes Navajo sand painting as the sole non-western influence upon Pollock. She fails to mention Orozco or Siqueiros at all in connection to Pollock. In Elizabeth Frank’s biography entitled Jackson Pollock, Orozco is mentioned one time in context to Benton and his work on the New School Murals. B.H. Friedman in his 1972 biography, Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible, cites the Muralists solely for their influence on a few of Pollock’s works in the late 1930’s like Woman because they taught Pollock “art could be ugly.” In a similar fashion, Bryan Robertson in his portfolio tracing Pollock’s works, acknowledges Orozco and Siqueiros’ influence only during a four-year period in the late 1930’s. He does not elaborate on their influence beyond the context of stylistic and technical antecedents and makes no mention of them in Pollock’s “mature works.” Robert Storr is the only critic beyond Stephen Polcari who fully traces Orozco and Siqueiros as important sources of inspiration on Pollock’s entire career. Unlike the others, Storr, in his essay “A Piece of the Action,” seeks to debunk the myth proliferated by previous critics like Clement Greenberg and William Rubin as well as Pollock’s wife Lee Krasner that Pollock’s stylistic development was rooted in his own creative ingenuity and in an artistic vocabulary indebted to European modernism.
Gauguin and his exploration of Polynesian culture, and Monet and his collection of Japanese wood block prints. While significant literature and evidence exists to substantiate these connections, artists of this era, most notably Picasso, spent considerable time denying the impact of non-western art. In 1920, Picasso famously stated “African Art? Never heard it.”² It wasn’t until decades later, 1971, that Picasso reluctantly admitted the sources in a conversation with Andre Malraux. Picasso admitted “[e]verybody always talks about the influences that the Negroes had on me. What can I do? We all of us loved fetishes.” He also disclosed that “[t]he masks weren’t just like any other pieces of sculpture. Not at all. They were magic things…the Negro pieces were intercessors, mediators…”³ Xenophobia, racism, and the isolated creative genius of the artist were proliferated from all members of the artistic community, even the artists themselves. Pollock describes the influence of peripheral sources only in passing. Robert Storr notes that when asked about his unorthodox method of laying the canvas on the floor and attacking it at different angles, Pollock gave a casual nod to Navajo sand painting. In reality, “…in 1936, five years before seeing Navajo sand painters at The Museum of Modern Art, he had taken part in the Siqueiros Experimental Studio.”⁴

Generally, Pollock was mute on the subject of the influence of the Mexican Muralists on his work. However, one of the most ardent detractors of the legacy of non-American art on his work also happens to be one of his most outspoken champions, his wife, Lee Krasner (figure 15). Krasner was a marketing guru promoting the merits of

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Pollock’s work during his life and even after his death. She boldly distanced herself from non-American art of the late 1930’s, claiming it was neither “independent or experimental art.” Pollock would have objected to her statement as his time in Siqueiros’ experimental studio and exposure to Orozco’s various commissions allowed him to see their commitment to modernism. Her statement only serves as a prelude to later comments that showcase Krasner’s strong bias against the impact of non-American artists on her husband’s work. Krasner was enthralled by Pollock’s rough American persona. She admits “I thought of Jackson as 100 percent American. He was American—at least five generations back. Other artists I knew where born elsewhere…” In the milieu of the era, she promoted the Existential Cowboy fairytale. Robert Storr in his essay A Piece of the Action brings attention to one of Krasner’s interviews from the Jackson Pollock Black and White Catalogue Exhibit in 1969. In the interview Krasner states that “…all of Jackson’s work grows from this period [referring to his late 1930s sketchbooks]; I see no more sharp breaks, but rather continuing development of the same themes and obsessions.” While Krasner knew that this period represented Pollock’s most concentrated exposure and interest in Orozco and Siqueiros, she does not mention either by name or even site them as influences. In an article in the Partisan Review in 1980 while discussing Pollock’s drip paintings, Krasner admits she “didn’t have the remotest idea why he wanted to work on the floor.” Later in the same interview, Krasner speaks in detail about Pollock’s innovative use of industrial paint. Again, she omits the fact that

5 Krasner effectively abandoned painting in an unequivocal statement of support and dedication to caring for Pollock and promoting his work. Details gained from Naifeh and Smith. 483.  
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industrial paint, enamels, and even the notion of the ‘controlled accident’ were concepts Pollock developed from Siqueiros’ Experimental Studio in New York in 1936.\(^\text{10}\) Krasner’s personal vendetta against provincial artists coupled with her unshakable desire to elevate her husband’s status as the heir apparent to Modernist painting helped disguise the impact of the Muralists and helped further the great Jackson Pollock myth.

The other explanation for the lack of scholarship is significantly more controversial and complex. The American public, critics, and art historians struggle to concede that their most notable modernist was strongly indebted to non-American and non-European sources.\(^\text{11}\) After all, considering Pollock’s persona as an American icon, only a traitor, a turncoat would admit that maybe, just maybe, Pollock wasn’t a wholly original American genius. In other words, the notion of Jackson Pollock and “American Type Painting” is so engrained within the popular consciousness that it is, at best, unpatriotic and, at worst, blasphemy to consider otherwise.

With the passage of time however, Pollock’s persona is finally being stripped away to unearth the true legacy ‘peripheral’ sources play in his artistic development. Although artists like Orozco and Siqueiros come from so-called peripheral places, they are for the first time becoming the center of discussion. Art historians who are leading the charge in this new ‘peripheral centric’ approach include Robert Storr, David Carven, and Stephen Polcari.

Pollock’s American style modernism was analyzed by David Craven in his pioneering post-colonial study of Pollock and the Navajo. While Craven’s conclusion that


\(^{11}\) Robert Storr in “A Piece of the Action” identifies two critics, Clement Greenberg and William Rubin, and Pollock’s wife, Lee Krasner, as the main culprits.
Pollock absorbed and transmitted the Navajo culture and experience into his works is certainly debatable, his background exploration of the cold war propaganda surrounding modernist painting in the United States is groundbreaking. He observes the web of irony surrounding the complex interplay of multi-cultural elements that helped create this new art and the right wing politicians that promoted the style as “radically American” art.\textsuperscript{12}

On a similar note, Louis Battaglia, in an article that discusses the political and ideological ramification of the Cold War, asserts that “whichever side [Communist USSR or Capitalist US] had the ability to exercise a dominate cultural influence over the neutral minds in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia would also have a greater chance in capturing their political allegiance.”\textsuperscript{13} This strong urge to control and to create political allies through the promotion of visual culture was central to the agenda of Clement Greenberg, (figure 16) the foremost critic during the Cold War era. His outspoken conservative political stance often spilled out into the public domain. This provides strong evidence showcasing how his influential critical voice could subdue non-American, especially socialist, voices. In a 1951 letter to J. Alvarez del Vayo, the new editor of \textit{The Nation}, a long running leftist newspaper, Greenberg harshly criticizes the editor’s socialist leaning. Greenberg states that “[he] would not be shocked if del Vayo appeared to be just a sympathizer with Soviet policy; but the evidence furnished by his own words would show that his column has been a medium through which the Stalin regime itself advances are transmitted in a more plausible form to the American

Due to Greenberg's clout as a proponent of American culture, outbursts like these carried incredible weight and had implications within the artistic community. The center of Greenberg's critical artistic viewpoint was the need to preserve and highlight American individualism and democracy.

In addition to his overt goals as a cultural promoter of the merits of US and capitalistic societies, Greenberg's right-winged comments may stem from deep seeded personal embarrassment of his own early socialist leanings. In the late 1930's, Greenberg joined the editorial staff of the Partisan Review and politically aligned himself with the Trotskyites. His goal in this capacity was to help thwart the "feeling of culture being crushed." However, as WWII broke out and the cruelties of the Soviet regime were exposed, Greenberg's political views shifted. He became an outspoken critic of Russian Social Realism and a champion of his New York artist/intellectual friends and their brand of Abstract Expressionism. With age and the growing tension between the capitalistic west and the communist east that lead to the Cold War, Greenberg attempted to distance himself from his early socialist views and became significantly more conservative. He stated that the capitalistic west was home to "the most ambitious and effective art." A sense of embarrassment over his political past coupled with the popularity of his newfound American conservatism were no doubt factors for obscuring the extensive and pervasive influence of the Mexican Muralists on Pollock. Rather than recognize the influence, Greenberg championed Pollock as an American original.

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15 These comments prompted a libel suit against Greenberg by The Nation.
17 Ibid 17.
18 Ibid 17.
Not surprisingly, Greenberg coins the term “American Type Painting.” He was able to capitalize on the subject matter and underlying thematic ambiguity of Modern art and appropriate it for a political purpose.\(^{19}\) He vehemently and condescendingly championed the originality and superiority of American modernist painting over contemporary French painting, cultivating a xenophobic art environment. In fact, in his essay *American Type Painting* first published at the height of the Red Scare in 1955, Greenberg explicitly attacked the Paris art scene by opining that “[p]erhaps it is another symptom of this state of affairs that Paris should be losing its monopoly of the fate of painting.”\(^{20}\) While Greenberg acknowledged the contributions of European and Latin-American artists on the development of Modernist Painting, he distinguished the sanctity and originality of the ‘Action Painters’ above all else. According to Greenberg, a single, concrete unifying factor existed among the ‘Action Painters.’ By maintaining that their convergence was “thanks largely to a common vitality… and inventiveness in relation to a given time, place, and tradition,” he perpetuated a legacy of singular artistic geniuses.\(^{21}\) In reference to Pollock, he specifically downplays the importance of Pollock’s early influences by saying “he compounded hints from Picasso’s calligraphy of the early 30’s with suggestions from Hofmann, Mason, and Mexican painting, especially Siqueiros, and began with a kind of picture in murky, sulphurous colors…”\(^{22}\) To Greenberg, these artists were just stepping-stones, like copies of Old Master’s works in art school. According to Greenberg, Pollock’s artistic vocabulary was wholly original.\(^{23}\)

\(^{19}\) A similar argument is made by Battaglia. See, Battaglia. “Clement Greenberg: A Political Reconsideration.” I.


\(^{21}\) Ibid 210.


Clearly these artists, in particular the Muralists, were much more than small stylistic footnotes for Pollock and modern art in general. Los Tres Grandes and the Mexican mural program of the 1920s introduced full-scale changes that rattled the traditional notion of bourgeoisie art to its core. Siqueiros best summarized the ambition of the Mural program in his 1921 Manifesto. He lays out several goals including: “To socialize art. To destroy bourgeoisie individualism. To repudiate easel painting and any other art that emanated from the ultra-intellectual and aristocratic circles.”24 These goals transcend Mexican painting and have physical manifestations in the work of American Modernists of the 1940’s and 50’s. Greenberg later recognized the shortcomings of the easel painting as a vehicle of modern art and even published an article in 1948, almost 30 years after the Siqueiros Manifesto, entitled The Crisis of the Easel Picture. His discussion was decidedly more focused on how European and Americans through monumental breakthroughs contributed to artistic progress. Historically and systematically, Greenberg outlines the artists and style periods that lead to the undoing of an Albertian “window onto the world” citing artists like Manet, Monet, Pissarro, Seurat, Mondrian, Braque, Picasso, Dubuffet, and contemporary artists like Pollock.25 In what became a common thread through his writing, Greenberg gives no credit to the Muralists and their advances in scale, materials, and artistic accessibility. Beyond a lack of recognition, Greenberg actually notes many of the goals of the Siqueiros Manifesto in his reading of contemporary art. He observes contemporary sensibilities that include “the disillusion of the picture into sheer texture, sheer sensation, into the accumulation of

similar unites of sensation…It corresponds perhaps to the feeling that all hierarchical
distinctions have been exhausted."^26 This socialist reading is strongly indebted to anti-US
politics and non-American artists. His reading further prompts the question whether
Greenberg truly gave up his early socialist political leanings. Greenberg’s long history of
contradictory statements and inflammatory public outbursts seem to conceal socialist
readings like this behind a thin veil of American and European artistic genius. As a result,
critics and patrons of the art readily accepted artists like Pollock as bastions of American
pride and symbols of patriotism.

The 1950’s concept of Nationalism also contributed to Pollock’s reputation. This
ethos that developed as a result of the rise of Communism and the growth of Nationalistic
pride from WWII is best understood through a sociological lens. Liah Greenfield in her
groundbreaking work Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity identified the origin and
types of nationalism that anchor modern society. Particularly relevant to the promulgation
of the superiority of American culture and the arts is her discussion on the two, distinct
forms of nationalism. One, formed on civic lines, is referred to as “Individualistic-
Libertarian” and the other, formed on ethnic lines, is referred to as “Collectivist-
Authoritarian.”^27 While most would argue that the Founding Father’s notion of
Nationalism is one based on ethnic inclusiveness and egalitarian principles grounded in
citizenship, the prevailing notion at that time was significantly more authoritarian.

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^26 Ibid 224.
^27 Liah Greenfeld, Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press,
1993), 11.
Greenfield defines Collectivist-Authoritarianism as a concept that “tends to assume the character of one individual possessed in a single will.”

Joséph McCarthy in his anti-communist witch hunts ensured that his voice and other right-winged disciples, politicians and cultural spokesmen like Greenberg, were the single will that garnered the public’s attention. They cited the United States’ moral and cultural superiority over Communism and Liberalism thereby creating an ‘us vs. them’ divide along ethnic lines. Greenberg, rather than looking at painting as a dynamic medium where global influences lead to its constant state of flux, identified the triumphs and pitfalls of painting along nationalistic lines. As a proponent to art-for-arts-sake, he stated that “[s]omeday it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism, which started out more or less as Trotskyism, turned into art for arts sake.” To continue the long string of ironies and contradictions Greenberg himself had been aligned with the Trotskyites. Although this mentality is fading with globalization, it was extremely influential in mitigating the importance of multiculturalism especially in our American art historical narrative. Not surprisingly, Orozco, Siqueiros, and other foreign artists were derisively labeled “peripheral sources.” While their importance is slowly being unearthed, the general public and at least some art historians still fail to recognize the extent of their contributions to American Modernist Painting. In short, Pollock continues to personify the singular artistic genius.

While the notion of “the artist as genius innovating solely through internal vision” has been around since the days of Vasari, the truth is that no significant artistic development or movement exits in a vacuum. Ferdinand de Saussure reminds us that that

28 Ibid 11.
the individual author and their artistic works, like language, are often simply a product of the culture and environment of the era. But just like ancient Greeks in their mythology, Americans love the romantic notion of the hero. It is no wonder the ‘Existential Cowboy’ is still recognized as a uniquely American genius.²⁹

²⁹ Pollock was referred to as an “Existential Cowboy” by the Media. This label probably comes from Harold Rosenberg’s The American Actions Painters where he discusses the existential nature of modern painting by saying, “The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.”
Jackson Pollock was not born with nascent artistic ability. The archetypal story of where Cimabue discovers an 11-year-old child genius, Giotto drawing life-like sheep on a rock does not define Pollock. In fact, his lack of natural talent as a draftsman was a major source of deep-rooted psychological pain for him throughout his life. In a self-deprecating letter to his brother Charles in the winter of 1929, Jackson confesses that his “drawing I will tell you frankly is rotten it seems to lack freedom and rhythm it is cold and lifeless.”… “I have never proven to myself nor anybody else that I have it in me.”¹ As a result of his self-consciousness as a draftsman, Pollock gravitated to works and styles that elicited an emotional response from within. While it is a daunting task to determine why artists are drawn emotionally to particular works, it is a question worthy of careful consideration in Pollock’s case to determine the psychological driving force behind his artistic production. By reason of his own admission that Prometheus was “the greatest painting in North America,” Orozco seems to represent the artistic type Pollock most closely identified with from an emotional standpoint.² Pollock’s connection seems to stem from Orozco’s artistic freedom and expressive style as well as the roughness and purity that Pollock perceived as primitivism. Additionally and perhaps most importantly, Orozco’s work provided Pollock with a structure for pouring out his troubled soul in the form of cathartic expression.

During a trip to Pomona College in the summer of 1930, Pollock made the discovery of his life. He identified with the un-naturalistic elements of Orozco’s

¹ Naifeh and Smith, Jackson Pollock: An American Saga. 149-50.
Prometheus (figure 2). In fact, seeing Prometheus was a seminal experience for Pollock because it introduced the idea that expressionism could overcome technical deficiencies as well as inspire a profound emotional response. For the first time in his life, Pollock discovered the antidote for self-described “cold and lifeless” drawings. Unlike classical works, the expressionist style seemingly refused to define an artist strictly by means of technical ability and, instead, legitimized otherwise unimaginable innovative talent.

Expressionist style provided Pollock the freedom from his self-proclaimed shortcomings as a draftsman. Pollock’s friends, art historians, and even the mainstream media all agree that the painting was a source of inspiration. For Pollock, however, Orozco’s Prometheus was much more than a moving or poignant work of art. On a deeper level, the painting’s intellectual underpinning captured Pollock’s psyche. It embodied the transformational artifact, the philosophical link, and the profound parallel between the two artists.

Prometheus provided Pollock reassurance that his skills, or lack thereof, need not destroy his dream; over time, it proved to be the life-long epicenter for artistic confidence.

While the idea of expressionism was not new or limited to modernism, Orozco’s ability to break from the prescribed notion of “what painting should be” was decidedly modern. In an interview in 1930, Orozco observed that “[a]rt is the creating by man of order in the universe…When art does not properly create order; when it degenerates to mere formula or a mere system: then it is decadent.”³ By breaking this rigidity and ignoring critics who referred to his work as a “monstrous disfiguration,” Orozco created

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the first modern fresco. Although detractors were demonizing Orozco’s corrupt style, Pollock was emboldened by it, especially his irreverent portrayal of the classic Greek myth.

Orozco’s daring *Prometheus* Mural is composed of four panels. The central panel (figure 2) is set into a gothic arch and is dominated by the nude Prometheus figure. The ceiling panel (figure 17) is composed of an interlocking block-like figure set against a cobalt background while the east (figure 18) and west (figure 19) panels are characterized by figural and architectural abstractions and juxtapositions. In the central panel, Prometheus is depicted in heretic scale surrounded by an abstracted mass of people who react to his gift of fire in various ways. Some welcome it with outstretched arms while others recoil as if blinded by the beaming orange/red abstracted light. Prometheus’s straightened right leg and flexed arms direct the viewer’s eyes to the vertex of the Gothic arch. The organic and generalized fire which engulfs Prometheus coupled with his animated pose, creates a feeling that he is just seconds away from propelling himself into the heavenly realm. Formally and compositionally, *Prometheus* represents in the words of noted Orozco scholar Gonzalez-Mello, “a moment of rupture…It is in this mural we see the undermining, for the first time of his academic formation.”

*Prometheus* was Orozco’s first and only work that broke from the prescribed Mexican socio-political narratives pushed by Rivera and Siqueiros. It truly encapsulated

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Orozco’s philosophy that art should be a-political. Unfortunately, the cold reception described by Orozco as the “disgust of the trustees, who would grumble as they made their way through the refectory… disposed to fall upon me at the first misstep,” forced him to revert back to politically charged art. This reception weighed heavily on Orozco. He was relegated to stereotypical Mexican themes in order to preserve his reputation and the commercial viability of his work. Nonetheless, *Prometheus* was an incredibly productive influence on Pollock. Because the political lens was stripped away, Pollock could observe *Prometheus’* unadulterated purity of expression. By applying emotion and expressionism to personal struggles, Pollock carried on the legacy that Orozco could not. Pollock’s introspective approach made him especially receptive to the story and psychological underpinnings of the Prometheus myth.

The Prometheus saga, according to the German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, demonstrates the Dionysian nature of the hero and his actions. When Prometheus stole fire from the Gods and gave it to mortals, he became the ‘Atlas of all Individuals.’ Although forever punished, Prometheus’ disrespect for the established boundaries between God and Man embraces the Dionysian value of hope through destroying boundaries. Nietzsche goes on to assert that hubris is a necessity for titanic individuals like Prometheus. Through hubris, the tragic story emerges which Nietzsche claims helps the myth “achieve its profoundest content, its most expressive form.” Artistic hubris evidenced in his larger than life scale and his celebrity, coupled with the seemingly

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6 Orozco. *José Clement Orozco: An Autobiography*. 30. From the quote “those [painters] who profess to have [political convictions] are not artists.”
7 Ibid 30.
9 Ibid 65.
10 Ibid 68.
endless torture Pollock endured in his personal life helped him identify with the mythical hero. It may have even helped him produce works of the ‘profoudest content.’ Finally, Nietzsche describes *Prometheus* in terms of the duality between his glory and his downfall: “[i]n himself the titanar artist found defiant faith that he had the ability to create men … the splendid ability of the great genius for which even eternal suffering is a slight price.”¹¹ Pollock’s life is a study in duality between a defiant creative force and psychological suffering. His pain was both his enemy and his ultimate source of artistic inspiration.

Orozco was keenly aware of the implications that painting the tragic hero entailed. Through his association with Alma Reid and Delphic Circle, a literary group interested in universal brotherhood through the study of Greek and Eastern philosophies, Orozco gained a sound understanding of classical culture and Nietzsche’s ideas behind the societal and moral implications of the Prometheus myth. Pollock too, having participated in the murals and having been exposed to the Delphic Circle through his teacher Thomas Hart Benton, knew and understood the implications of the Prometheus saga. Pollock absorbed its significance upon seeing the mural in the summer of 1930. Like Prometheus the classic hero, both Orozco and Pollock shattered boundaries. And, both demonstrate epic struggles, reminiscent of the tragic hero, in their works of art.¹² Understandably, Stephen Polcari, in his work “Orozco and Pollock: Epic Transfiguration” labels Orozco and later Pollock as contemporary “mythmakers.”

¹² Orozco tackled socio-political struggles and their implications to modern society evidenced by his *New School Murals* and *The Table Of Universal Brotherhood*. Pollock addressed internal struggles by finding cathartic outlets for his self-inflicted wounds evidenced in pieces like *Woman* and *The Flame.*
According to Polcari, the two “reinvent[ed] allegorical symbols for the modern experiences.”

Orozco gravitated to mythmaking and reinterpreting classical stories as a means of developing a framework for social commentary. His time at Alma Reid’s Delphic Circle in 1930 and his associated mural project at New York City’s New School (figure 3) best illustrate his ability to recast historical/classical stories to explore contemporary social issues. In a broad sense, the mural cycle incorporates allegorical figures and stories to explore conflicts plaguing the modern world. Orozco orients his panels geographically with each cardinal point corresponding to epic conflicts in each world region. The east panel deals with struggles in the orient including slavery, imperialism, and nationalist movements symbolized by Gandhi while the west panel presents an allegorical view of conflict in the occident with references to communism in the Soviet Union and socialism in Latin America. The north panel entitled The Table of Universal Brotherhood (figure 20) is the culmination of the mural cycle and the finale of Orozco’s social commentary. Here, he exploits the notion of the table as a center of intellectual discourse among peers.

At first glance, the New School Murals and The Table of Universal Brotherhood bear little resemblance to Pollock’s work. But, with a critical eye, the sources of inspiration become apparent. Chief among these was Orozco’s use of “dynamic symmetry,” a geometric system revitalized by Jay Hambidge and communicated to Orozco by his widow, Mary, a member of the Delphic Circle. The system focuses on the relative proportions of areas as opposed to the traditional art historical notion of building

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perspective base on line. Hambidge claimed the system was living and dynamic because it was “based on organic principles of growth and movement found in nature and humans.” Alma Reid in her account of the inauguration of the Murals claims “the dynamic forms on the dining room wall seemed to be living beings mingling with the crowd.” In addition to energizing Orozco’s composition, the effect of the system on the New School Murals was to create a decentralized narrative with multiple perspectives. This sense of decentralization is continued in the Table of Universal Brotherhood panel. Just as the cycle itself lacks hierarchy and any form of linear narration, there is no sense of leadership or subordinance around the table. All figures gather as equals. Orozco, in his own unique way, created an all-over composition that would carry through the entire mural cycle. Renato Mello and Diane Miloties in their book José Clemente Orozco in the United States 1927-1934 explain the effect of these choices: “[the viewer] is consistently decentralized by the organization of the program as well as by its proposal of future liberation emanating from outside European and US metropoles.”

The new perspective device and its capacity to create compositional vigor coupled with Orozco’s ability to convey deep emotions resonated with Pollock. More importantly, the lack of center had a profound effect on Pollock and probably set the stage for making Siqueiros’ socialist and conceptual ideas at the Experimental Studio in 1936 more relevant. While Orozco used myths and allegories to make social statements on contemporary struggles, Pollock used myths as an outlet for internal struggles. The epic scale of myths, their emotional content, and their ability to foster intellectual

14 Mello, José Clemente Orozco in the United States. 136.
15 Ibid 136.
16 Ibid 139.
17 Ibid 140.
contemplation resonated with Pollock. These mythic qualities have obvious manifestations in his works.

One of Pollock’s surviving sketchbooks is dated between 1938 and 1941. It marks his most observable period of technical, stylistic, and figural reference to Orozco. Interestingly, this is his first sketchbook that contains original compositions, not direct copies of master’s works. Some scholars would argue that because Pollock’s compositions are referential to Orozco, they symbolize only a developmental period in Pollock’s career similar to his early studies of Thomas Hart Benton and the Regionalists. On the contrary, his sketchbook represents a conscious choice to explore the artistic implications of Orozco’s work at a decisive moment in his career. They also represent the first glimpse at Pollock’s unique artistic voice and his epiphany that the psychological and expressionist underpinnings of Orozco’s work could serve as a source of sustained artistic inspiration. Pollock affirmed Orozco’s notion that deeply emotional subjects could be communicated with expressive power.

Orozco’s psychological inspiration is particularly evident in Pollock’s Sketch Number 18 (figure 14) from his third surviving sketchbook. Obvious references to several of Orozco’s works including Christ Destroying his Own Cross (figure 21) from the National Preparatory School and two panels, Migration (figure 22) and Modern Migration of the Spirit (figure 11) from Dartmouth College, appear at first. The most striking aspect of Pollock’s sketch is what it is not. It is not a political epic, it is not didactic, and it does not make a social statement. Despite the fact that in his

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18 Greenberg describes Mexican Painters in terms of stylistic antecedents in his essay “American Type Painting.” Also, refer to footnote 22 which identifies other authors who downplay the Muralist impact on Pollock.
autobiography Orozco says “[n]o artist has, or ever has had, political convictions of any sort...those who profess to have them are not artists”, his panel is an overt statement on the failures of modern American society.\(^{19}\) His Christ is not the traditional symbol of the almighty creator but rather a symbol of the all mighty destroyer, akin to the Aztec God Quetzalcoatl. The image is a modern Last Judgment where Christ, instead of judging and condemning individuals for their personal deeds on earth, judges and condemns society as whole. Christ, in a gesture of strength and liberation, stands erect at the foot of his destroyed cross with a clenched fist. Behind him is an apocalyptic mountain of industrial waste, the trapping of the capitalistic forces that plague American society.\(^{20}\) As David Scott, a prominent Orozco scholar states “[h]e destroys the old orders, as did Prometheus to prepare for the ‘Modern Migration of the Spirit.’”\(^{21}\)

Pollock, on the other hand, strips away any notion of Orozco’s socio-politically charged narrative and grounds his composition as an entirely internal struggle. Sketch Number 18 (figure 14) is a work in which Pollock funnels away any suggestions of propaganda yet retains the epic quality of Migration of the Modern Spirit (figure 11) to produce art for arts sake. Orozco unsuccessfully battled to achieve this feat his entire career. Sketch Number 18 is an image of personal psychological transformation and chronologically coincides with Pollock’s interest in social psychology. Sketch Number 18 is a composition defined by destruction and redemption. Strewn throughout the periphery of the composition are skeletal forms, heads, rib cages, feet, and legs as well as organic forms representing wombs. At the center of the composition is a lower body with a

\(^{19}\) Orozco, José Clemente Orozco: An Autobiography. 30.
\(^{20}\) Hurlburt, The Mexican Muralists in the United States. 74.
massive cross radiating from between the legs. It is surrounded by more skeletal figures that appear to float from the incorporation of abstract lines indicating movement. Finally, a long sword shown diagonally animates the composition. Its great weight plunges its handle into the ground. The destruction of the cross, the sheer power of the sword, and the ethereal floating skeletons are all indicative of the work’s deeper psychological meaning. The sword represents the new found power that Pollock is beginning to derive from Orozco’s angst filled expressionism. The cut-down cross corresponds to an irreverent destruction of his old artistic foundation, while the floating skeleton marks his rebirth as a truly original artist.

In addition to the affirmation Pollock gained from Orozco to explore emotional subject matters, the paradigm shift in his sketchbook with regard to compositions that emphasize personal cathartic subject matters, coincides with several successive mental breakdowns, prolonged alcohol binges, and a stint at a New York asylum. To curb his manic state, Pollock began regularly seeing Helen Marot. Marot, a former social reformer of the 1910’s and 1920’s, devoted the latter part of her life to studying psychology. She provided Pollock with an outlet and a sympathetic ear. Marot’s psychological approach was grounded in behavior philosophies that ran counter to ideas of Freud and Jung.\(^22\) Her philosophy is of particular note because it had important implications to Pollock’s work at this time. She believed “that impulses were the physiological building block of human behavior. Because impulses could be directed, no action was truly spontaneous. Actions that appeared to be spontaneous were, in fact ‘reflexes’ of the unconscious.”\(^23\) In other words, if Pollock could eliminate academic traditions and paint impulsively, he could

\(^{22}\) Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*. 325.

\(^{23}\) Ibid 325.
more accurately reflect his unconscious. This new found artistic freedom is undeniably correlated to the fact that this period marks his first exploration of original compositions. Armed with the power of spontaneity and a new expressive artistic vocabulary from Orozco, Pollock’s creative output became decidedly more innovative. *Sketch Number 8* (figure 23) from Sketchbook three reflects Pollock new found artistic voice. The work is a blend of figural and non-objective elements. Along a strong diagonal axis is the suggestion of a crucified figure. However, his body merges with the organic abstractions that dominate the composition. Pollock uses blacks, browns, and organic curving lines to create an amorphous figure. His emphasis on movement and musculature, recalls Orozco’s *Migration Panel* from his Dartmouth murals. While there are clear figural references, *Sketch Number 8* is beginning to take on an overall, non-objective quality that Orozco’s works stop short of reaching.

Marot’s psychological philosophy and Orozco’s dynamic expressionism definitely diffused into Pollock’s artistic approach and opened his eyes to the power of psychology as a means expressing internal struggle. But his development did not end here. After his sessions with Marot, Pollock began visiting Joséph Henderson who introduced him to Jungian symbols. Pollock gravitated toward these as tools to further facilitate cathartic expression in his works. Henderson’s treatment consisted of using Pollock’s sketches as a medium for delving into his unconscious. He explained to Pollock the four personality functions and their corresponding color assignments. Yellow symbolized intuition, blue represented thinking, red feeling, and green sensation. The initial piece that Henderson examined was a small sketch (figure 24) in the vein of
Orozco’s *Christ Cutting Down his Own Cross* (figure 21). The sketch is dominated by violent slashing brushstrokes, swatches of yellow, and figures heavily outlined in black. Henderson determined that lack of green or sensation coupled with the violent brush strokes meant that the four elements of Pollock’s personality were severely out of balance. Henderson then noted the ordering symbols like the axial cross shapes and round sun. According to Henderson, the ordering symbols along with greater exploration of the alternative side of his personality could help Pollock create more balanced works and sustain a more balanced personality. Whether Pollock believed in Henderson’s assessment of his personality imbalance is up for debate, but Pollock’s belief in the power of psychology to enhance his work is not debatable.

Like his time with Marot and his visual studies of Orozco, prominent Pollock biographers Steven Naifeh and Gregory Smith observe that he was able to “absorb ideas and recycle them through his unconscious and into his art, and, in the process make them his own.” Just as Pollock recast the emotional and expressive content of Orozco’s work and the technical innovations of Siqueiros’s Experimental Workshop, this is exactly how Pollock treated Jungian psychoanalysis. He viewed it as a tool for further artistic freedom and experimentation. Jungian theory on art dictates that in order to truly analyze a piece it must come from the artist’s unconscious. However during each session, Henderson offered Pollock in depth readings on the color assignment as well as line and symbol interpretation. As a result, Pollock quickly began adapting Jungian symbols to aid the expressive power of his works. Although Henderson intended to help Pollock “structure

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24 Ibid 331.
25 Ibid 331.
26 Ibid 332.
27 Ibid 338.
his thinking function toward achieving a more rational and objective view of his life and his art,” he actually gave him artistic ammo for the future.\textsuperscript{28}

The culmination of Pollock’s time with Henderson was a sketch (figure 25) executed at the end of his therapy from 1939-1940. The sketch is composed of two muscled human forms meeting with their arms outstretched and interlocked. A long vertically oriented pole bisects the figures. Rapped around the pole is an oval form that contains a small plant with four leaves and at is base is a coiled snake. This grouping forms the center of the composition. It is bonded by a large pelvic-like rib structure with a bull and horse peering out. Henderson offers long-winded phrases like “reality function” and avoiding the “jaws of the world monster” to describe Pollock’s transformation, but in reality he is observing the first instance of Pollock employing a device for compositional unity while still exploring an emotional internal subject manner.\textsuperscript{29} Henderson and this work in particular ushered in a period of unconscious exploration coupled with compositional discipline.

As a result of Pollock’s exploration of psychological subject matter, many critics argue that Pollock’s period of Jungian analysis marks a distinct departure from the influence of Orozco and Siqueiros in favor of European Surrealism and Modernism. While Pollock did gain an understanding of the unconscious allowing him to strike compositional balance between opposing forces like male and female and dynamism and structure, Jungian analysis also further solidified his connection with Orozco. The disciples of Jung believe that artists are the symbol makers. The artist “reaches out to that

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid 335.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid 334.
primordial image in the unconscious… he brings it into relation with conscious values thereby transforming its shape, until it can be accepted by the contemporaries according to its value."\(^30\) This theory provided the scientific backing that helped Pollock validate his artistic identity as a myth or symbol maker, an identity he shared with Orozco. Just like Prometheus proved to Pollock that expressionism and emotional content could overcome his technical shortcomings, his time in Jungian analysis developed his confidence that the wellspring of his internal emotions would help him produce true art.

The notion of becoming more sensitive to the unconscious was that the heart of Jungian analysis. Like the Surrealists at this time, Jungian practitioners like Henderson believed “primitive races…have readier access to their unconscious mind than so-called civilized people.”\(^31\) This lead Pollock to explore Navajo sand painting at the Museum of Natural History in 1941, an experience that Krasner later acknowledges as a possible reason for why Pollock placed his canvases on the floor. \(^32\) Although Pollock never explicitly explains his psychological connection to Orozco or any of the Muralists, he must have recognized and gravitated to elements of the unconscious in their work. These qualities in \textit{Prometheus} (figure 2) are referential to Aztec art. They include its totemic compositional form and its amorphous blend of the crowd, the sunburst, and the hero. Whether or not these elements were a part of Orozco’s indigenous heritage is not relevant. What is relevant is that Jungian analysis opened Pollock eyes allowing him to see a purity and authenticity that could not be replicated in European or American art.

\(^30\) Ibid 330.
\(^31\) Ibid 348
\(^32\) Storr. "\textit{A Piece of the Action.}" 38.
Chapter 4: Who Really Invented Drip Painting? Siqueiros’s Innovation and its impact on Pollock

As a political agitator, Siqueiros is best remembered by the art historical community as a proponent of radical socialist ideas. His outspoken criticism of capitalism with the ultimate goal of creating what he called “art for the people executed collectively,” positioned his brand of avant-garde art in direct political opposition to American abstract expressionism. As a result of this political polarization, the connections that exist between Pollock and Siqueiros have been largely ignored. However, with distance from the perceived political incongruities of Pollock and Siqueiros’s works, it becomes clear that these two avant-garde artists are not as disparate as most scholars have purported. In fact, Siqueiros’s legacy of technical, material, and optical innovation is a driving force behind Pollock’s works as well as his artistic philosophy. While the two artist’s styles appear polar opposite, they share an unrelenting ideological similarity. They both believe a revolutionary modern art form with expressive power necessitates new materials and techniques.

In order to understand why new experimental techniques and material choices had such a lasting effect on both artist’s careers, it is important to examine why Pollock and Siqueiros gravitated to the Experimental Workshop. For Siqueiros, the Experimental Studio was part and parcel of his larger, career long goal of “creating a viable twentieth century Revolutionary art form.” Siqueiros and his students worked collectively in their artistic production to uncover revolutionary technical breakthroughs in art and then reconcile them with a revolutionary political agenda. Siqueiros believed that the

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2 Ibid 237.
“fundamental problem of Revolutionary art is a technical problem … tied to a problem of dialectic methodology.”

Like Siqueiros, Pollock was also drawn to the new aesthetic, materials, and techniques that the Experimental Studio had to offer when he joined the studio in April of 1936. Through the process of experimentation, Pollock sought to find a visible form that would provide a direct link with his internal emotions. Observers like Pollock’s brother Charles believe that Pollock found this visible form at the Experimental Studio. Charles said in a letter to Pollock’s first biographer Francis V. O’Connor in 1966 that “[he] ha[d] always thought of this to be a key experience in Jackson’s development… the violation of accepted craft procedures, certain felicities of accidental effect, scale, must have stuck within his mind to be recalled later even if unconsciously, in evolving his mature painting style.”

But before this new visual form was realized, Pollock was introduced to new materials that would serve as the vehicle for his artistic expression. Just as the invention of the tin paint tube ushered in a new era of plein aire painting and a new style of impressionism, new materials introduced by Siqueiros also ushered in a modern era where artistic materials reflected the industrialization of the times. With the overarching goal “to be a laboratory for experiment in Modern art technique,” the Studio experimented primarily with industrial paints such as duco enamel and lacquer that previously did not have an application in the arts. Pollock would continue to use this same enamel in virtually all of his mature works.

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3 Ibid 242.
Siqueiros and Pollock understood the political and ideological significance of using industrial paint as their primary medium. Duco enamel in particular was first introduced in 1923 as quick drying paint for the General Motors assembly line.\(^6\) In gravitating to this medium, Siqueiros equated the artists to the greatest socialist hero, the industrial worker. In keeping with the Muralists goal for developing an art for the people, Diego Rivera represents industrial workers as great symbols of promise for a new socialist order in his seminal Detroit Industry Murals in 1933 (figure 26). But above all else, Siqueiros sought to demonstrate and personify the heroism of the workers that Lenin outlined in his essay on “Communist Subbotniks” in 1919. Lenin addresses the importance of the subbotniks, groups of workers practicing Socialism through unpaid labor, by saying “the heroism of the worker… in this connection, the communist subbotniks… is the beginning of a revolution that is more difficult, more tangible, more radical and more decisive than the overthrow of the Bourgeoisie.”\(^7\) Just like Russian workers assembled into subbtkn collectives to further their revolutionary cause, Siqueiros and his “artistic subbotnik” assembled with the aim of “creat[ing] art for the people.”\(^8\) While Pollock was not touting a communist revolution, the formation of his artistic principles is linked to communist ideals.

Upon examining Pollock’s statements from his mature style period, his ideas mesh with those of Siqueiros along iconoclastic lines. In an interview with William Wright for the Sag Harbor radio station which was taped in 1950, Pollock remarked that

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“[n]ew needs, need new techniques. … It seems to me that the modern cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture.”

Like Siqueiros, Pollock believed that in order to truly express the feeling of the age, materials from that age must be used. His interest in enamel and other modern resources was a powerful tool to subvert the Renaissance artistic ideal, a power that Pollock grasped from Siqueiros. Siqueiros, in his 1921 Syndicate of Painters manifesto, writes “let us reject theories anchored in the relativity of ‘national art.’ We must become universal! Our own racial and regional physiognomy will always show through in our work.”

As an ardent and outspoken professor of the modern, Pollock clearly experienced Siqueiros values during his time at the Experimental Workshop.

In addition to industrial paint’s modern implications, Pollock used gloss enamel and lacquer for their unique properties and compositional benefits. Both of which he also observed in the Experimental Studio. Harold Lehman noticed that lacquer could broaden what was stylistically possible. He explained that it “opened up enormous possibilities in the application of color…It dried quickly, almost instantly and could be removed at will even though thoroughly dry and hard.”

To Pollock, enamel as opposed to lacquer opened up enormous possibilities. Its viscosity allowed Pollock to paint fluidly in continuous expressionistic action. Industrial enamel paint first introduced to Pollock at Siqueiros’s experimental studio would serve as the primary material used in almost all of his mature paintings.

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Modern materials however only provided a conduit for expression. It wasn’t until Pollock fully absorbed the techniques introduced to him in the Experimental Studio that he was able to create a visual representation of his internal emotions. Siqueiros, Pollock, and the rest of the collective knew that to realize their broad ambition to uncover a visual form for a new revolutionary art, progressive techniques must also be developed. To create a holistic revolutionary art form in keeping with the Studio’s broad purpose, they also experimented with new techniques. In fact, “to be a laboratory for experiment in modern art techniques” was one goal specifically outlined in the studio’s manifesto.\(^{12}\) Their most innovative technical advances came when they developed new methods for applying industrial paint. Axel Horn, a studio participant, recalls when applying lacquer they would “use it in thin glazes or built it up in thick gobs. We poured it, dripped it, splattered it, hurled it at the picture surface...What emerged was an endless variety of accidental effects.”\(^{13}\) Siqueiros would later incorporate these effects into a theory he referred to as the Theory of Controlled Accidents. This language might strike you as language that has been applied to Pollock. Controlled Accidents and other experimental techniques represent Siqueiros’s significant artistic contributions to the modern aesthetic in their own right. However their effect on Pollock is career altering.

Siqueiros performed one experiment that particularly resonated with Pollock. He fastened a plywood board onto a lazy susan and poured different colored paint directly on the board as he spun it. He then poured paint thinner on top of the enamel as an overlay and let it bleed between the pigments. The result was the creation of what Lehman called

\(^{12}\) Ibid 236.

\(^{13}\) Ibid 241.
“the most fantastic weird images.” Alex Horn, one of Pollock’s artist friends, remembers him attempting this experiment months later in his studio. Pollock recreated the experiment in an attempt to appreciate and absorb the automatist and expressive effects of the process. Although the significance of this experience is not observable in his work for several years, it is obvious that dripped, poured, and streaked paint coupled with the concept of ‘controlled accident’ formed a powerful influence on Pollock. It was the precursor for establishing his eventual status.

Over the years there have been countless explanations proposed by critics, biographers, and artists regarding Pollock’s development of his signature drip painting style. One of the most tempting and entrenched explanation traces Pollock’s drip painting back to the Surrealist practice of automatism in the mid 1920’s which was developed and explored by artists like Breton, Miro, Picabia, and Masson (see figure 27). There are major issues with this assertion. First and foremost, the notion of automatism outlined by Andre Breton in the Surrealist manifesto is that in order to truly create a work or writing that is meaningful it must be “absent[t] of any control exercised by reason, exempt from aesthetic or moral concern.” In other words, the Surrealists tried to orchestrate an involuntary art form that welled-up from the unconscious. Many of these

15 Ibid 286.
16 For Greenberg, drip painting and Pollock’s mature works were the next artistic leap forward from analytical cubism. Krasner argued that the gestures and working on the ground were derived from Indian sand painting. Naifeh and Smith argue that it was a masculine inclination related to urinating. William Rubin proposed the most ubiquitous explanation: it was derived from automatism developed by the Surrealists.
artists practiced meditation or breathing techniques to arrive at a calm, contemplative state and ensure that their works were devoid of emotion or expression.

Pollock was anything but calm or emotionless or expressionless. As the personification of an action painter, Pollock hovered over his works like hawk circling its prey with cigarette hanging out his mouth. The famous studio shots by Hans Namuth capture Pollock in this frenzied state (figure 28). Like the Surrealists, Pollock approached his work with an open mind and allowed images and figures to appear in the painting process; however, his technique was not an involuntary analytical exercise. For Pollock, it was purposeful, controlled, and most of all expressive.

Krasner, in an interview for a Pollock exhibit in 1969, remarked that “[h]is control was amazing. Using a stick was difficult enough, but the basting syringe was like a giant fountain pen. With it he had to control the flow of the paint as well as his gesture.”18 These spontaneous gestures were a physical extension of Pollock emotions and psyche. And, like Siqueiros said the “accidental phenomenon could have plastic value only in the means in which we could coordinate, direct, and utilize it.”19 To both Pollock and Siqueiros an involuntary and uncontrollable technique like automatism was useless. Instead, the artists approached accidental qualities not as a window into the unconscious, but rather as a tool to aid in expressing a profound statement whether personal or political.

The implications of ‘controlled accidents’ are best appreciated by observing how Pollock and Siqueiros’s formal and stylistic qualities were aided by this technique. The two works that exemplify the technical and material breakthroughs of the studio are Pollock’s *Convergence* (figure 29) from 1952 and *Collective Suicide* (figure 9) executed by Siqueiros and the Studio in 1936. *Collective Suicide* thematically is a work consistent with Siqueiros’s socialist historical narrative. It depicts a group of 16th century Chichimecha Indians who hurled themselves into the seas to avoid Spanish colonization. As a side note, Siqueiros’s interest in Indigenous people can be summed up in his line drawn from his Syndicate of Painters Manifesto in 1921: “Let us, for our part, go back to the work of ancient inhabitants of our valleys, the Indian painters and sculptures…They demonstrate a fundamental knowledge of nature, which can serve as a point of departure for us. Let us absorb their synthetic energy, but avoid those lamentable archeological reconstructions (Indianism, Primitivism, Americanism)...” But, Siqueiros’s interest in Indigenous peoples and their political struggle is relegated to a subordinate place in the foreground while the experimental effects hieratically dominate the composition in the middle and backgrounds. This is not to say these effects diminish the epic nature of this event. In fact, by using poured paint and enamel over a reddish-brown base coat, Siqueiros captures the violence of the sea. Streaks of browns, blacks, purples, and off whites run together and capture the essence of white-capped waves thundering on seaside cliffs.

The effects of these accidents are best summed up by Octavio Paz the famous Mexican author who writes that Siqueiros “understands matter to be animated by energy

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20 Siqueiros. “Syndicate of Painters Manifesto.”
at war with itself.”

This violent energy elicits a sense of empathy from the viewer who commiserates with the Inca’s as they jump into the vast oblivion. While the accidental effects aid the expressionistic and emotional power of Siqueiros’s narrative, these forms also create a sense of unity bordering on an allover compositional character. The abstract patterns, drips, and cloudy areas, created by an airbrush, form a composition with no discernible beginning or end, totally free of hierarchy. The allover quality of Collective Suicide is an artistic achievement that would not be recognized or appreciated until Pollock developed his mature style in the late 1940’s.

Pollock took the breakthroughs of Siqueiros’s Collective Suicide a step further in his mature works by fully eliminating all traces of figural references and creating works that were complete abstractions. Yet, Pollock still employed the technical advances he learned in the Studio. His mature works incorporate industrial paints like enamel and new methods of paint delivery like pouring, flinging, and dripping. Convergence from 1952, showcases Pollock’s ability to absorb these technical innovations and transform them into his own unique composition. The enamel on canvas work is a web of blacks, whites, oranges, yellows, and purples, strewn on top of a light brown base coat. As Krasner recalls Pollock used “sticks and hardened or worn out brushes and basting syringes” to produce controlled accidental effects like drips, runs, and splatters. In contrast to Siqueiros who used accidental effects to add painterly tension and highlight political struggle in his works, Convergence and other mature works incorporate accident effects to physically depict raw internal emotions. Or as Octavio Paz eloquently said, Pollock

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22 Harten. Siqueiros/Pollock, Pollock/Siqueiros. 48.
works with a “vision of matter expanding and distending until it denies itself, until it ceases to be matter and is transformed into a cry. A cry not a word: a total affirmation of energy…”

24 Pollock in effect is able to sift through superfluous political and ideological baggage to arrive at an essence in the form of wholly abstract art. In *American Type Painting*, Greenberg identifies the Abstract Expressionists and Pollock in particular as having the ability to “isolate and detach... the expendable conventions imbedded in [painting]” 25 Perhaps it is Pollock’s full-fledged abstraction contrasted with Siqueiros political realism that deters some critics from examining their similarities. But, it is important to keep in mind that inspiration and artistic connections are not necessarily formed on stylistic grounds. Siqueiros’s *Echo of a Scream* (figure 30) personifies this notion. Its extreme realism showcasing industrial wreckage, plumes, smoggy clouds, and the oversized head of a baby whale, immediately illicit an overwhelming sense of sorrow in the viewer. *Blue Poles* (figure 31), considered by many to be Pollock’s late masterpiece tells a similar story of terror, wreckage, and sorrow. The work was made during an intense period of binge drinking. It includes shattered pieces of turkey basters that Pollock hurled at the work in frustration. 26 Dark blue verticals pierce through the work impaling the layers of pigment surrounding them. Pollock is able to convey the same brute force and energy in the gestural power of the trust of his arm as Siqueiros. Although it may appear on the surface the two artists’ works have little in common, the pair shares the same ideological mindset. They both conceive of the world in deeply emotional terms and use the same experimental techniques and media to express them.

Chapter 5: Reconciling the Irreconcilable: Reading Pollock’s Personal Expression Through a Socialist Lens

Through films and biographies, curatorial choices in exhibitions, and landmark sales in the auction market, Pollock remains relevant and interesting in the art world. Perhaps the world is still drawn to Jackson Pollock because his works inspire strong, opposing readings and reactions. In fact two divergent readings dominate Pollock’s critical scholarship: one characterized by individuals who believe Pollock’s work is a symbol of personal expression and tout his status as an ‘action painter,’ and a second in which post-colonial theory is employed to derive Socialist meaning in Pollock’s works. These divergent readings, personal versus collective, appear to be entirely opposite and irreconcilable. But, Pollock’s work rests at the intersection of these seemingly irreconcilable interpretations.

In a way, the formation of the two opposing readings is an attempt by critics to assert their control over the meaning of Pollock’s works. As a proponent of an individualistic reading, Greenberg’s control over Pollock’s work came in the form of an attempt to cling to the “preservation of whatever living culture we have right now.”¹ In an era of political polarization in the form of 1950’s United States vs. the Iron Curtain, individualism and liberalism were stifled. As a result, Greenberg believed that the remnants of culture and modernism should be entrusted to the individual artist and his personal expression. In the words of Justin Spring, Greenberg viewed Pollock’s paintings, “as a sort of visual testimony, the work of individual who was questioning the established order, rebelling against the conventional values, artistic, social, and spiritual-

and replacing them with the order he had found in his own particular visual art.”

Ironically, in grouping the Avant Grade artists together to tout their works as more expressive and daring than Parisian counterparts, Greenberg is in fact denying this new order that he claims individual Abstract Expressionist gained through their personal expression. Nevertheless, Greenberg was trying to show that in a modern world, which downplays the importance of the individual, the artist’s expression becomes a symbol against the uniformity of a totalitarian society. In the process of establishing the artist as the last bastion of individuality, Greenberg created a pervasive intellectual interpretation of Pollock’s work inextricably tied to personal expression.

Harold Rosenberg propelled this notion further in his essay “The American Action Painters” in Art News in 1952. The piece was an attempt to characterize and classify the modernist vanguard of painters in New York City. Rosenberg clearly wrote with Pollock in mind when he declared that “[m]any of the painters were Marxist trying to paint society…The Big moment came when they decided JUST to paint. The gesture was free of value-political, aesthetic, moral.” Rosenberg identifies a defining element advanced by the ‘Action Painters’ and Pollock. By saying they decided “just to paint”, Rosenberg is referencing the seminal moment in which Pollock exploits the surface of the canvas as two-dimensional and pioneers experimentation in non-objective art. Rosenberg like Greenberg asserts his control over Pollock’s works by stripping away all external

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forces to arrive at a reading that asserts personal expression as the sole value qualification in judging modern art.

On the surface, Rosenberg and Greenberg appear to correctly identify formal elements in Pollock’s works that are void of political statements. As previously mentioned, Pollock’s work is defined by his ability to strip away the political connotations observable in Orozco and Siqueiros’s work to arrive at an essential form of personal expression. Orozco and Siqueiros, in Rosenberg’s mind, remained ‘Marxists trying to paint society’, while Pollock because of his non-objective approach, became decidedly more universal. But to say that his art is free of all political, aesthetic, or moral values is not only impossible, it denies Pollock’s own politics and artistic upbringing. No artist, or person for that matter, has the ability to fully remove himself from the meaning and perceptions he gains from external factors. Pollock’s works do not exist in a vacuum, and his creative process is definitely tied to his political and aesthetic values.

In contrast to Greenberg and Rosenberg, David Craven formulates his reading of Pollock’s work thorough a Post-Colonial lens. In the process, Craven implicitly poses two important questions: Why were the majority of Americans initially hostile toward Abstract Expressionism? And why was Latin America, where several countries were engaged in some anti-US clash, so receptive to it? Craven argues that Latin Americans gravitated to the “decentralized vocabularies of visual convention.” Additionally, Latin American’s accepted Abstract Expressionism because it embraced artistic conventions

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6 American hostility is evidenced by Rep. Dondero’s speech to the House in 1956, which attacks modern art as Communist and declares that it is opposed to “our government”. From David Craven, Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 97.

7 Craven, “Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art.” 44.
free of the influence of European oppressors and celebrated the collective culture of Pan Americanism. At the same time however, Craven is careful not to label Abstract Expressionism a cohesive movement. He vehemently opposes the notion that Abstract Expressionism served as vehicle for promoting the ideology of the dominant Cold War Liberal agenda. Instead, he argues that all art reflects the values of the controlling interest and the oppressed. In other words, Craven believes that “all visual languages are unavoidably shaped by cultural, ethnic, and class tensions, so that they are necessarily decentered.”

In examining the cultural, ethnic and class tensions that affect Pollock’s works, Craven argues that Pollock identifies and absorbs the cultural identity of the Navajo by witnessing sand painting and studying their works. He is then able to transmit his own socialist ideology to create a new hybrid. While Craven should be credited for his exposure that “any visual language in the arts is thus understood as a locus for competing cultural traditions along with competing ideological values,” his assertion that Pollock truly grasped and absorbed cultural elements of the Navajo to arrive at his mature style is unsubstantiated. Pollock’s work instead can be thought of as a deeply personal expression created through a socialist lens. Although this characterization is seemingly oxymoronic, as Socialism is usually associated with the collective, Pollock is able to blend opposing forces—personal expression and socialism—to reconcile the irreconcilable. Critics have been hesitant to recognize that both readings could co-exist and accurately reflect Pollock’s intent.

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8 Ibid 46.
9 Ibid 45.
Formal analysis helps to clarify this position. Consider Pollock’s *Full Fathom Five* (figure 32) from 1947 and Orozco’s *Dive Bomber and Tank* (figure 33) from 1940. *Full Fathom Five* seems a-political. Its title is drawn from the song by the Shakespeare character Ariel in the “Tempest” who sings,

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“Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange,
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
Ding-dong.
Hark! now I hear them — Ding-dong, bell.
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The title and verse gives the work a sense of personal introspection on the transient nature of life as if Pollock is trying to capture and suspend life’s state of flux in his application of paint. His palette is composed of seas greens, blacks, and turquoises with splashes of burnt orange adding to the sense of depth and turbulence. The work is physically stamped by Pollock’s presence complete with nails, tacks, buttons, keys, coins, a torn cigarette, matches, paint-tube tops, and even footprints. Not only does *Full Fathom Five* appear not to contain any overt political statements. On the contrary, it appears to be overtly personal. The viewer can literally trace Pollock’s arm gestures, footprints, and his additions of foreign objects to recreate his painting process. Like no other artist before him, what Pollock captured on canvas through his gestures directly correlated to his energy and state of mind. It is no wonder that early critics called it “raw uncultivated emotion.”

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Nevertheless, Greenberg and Rosenberg fail to acknowledge that Pollock’s controlled accident technique was grounded in the socialist ideology of Siqueiros and his experimental workshop. ‘Controlled accidents’ promoted Siqueiros’s socialist cause by subverting themes of bourgeoisie art, creating a partnership with the material, and offering no deference to illusionistic art over nonobjective art. Additionally, the chaos and alienation created by the individual drips of paint *Full Fathom Five* is saved from disintegration by the overall composition. In other words, the collective (all over composition) provides the web of support that saves the individual (drops and splatters) from blending into the vast oblivion. As such, Pollock proves that the individual needs the support of the collective to avoid alienation. Without some hierarchy, there is no single focal point or leader. Instead the lack of center emphasizes the importance of the collective or all over quality. This sense of detachment and isolation of the individual coupled with Pollock’s socialist undertones could even represent a covert indictment of the modern capitalist society.

Even Pollock’s use of personal detritus, seemingly the ultimate personal artistic statement can be traced to its similarity to Siqueiros’s notion of ‘controlled accident.’ Remnants of Pollock’s presence echo the random and haphazard qualities inherent in the drips, streaks, and splatters of paints promoted by Siqueiros.\(^{11}\) As a result, they help eliminate compositional hierarchy and contribute to the over-all quality of his work. Yet, Pollock, like Siqueiros, believed that “accidental phenomenon could have plastic value only in the means in which [they] could coordinate, direct, and utilize it.”\(^{12}\) As a result,

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\(^{11}\) See Collective Suicide figure 9 for an example of “controlled accident” technique.

Pollock appropriated the accidental phenomena complete with its socialist underpinnings to showcase his physical presence.

In addition to how personal expressive statements physically dominate Pollock’s work, many critics refrained from formulating any kind of socialist reading because political works of time, like those of Pollock’s mentors Orozco and Siqueiros, were figural, objective, and often interpreted as didactic. At first glance, they represented a style that was far cry from Pollock’s, which in the absence of figural references appears a-political. Orozco’s *Dive Bomber and Tank* commissioned for the 1940 MOMA’s *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* exhibit typifies this apparent contrasting approach to painting. Prior to arriving in the United States, Orozco had selected the theme, “un aeroplano de bombadero” or a bomber. The mural is organized in an innovative six-panel scheme in which panels are moveable to create dramatic juxtapositions. In his essay on the piece, Orozco proposes six different ways to display the panels but acknowledges that the display possibilities were endless. In its original layout, the mural is an image of industrial wreckage formed from scrap heaps of painterly abstractions of human and machine forms. His theme, just after the onslaught of WWII, provides a timely social statement with obvious implications to the overwhelming destruction of modern war. Orozco’s piece actually coincides with the signing of the Nazi Soviet pact of 1939 signaling the end of communist opposition to Hitler and the imminent threat of fascism. This fact coupled with the US and Mexico’s neutral stance against fascism (until Pearl Harbor in 1941) and the Nazi’s use of blitzkrieg tactics symbolized by the incorporation

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13 Mello. *José Clemente Orozco in the United States 1927-1934*, 188.
of the dive-bomber, necessitates a reading along antifascist lines. Yet, ironically, just as
the socialist and political connotations of Pollock’s work are ignored, the personal
expressive elements of Orozco’s work are ignored.\textsuperscript{15} Specifically, Luis Cardoza y
Aragon, the Guatemalan poet and writer exposes the important elements of Orozco’s
personality imbued in the work. He identifies “the desolate bitterness of Orozco, absent
of hope born from the collision between longing and reality, is one of the most
pronounced aspects of his psychology” and also an element of \textit{Dive Bomber and Tank}
that is ignored by the critics.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Dive Bomber and Tank} beneath its surface actually rejects much of the
stereotypical elements of Mexican painting like a picturesque quality and a politically
charged narrative ambition. Rather than painting a series of historical events like his
Dartmouth murals (figure 10), Orozco chooses to paint an idea which he described as
“the subjugation of man by the machines of modern warfare.”\textsuperscript{17} In other words, Orozco’s
subject matter is really a personal and abstract version of the horrors of a machine age
war. Orozco further emphasizes expression over overt politics by configuring the work
into six movable panels. By allowing several different layouts, Orozco undermines the
traditional notions of the narrative. He is able to eliminate any sense of hierarchy, time,
beginning or ending. His vision is esoteric and almost dreamlike in its juxtapositions. Not
unlike Pollock in \textit{Full Fathom Five}, \textit{Dive Bomber and Tank} presents the viewer with
Orozco’s overall feeling of anxiety and unstoppable change that he associates with the
\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{15} Titles like “Orozco’s Blitzpaints Modern Museum Mural” from the newspaper PM and with articles from
the New Yorker that speak to the horrors of modern warfare help push the solely political interpretation of
Orozco’s work. Form Mello 194.
\textsuperscript{16} Mello, \textit{José Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927-1934}. 197.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid 188.
\end{footnotesize}
modern era. Although Orozco refers to the Mexican Revolution “as the most happy and fun of carnivals” his violent slashing brush strokes in *Dive Bomber and Tank* are visual evidence showcasing Orozco’s personal anxiety surrounding the escalating conflict.\(^\text{18}\)

While Pollock, unlike Orozco, is able to strip away obvious political references through his non-objective approach, his works are still strongly grounded in his socialist beliefs. In fact, the gestures that Rosenberg describes as “free of value” are actually dependent upon Pollock’s socialist sentiment. While his association with the socialist party is downplayed because of the prevailing anti-socialist sentiment of the fifties, plain and simple Pollock was a socialist. He subscribed to *The Nation*, wrote a politically radical and socialist influenced pamphlet in high school, and participated in Siqueiros’s Experimental Workshop.\(^\text{19}\) Had his personal political persuasion been so opposed to the ideas exposed by the journal and the Studio, he would have never associated himself with them. Although his works with socialist undertones could be viewed as an indictment of capitalist society, the most holistic interpretation of Pollock’s work is far more complex and problematic without a nuanced approach of subtlety. Pollock’s works are examples of personal expression though a socialist lens. While this notion is contradictory at its core, so are Pollock’s works, which draw from socialist techniques and ideology to produced individual statements.

Formally, the reminders of Pollock’s presence in the form of cigarette butts, glass shards, and footprints immediately force the viewer to consider Pollock’s vigor and angst-filled painting process. His presence is literally contained in the canvas yet


\(^{19}\) Naifeh and Smith. *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*. 145.
inextricably tied to socialist ideology. His individual gestures are part and parcel of a unified collective, organized through his overall composition and carried out by utilizing techniques preached by Siqueiros in the Experimental Workshop. As Pollock’s first and most influential therapist, Helen Marot said “actions that appeared spontaneous were, in fact, reflexes of the unconscious.” Pollock no doubt appreciated and explored the duality between his presence as a symbol of expressionism and, simultaneously, as a symbol of a deeper collective unconscious. This complex interplay creates the compositional dynamism that contributes to the discrepancy in the interpretation of his works.

The methods and spiritual implications of Navajo sand painting also represent a source of inspiration for Pollock with the same opposing tension between socialism and personal expression. David Craven, whose work relies on a Post-Colonial approach believes, Pollock developed a “strong ideological affinities to [Navajo] values.” Specifically he outlines several Navajo cultural elements that Pollock embraced:

“1). They originally had no concept of absolute personal property 2). They continued to see land as a basic framework for life as opposed to a key factor in the production of personal profits 3). They made no sharp breaks between their lives and their art…”

In other words, Craven identifies foundations of organic socialism that Pollock and the Navajo have in common in their ideology and artistic expression. The cultural elements that Craven outlines are also exposed by Siqueiros in his Painters’ Manifesto from 1926. These ideas were conveyed to Pollock when Siqueiros, in all likelihood, urged his Experimental Workshop comrades to observe work of indigenous cultures. He believed

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they could “demonstrate a fundamental knowledge of nature, which can serve as a departure for us.” He urged his comrades to absorb “their synthetic energy, but avoid those lamentable archeological labels.”

To Siqueiros, indigenous culture provided evidence that his revolutionary ideal of organic socialism existed in a natural state and could exist again with the overthrow of the bourgeoisie. In fact, throughout many of Siqueiros’s works he depicts himself as Cuauhtémoc, an Aztec, who after his uncle the king failed to stand up to Cortez and the Conquistadores, assumes the role of defender of Tenochtitlan. In Siqueiros’s 1950-1951 mural in Mexico City the Torture of Cuauhtémoc (figure 34), the hero is depicted with his feet engulfed in flame in a dignified pose surrounded by faceless armored Conquistadores. During the Mexican Revolution and later in the late 1940’s, Cuauhtémoc became a populist Mexican symbol for “dispelling foreign, restrictive powers” and to “promote the revolutionary ideals of Mexican socialism.” By equating himself to Cuauhtémoc, Siqueiros is emphasizing the artist’s subversive ability to overcome the oppressive nature of society and encourage revolutionary change.

While Indegenismo was obviously artistically and ideologically significant for Siqueiros, Pollock was also drawn to organic socialism that forms the underpinnings of indigenous culture. Siqueiros must have sparked his interested because in 1941 Pollock attended the Museum of Natural History’s show on the art of the American Indian. Pollock, in My Painting from Possibilities Magazine in the Winter 1947-48, explains “on the floor I am at ease. I feel nearer, more apart of the painting since this way I can walk

around it, work from all four sides and literally be in the painting." In working on the floor and viewing himself as an extension of the canvas Pollock is able to eliminate compositional hierarchy. There is no one focal point; instead, he paints from all angles allowing for equal emphasis and continuity in his drips in keeping with the socialist emphasis on collectivism. But, the indigenous correlations really become apparent when contextualizing Pollock’s emotional and psychological anguish.

It is clear Pollock mainly gravitated to this art form for its cathartic affects both in a personal and social sense. When discussing the significance of sand painting, Pollock stresses the word in. This relates to his physical presence in the form of footprints and visible marks, but it also corresponds to goals of Navajo Sand Painting. The ailing person actually sits on the finished work in effort to absorb the healing powers bestowed on the work by the shaman (see figure 35). Pollock wants to be in the work to receive the healing power of Navajo collective. In keeping with Craven’s notion that Pollock and the Navajo shared the concept of blurring the boundaries between art and life, it is apparent that the search for emotional balance in his personal life had a residual effect on his work. In fact, the crux of his artistic development is the quest for an outlet to express his personal anguish. It just happens that his ideology and political persuasion lead him to explore Socialist methods.

However, to argue as Craven has that Pollock is able to transmit Navajo culture through his works is contentious. Pollock, as evidenced in his own words, never truly understood the sand painting process. After discuss his painting method of spreading the canvas out on the floor and approaching it from all angles he says “this is akin to the

25 Navajo sand painting is secretive in nature. Please keep in mind the sensitive spiritual nature of the ceremony.
methods of the Indian Sand painter of the West.” Pollock demonstrates his naivety towards the sand painting process. In reality, the Navajo shaman paints in a structured, stationary manner dropping small amounts of sand at a time to create images that attempt to cure the specific ailments of the person seeking help (see figure 35). Pollock’s ignorance on the ideology and methodology of sand painting showcases that while he may not have fully understood the process, he was able to intuitively feel the power of Navajo art as a means to physically and emotionally heal the sick.

Practically every example of “personal expression” that helps define Pollock is linked to yet simultaneously creates opposing tension with Socialist principles. In the broadest sense, inherent in all of Pollock’s mature works is expressive gesture coupled with what Clement Greenberg described in The Crisis of the Easel Picture as the “dissolution of the picture into sheer texture, sheer sensation”… “correspond[ing] perhaps to the feeling that hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted…” Full Fathom Five (figure 32) showcases Pollock’s absorption of breakthroughs of the collective in Siqueiros’s Experimental Workshop like the use new industrial paint and new techniques like ‘controlled accidents.’ They allow Pollock to subvert the traditional three-dimensionality of the canvas and return it to its two-dimensional form.

Obviously, Pollock proves that his works are not “free of value-political, aesthetic and moral.” At the same time, it is incomplete to view Full Fathom Five as a purely socialist work. This would ignore the Pollock’s personal vigor and angst communicated through the labyrinth of intertwining webs of paint and his leftover detritus.

Conclusion: Reevaluating the Existential Cowboy

There is a reason why Jackson Pollock remains a fixture of the American popular consciousness. His persona has taken on mythical status. As America’s first artistic celebrity, the ‘existential cowboy’ legend has managed to seep into the interpretation of his works and in the examination of his career. Without carefully separating myth from fact, his true identity and his artistic influences are in jeopardy. Unfortunately, the process by which Pollock’s persona eats away at the true narrative surrounding his stylistic development is well established. Too many critics, scholars, and members of the art historical community for too many years have marginalized the role José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros played in shaping Pollock’s development. Facts dictate the conclusion that Orozco and Siqueiros were primary, not peripheral influences upon Pollock.

By simply recording the biographical connections that exist between Pollock and Orozco and Siqueiros, it is apparent that the Muralists are not just a stylistic jumping-off point for Pollock but represent a sustained source of inspiration. While there is obvious evidence that Pollock crossed paths with the Muralists, their connections run much deeper. Pollock actually sought out opportunities to absorb Orozco and Siqueiros’s technical and ideological advances like viewing *Prometheus* and joining the Experimental Workshop.

Somehow in the process of building Pollock’s celebrity status as an American pioneer, these connections were ignored. The scholarly legacy connecting Pollock and the Muralists became an ancillary footnote in history books. The combination of silence
on Pollock’s end combined with the appropriation of his works by critics like Clement Greenberg to establish the cultural and artistic superiority of the United States, established Pollock as a singular genius. Although Pollock’s contributions to a modern aesthetic are monumental, they could not exist in a vacuum.

The kindred psychological similarities that exist between Pollock and Orozco were instrumental in his development. Chances are if Pollock’s brother Charles had not persuaded him to see Orozco’s *Prometheus* in 1929, Pollock would not have found an expressive way to overcome his technical shortcomings as a draftsman.

The most direct contributions of the Muralist are clearly observable in Pollock’s techniques and material choices. Siqueiros, in his Experimental Workshop, introduced Pollock to the ‘control accident’ technique and new materials that from the basis for Pollock’s mature all-over compositions. Despite critics who attribute Pollock’s drip techniques to Surrealist psychic automatism, the fact that Pollock attempted to recreate experiments he witnessed in Siqueiros’s studio solidifies its prominent role in Pollock’s development.

The muralists also helped Pollock graft together psychology and politics to form his own artistic voice. His personal expression is firmly grounded in the organic socialism exposed by the Muralists.

By stripping away Pollock’s mythical persona, the Muralists true place in Pollock’s development advances to the forefront. Orozco and Siqueiros must finally claim their role as his primary influences.
Bibliography


