

Picasso's Influence on Jackson Pollock's Late Black and White Paintings

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Jackson Pollock's reorganization of Picasso's motifs and compositions in such paintings as *Male and Female*, *Magic Mirror*, *Birth*, *Guardians of the Secret* and *White Angel* has been critically analyzed primarily from a Jungian point of view.¹ This criticism, along with Pollock's early sketch books, provides a firm foundation for establishing a relationship between Pollock's early figurative work of 1938 to 1946 and the work of Picasso from this point of view.² Critical analysis which used a pictorial model in place of the psychological one, favored by Elizabeth Langhorne and Jonathan Welch, to explain the strength of Pollock's early artistic dependence on Picasso found expression in the writing of both William Rubin and Jonathan Weinberg.³ Rubin, in a compositional analysis and comparison of the dog figures found in Pollock's *Guardians of the Secret* and Picasso's *Three Musicians* of 1921, offered Pollock's explanation of his dog figure, "the dog is a father figure inhibiting access to the 'secret.'" This dog, Rubin asserted, symbolized Picasso. Rubin, in the same 1967 article which appeared in *Art in America*, again pointed to Pollock's 'Oedipal struggle' against Picasso, illustrated by Pollock's frequent depiction of Picasso's Minotaur motifs which were published in issues of the *Cahiers d'Art* and *Minotaur* during the late 1930s and early 1940s, as well as Pollock's use of figurative references to the studio such as chairs, palettes, tables and ladders.⁴ Also noting Pollock's "struggle with Picasso throughout his work," Weinberg lists the Picasso motifs of masks, bulls, horses and masks found fragmented in much of Pollock's early work, learned from the many Picasso exhibits held in New York during the 1930s including the 1939 MOMA exhibition *Picasso: Forty Years of His Art*. No doubt, Picasso's application of animal and primitive imagery to the enunciations of 'high art,' first introduced to Pollock by Lee Krasner and John Graham, resonated with Pollock's personal youthful western experiences and provided him with the visual language necessary to express the contemporary artistic interest in primitivism found also in all of the work of Pollock's abstract expressionist friends.⁵ However, scant attention has been paid to the possibility of a similar relationship existing between Picasso's work and the figurative paintings of Pollock's last years. Two scholars, Rubin and Weinberg, have suggested that such a connection may exist. Rubin saw the expressionistic qualities of Picasso manifested in Pollock's paintings up to 1946 and to a lesser extent thereafter, while Weinberg found Picasso to be a possible source for Pollock's 1953 *Portrait of a Dream* in a comparison between that painting and Picasso's *Painter with a Model Knitting*.⁶

This paper will address the influence of Picasso found in several of Pollock's late black and white figurative paintings. Through a comparison of some of Pollock's late works to works by Picasso illustrated in the 1940 MOMA catalog *Picasso, Forty Years of His Art*⁷ and a formal analysis of composition and motif found in, among others, such paintings as *Shadows*, *Echo*, and *Number 32*, I will explore Pollock's continued interest in Picasso, even after the 1947-51 drip paintings which Pollock claimed were created in order to refute Picasso's claim that high art could not be made without figuration.⁸

Following the media-celebrity which accompanied his initial artistic breakthrough with the drip paintings, Pollock, facing a creative impasse, searched for a direction that would lead to his next and last major artistic step, the black and white paintings in which he would once more 'unveil the image,' consequently producing ultimate proof of his abilities as a draftsman both to the critics and himself, and conclusively, dispelling from his own mind his long-held 'guilty secret' of being a painter incapable of producing 'good' drawing.⁹ In the winter of 1951 Pollock, noted the staining effects of poured ink on successive pages of rice paper and used this method to produce black ink drawings on paper that were later translated, enlarged in scale, to canvas. These works he called, "drawing on canvas in black."¹⁰

Lee Krasner later published Pollock's statement concerning the black and white paintings of 1951 and linked the 1951 paintings to the work of the early to mid-1940s, whose motifs critics have previously shown were derived from Picasso. She stated, "They come out of the same subconscious, the same man's eroticism, joy, pain....Pollock chose not to veil the image in the black and whites."¹¹

While most critics felt that Pollock's return to the figure represented a step backward, Clement Greenberg, who, early on, had championed Pollock's art, wrote:

Like some older masters of our time he develops according to a double rhythm in which each beat harks back to the one before the last. The anatomical motifs and compositional schemes sketched out in his first and less abstract phase are in this third one clarified and realized.¹²

As Greenberg suggests, Pollock's career may be properly divided into three main phases: figuration, abstraction and in the final phase, an attempt to fuse these two earlier concerns. Thus, the movement of ritualistic dance, the basis of composi-

tion for the drip paintings as suggested by Robert Motherwell, continued to be a thematic concern pursued by Pollock in some of his late black and white figurative work. Although it has been noted that Pollock sought inspiration for this last phase of his career in the pen and ink drawings on paper that were executed during the winter of 1951, the works *Cut-Out*, 1949, and *Shadows*, 1949 (Figure 1), show Pollock to have begun his last figurative explorations two years earlier. *Cut-Out* contains a figure defined by actually cutting out a section of the painted web to reveal the board-ground and bears a marked similarity in composition to Picasso's, also single-figured, *The Swimmer*, 1929.

Figures in *Shadows*, composed of basic signs and gesture, are created of flat areas of poured black paint set against a web that is similar to that found in *Cut-Out*, though less dense, and, illustrate Pollock's struggle to generate new development in his art by attempting to unite the figure, ground and web-abstractation. In *Shadows*, the webbed ground creates a sense of atmosphere behind the ritualistic dance-like action of these figures whose femininity is denoted by their small triangular shaped heads. This triangular motif was used previously by Pollock in such paintings as *White Angel* and *Sleeping Woman* to denote a female figure. It is part of Pollock's pictorial vocabulary derived from Picasso's *The Dream and Lie of Franco*, 1937, and also from *An Anatomy* of 1933.¹³ From the standpoint of theme, composition and motif, one finds in *Shadows* a strong resemblance to Picasso's *Three Dancers*, 1925, (Figure 2) which was exhibited in the 1939 MOMA Picasso retrospective. In *Three Dancers*, three figures are positioned frontally across the picture plane and connected by a diagonal of extended arms behind the central figure. Pollock implies the diagonal in his similarly arranged grouping.

Both paintings share the theme of ritualistic dance. However, in the Pollock, the title of which may come from the shadow of a man who is presented on the left in *Three Dancers*, cubist language has been employed in an even more abstract way. While each artist has used primitive geometric shapes to create their dancers, Picasso locates his dancers within a contemporary interior. In Pollock's *Shadows*, not only can the painting be read as a 'shadow' of some long forgotten ritual, but also, as a 'shadow' cast by the earlier Picasso *Dance*.

Number Thirty-Two, 1950, by Pollock, represents an attempt to combine the pure action of the earlier drip paintings with figures again involved in a primitive ritual dance. More successful in merging figure and ground than *Shadows* was, *Number Thirty-Two* not only recalls Picasso's *Dance*, but also Matisse's *Dance* of 1909. In *Number Thirty-Two*, Pollock has expanded the format to include numerous figures swirling across the canvas. Lines delineating action and figure have been incorporated in such a way that allows the line and the figure to function in a dual capacity while retaining formal abstract qualities. Here Pollock displays his unique ability to create line that is simultaneously volumetric and calligraphic. Singled out by the critic Robert Goodnough, writing in *Art News*, *Number Thirty-Two* is praised for its "open black rhythms...dance in

disturbing degrees of intensity, ecstatically energizing the powerful image in an almost hypnotic way."¹⁴

Number Twenty-Seven, 1951, is divided into two clearly demarcated zones against a white ground. On the left a large seated figure that is fragmented in gestural strokes is balanced by two stacked shapes on the right. One, a double-portrait, a well-known Picasso motif, appears on the bottom while above is a head. In its ferocity, flattened planes and pose, Picasso's *Seated Bather*, 1929, exhibited in the 1939 MOMA Picasso show, suggests a likely inspirational source for the seated figure.

The double-portrait motif in the lower right is one which Picasso often used, in, for example, *The Girl Before a Mirror*, a work which had inspired Pollock in the earlier phases of his work, having been seen by Pollock in the 1939 MOMA exhibition, along with the small Picasso etching of a double-portrait entitled *Woman*, 1922-3. Picasso produced this etching for the first fifty-six copies of a book by Zerovs entitled *Picasso, Oeuvre 1920-6*. Pollock could have seen this work in a copy of *Cahier d'Art* of 1926, and also, in the 1939 New York show. The third shape, the one in the upper right of *Number Twenty-Seven*, is similar to Picasso's *Portrait of a Woman* of 1938, also in the same exhibition. Pollock has repeated in gesture the overall triangular shape of the figure and its profile. Through the juxtaposition of these three feminine motifs, Pollock seems to be once more exploring the theme of primeval woman.

Pollock continued to explore the archaic theme of primitive woman in *Black and White Number Five*, 1952. Here, he created a monumental seated nude framed by a vertical band of small ovoid shapes on the right and a shorter band on the left. This figure is clearly related in the sense of fragmentation, curve-linear shapes, pose and command of the format to a series of seated nudes by Picasso which presents a similar theme. This series, shown in the exhibition *Picasso, Forty Years of His Art*, included *Woman in an Armchair*, 1929, *Figure in a Red Chair*, 1932, *Dancer* of 1907-8, and his *Demoiselles Sketches*.

Pollock's *Black and White Painting*, 1951, depicts a format filled with a commanding figure posed as an orant. Three Picasso paintings can be cited which contain similar figures, all part of the same Picasso 1939 New York exhibition: *Crucifixion*, 1930; *Guernica*, 1937; and *Danseuse nègrée*, 1907. Similar figures based on studies of Picasso have been found in Pollock's sketch books. Picasso's *Bullfight* of 1933, included in the 1939 New York exhibition of his work is reflected in the similar, though fragmented, motifs, movement and line of Pollock's *Number Fourteen* of 1951 and *Number Eight* of 1952.

Echo, 1951, has been recognized as one of Pollock's most successful late black and white figurative paintings. Its unification of figure and ground is nearly complete in an easy exchange of line and shape, still allowing the figures to maintain their sense of integrity. On the right stands a male artist facing a standing female on the left. His arm is extended to a rectangle in the center. The same composition was used in Picasso's *The Studio*, 1928. Pollock has used an ovoid shape to indicate the male's head similar to the artist in *The Studio*.

Portrait of a Dream, 1953, is a transitional painting for Pollock that reintroduces color into his late work and marks an end to his black and white figure explorations. As Weinberg pointed out, this painting contains obvious references to Picasso's *Painter with a Model Knitting*, 1927. Similarities between the two paintings are found in the shared compositions, the Picasso-like mask in the Pollock, the shape of the heads seen in both paintings, and the shared gestural abstractions, one depicted on the easel in the Picasso and the other filling the left half of the Pollock. Weinberg surmised, correctly, that Pollock's choice of composition and motif for *Portrait of a Dream* indicated Pollock's desire to solve his problems of artistic growth and content as a working artist.

This same desire on Pollock's part is reflected in his use of long-worked and thoroughly assimilated Picasso motifs in his late black and white paintings reviewed here. In his return to the figure, Pollock also returned to the lessons learned from Picasso's late cubist figurative solutions, choosing images first derived by Pollock in his early career from Picasso's late cubist phase. By incorporating his new staining painting method, express primitive themes in an even more abstract way than in

developed more fully through the black and white paintings, with Picasso's graphic solutions, Pollock found the means to his earlier work, solve compositional problems, fragment the figure and incorporate gestural line with the ground. This is seen most successfully in *Echo* and *Number Thirty-Two*. As Lee Krasner stated, these black and white paintings came from the same source as Pollock's earlier work.

By incorporating traditional artistic themes and his interest in primitivism with the figure, Pollock's late black and white paintings, like his famous drip paintings, whose relationship to traditional European art was pointed out by William Rubin, are also placed directly in line with traditional European art. With the exception of *Echo*, the number titles of these paintings after 1951 suggest that Pollock considered them to be a series of early experiments which synthesize the two dimensional surface and fragmentation of Abstract Expressionism and the figuration of Cubism. In what direction he might have developed these ideas, one can only guess. Even though Pollock's death in 1956 prematurely ended his career, these black and white paintings proved to be a long noted major influence on later color-field painters.

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¹ Andrew Kagan, "Improvisations: Notes on Jackson Pollock and the Black Contribution to American High Culture," *Arts Magazine* 3 (1979): 96-9. Elizabeth L. Langhorne, "Jackson Pollock's *The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle*," *Arts Magazine* 3 (1979): 128-37. "Pollock, Picasso and the Primitive," *Art History* .3 (1983): 66-92. Jonathan Weinberg, "Pollock and Picasso: The Rivalry and the 'Escape,'" *Arts Magazine* 61 (1987): 6-10. Jonathan Welch, "Jackson Pollock's *The White Angel* and the Origins of Alchemy," *Arts Magazine* 3 (1979):138-43.

² Stephen Pulcari, "Jackson Pollock and Thomas Hart Benton," *Arts Magazine* 3 (1979): 123. Pulcari notes Pollock's absorption of Picassoid form, derived from *Girl with a Cock* and *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, into Pollock's *Birth* of 1938-41.

³ William Rubin, "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism," *Art in America* 11 (1979): 104-23. Weinberg 42-8.

⁴ Rubin 110.

⁵ John D. Graham, "Primitive Art and Picasso," *Magazine of Art* 4 (1937): 236-9, 260. William Rubin, "Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition, Part I," *Artforum* 2 (1967): 14-22. Pollock also considered Albert Pinkham Ryder, Miro, Orozco, Sequerias and Reveria important to the development of his art. It is notable that the motifs which Pollock retained throughout his painting career and which appeared in both his first and last periods were the primitive references used by both Orozco and Picasso.

⁶ Rubin, *Pollock as Jungian Illustrator* 104-23. Rubin, *Modern Tradition*

Part I 14-22. William Rubin, "Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition, Part II," *Artforum* 3 (1967): 28-37. "Part III," 4 (1967): 18-31. "Part IV," 5 (1967): 28-33. Weinberg 48.

⁷ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ed., *Picasso, Forty Years of His Art* (Museum of Modern Art, N.Y. 1939).

⁸ Weinberg 47. Weinberg deals only with Pollock's *Portrait of a Dream*.

⁹ Stephen Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock. An American Saga*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1989) 667-8.

¹⁰ Naifeh and Smith 664. David Rubin, "A Case for Content: Jackson Pollock's Subject was the Automatic Gesture," *Arts Magazine* 3 (1979): 103-9.

¹¹ Rubin, *A Case for Content* 103.

¹² Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting. A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) 117. Dore Ashton, "Jackson Pollock's Arabesque," *Arts Magazine* 3 (1979): 142-3. Ashton points to references to 1938-41 vocabulary of bulls, horses, Picassoid distortion, and vertical configurations as references to the sentinel-like figures painted in the early 1940s seen in the 1951 exhibition of Pollock's black and white paintings held at Betty Parson's gallery.

¹³ Welch 139. Welch notes that Picasso's *An Anatomy* was reproduced in the first issue of *Minotaure* in 1933.

¹⁴ Naifeh and Smith 657.



Figure 1. Jackson Pollock, *Shadows*, 1949, oil, 32" x 26", Private Collection, New York.



Figure 2. Pablo Picasso, *Three Dancers*, 1925, oil, 84 5/8" x 56 1/4", Tate Gallery, London.