

Brother of the more famous Jackson

The abstract paintings of Charles Pollock have been scandalously neglected, argues Sebastian Smeed

In 1980, Charles Pollock begged his ex-wife, Elizabeth, "not to make any further effort to find a home for my paintings. It is too painful and humiliating to have one's work rejected in such a contemptuous way." Self-promotion seemed to disagree with Pollock's constitution. He admitted that "my own self-management over the years has seldom helped - when it hasn't been an absolute obstacle to even modest recognition."

Only 10 years prior to his letter to Elizabeth, Charles Pollock had had his work exhibited alongside post war giants such as Rothko, Motherwell, Olitski, Noland and Louis. Before that, he had been befriended by Clement Greenberg, by far the most influential critic of his time. And he had, of course, had a younger brother called Jackson. But none of this was to count for very much in the reception of Charles Pollock's work. He had exhibitions throughout his mature life - in Michigan, Rome, London and New York; he was even included in a few national exhibitions. But his work has remained - in the words of the Australian-based curator and Cézanne scholar Terence Maloon - "scandalously underappreciated". According to those who knew him, Charles Pollock was both humble and persevering, with a great capacity to accept life's many aches and

incongruities. "He looked," says Sylvia Winter, who would become his second wife, "a little like a James Dean - at least when I met him in 1955. He was a charismatic fellow with a twinkle in his eye." Willem de Kooning once told him he looked "like an Irish revolutionary". He was completely self-taught, and, according to Sylvia, "could build things, but only beautifully. A bookcase took him ages. He was a perfectionist." "His accomplishments," Maloon has written - "the knack of accurate pitch, a fine sense of a work's... proper level of condensation - put paid to any... invidious comparisons with Jackson... Here is an entirely genuine artist... He seems extraordinarily unaffected by the spin-offs of Jackson's achievement, despite the fact that these have worked consistently to his disadvantage."

There were five sons in the Pollock family; Charles, born in 1902, was the eldest and Jackson the youngest. When he was seven or eight, Charles discovered an abandoned schoolhouse near the sheep ranch in Wyoming where his father was fore-

man. "The floor of its one room [was] completely covered with foolscap sheets of Palmer writing exercises. It was some sort of revelation." The influence was to hold throughout his life. "Often," wrote Maloon, "his paintings resemble gigantic pages, with the beautifully spaced and balanced units of colour reminiscent of a typographical design..."

As a 20-year-old, Pollock had become interested in politically-minded art - particularly Thomas Hart Benton and the Mexican muralists - and he went to New York to study with Benton. Just as his passion for art was blooming, swirling in his mind with fiercely held social ideals, Charles discovered that all was not well with Jackson back in California. He suggested to Sylvia that he come to New York in 1930, which he did. "But then I left New York in 1935 just at the moment of the beginning of a major breakthrough for him. I wasn't part of it."

Those last words sound - from today's perspective - singularly despondent. For it wasn't just his brother's rise that Charles missed out on by leaving New York. It was

the whole storm of creativity that gathered to greatness in that city with the advent of abstract expressionism. Charles was in Mexico and Michigan at the time, experiencing creative block, courting Sylvia, negotiating a divorce from his first wife, then having to confront his brother's sudden death in a car crash. He abandoned social realism in 1944 - the year Picasso joined the Communist Party - and began experimenting with abstraction. "Abstract painting," he said, "was simply bringing it back to where I'd started from, if I'd had the sense to stay there." The political impulse, he also observed, has "nothing to do with painting."

Charles became the first of the Pollock brothers to cross the Atlantic, and he and Sylvia made the most of it, visiting Chartres and the Lascaux caves, Matisse's Vence Chapel, the Léger Museum, the Gaudi buildings in Barcelona, and so on. They settled in Rome, where Charles held a well-received exhibition. They had a daughter in 1967, and eventually settled in Paris, where Sylvia was offered a job in publishing.

The French life suited

Charles's disposition and temperament. Unlike New York in 1971, he commented, "Paris has communities all over the place." On another level, living there worked against Charles's prospects. Paris's steady decline as the international centre for art meant that his kind of painting found only limited audiences. A one-man show in 1981 at the Paris Art Center met with no great response: "Nothing much came of my exhibition; no comment in the press, and no sales. It's about what I expected."

For the short period they were living together in New York, Charles had introduced Jackson to Thomas

Hart Benton, who proceeded to teach him, as he had taught Charles. In 1934, the two brothers got in a Model-T Ford and drove across the continent and back. "This was the year of the great Okie migration and the drought," Charles remembered. "We saw it all." When asked if he had any notion of Jackson being on the verge of something great around this time, Charles said: "I was aware that Jack was violent and frustrated. He was painting in a little room at the end of the hall, not bigger than a kitchen. He was doing small things, but quantities, quantities of it and destroying

lots of things, breaking up violins... I thought that these things that he was doing - chaotic as they seemed to be - had great possibilities... I admired his effort. I even liked much of it, but it didn't occur to me that there was something cooking there that wasn't cooking on my part."

The sense one gets from accounts like these of two brothers fighting their way out of their own individual tunnels is bracing. For Jackson, the process was sudden, and fraught with demons that constantly threatened to overwhelm him. For Charles, it was slower - and altogether less conducive to the myth-mongering that has characterised the reception of his brother's work. "Above all," Clement Greenberg wrote to Charles in 1965, "keep painting and don't judge the results too soon."

Hard work did bring results, and it is precisely the qualities of clarity and integrity that critics have praised in Charles Pollock's painting. "These paintings are exemplary," wrote Terence Maloon of one exhibition, "in being as free of attitude, as unnumbered with rhetorical posturing and art-historical conceit as any art could be. All the effort behind the work is directed towards articulation, towards the most succinct, simple statement of a felt truth."

After a telephone conversation with her ex-husband in Paris, Elizabeth Pollock wrote that she had been moved to tears: "It is, indeed, mean and regrettable that your genius has yet to be widely acknowledged. But as a man and an artisan you have realized a rare kind of accomplishment... Stubbornly, with awareness, you have been true to yourself." "When he was old," recalls Sylvia Pollock, "he said 'My sweetheart, I hope I am not leaving you a white elephant.' But I know he believed in his work and had some kind of notion it would one day be seen. Maybe it was even a conviction."

An exhibition of Charles Pollock's abstract paintings is being planned by the Ball State University Museum of Art in Muncie, Indiana to celebrate the centenary of his birth in 1902. A monographic study of Charles Pollock's art and life, including an essay by Terence Maloon, will be published simultaneously.



Charles Pollock: 'It is too painful and humiliating to have one's work rejected in such a contemptuous way'



Beautifully spaced and balanced: 'Chapala 9', 1956