Problem child

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Jackson Pollock & Family
AMERICAN LETTERS, 1927–1947
Edited and annotated by Sylvia Winter Pollock
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In the public mind, Jackson Pollock was a tough-guy American artist, a cowboy out of Cody, Wyoming, who stretched the limits of abstract art not with brush and easel but by dripping, pouring or flinging paint at canvases tacked to the floor of his small barn on Long Island. This image of Pollock as an "action" painter, an existentialist in jeans, was less a commentary on his art than the offshoot of Hans Namuth's celebrated films and photographs of Pollock painting: the choreography of a man in perpetual motion, communing with the canvas as if by instinct, immersed completely in the creative moment. Pollock's alcoholism, his difficulty in dealing with fame, and finally his death in a car crash in 1956 completed the picture of a tormented masculine loner wrestling with his inner demons.

The last figure we expect to meet is Jackson Pollock the family problem, the messed-up sibling. Yet this is precisely the role he plays in this fascinating collective portrait of the painter, his four older brothers, and their parents and wives during the years of his painful apprenticeship. *American Letters, 1927–1947* is an enlarged version of a book first published in 2009 in France, an intricate network of letters these family members wrote to each other, full of news and chatter, often merely dutiful, at times covertly desperate. Though Jackson Pollock's name is on the title page, the book was no doubt conceived as a tribute to his brother Charles, whose career as a painter over six decades was overshadowed by Jackson's. Carefully edited by Charles's second wife, Sylvia Winter Pollock, the book is illustrated with his early drawings, which show him to be a competent but conventional social realist. Perhaps pressed by Jackson's example, he was reborn as a softly lyrical abstract painter after 1945.

The eldest of the five brothers, whose parents' chronic failures and frequent relocations preceded the Depression, Charles left California for New York in 1926 to study art with Thomas Hart Benton. With Charles's encouragement, brothers with similar ambitions soon followed, including eighteen-year-old Jackson in 1930 and Sanford (Sande) in 1934. They were quickly integrated into Benton's family – a substitute for their own, even more so after the death of their father in 1933. With major mural commissions, especially at the New School in New York, Benton was then at the height of his fame as a populist and regionalist in the American grain. Jackson gradually replaced Charles as his favourite, despite the younger man's lack of technical skill. Even as a troublesome high school student, kicked out as a "rotten rebel from Russia", Jackson had vaguely wanted to become an artist and had a surprisingly clear grasp of the challenge before him. Drawn to the Mexican muralists such as David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera and Gabriel Orozco, he found it difficult to do any realistic drawing, though he would soon imitate Benton's fluid, swirling manner and Picasso's signature images.

But this is a story less of one artist's coming of age than of an exceptional family, starting with nothing, improvising to make its way in lean economic times. Since some of them were always at opposite ends of the country, or criss-crossing it in cheap jalopies, they wrote to each other simply to keep up. Along with details of their lives and (more sparingly) their feelings, the book is dotted with snapshots of Depression America. In April 1934 one brother in California, Marvin Jay, wrote to Charles in New York:

> We are eating regularly and shall continue to manage by some means.
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> Frank [another brother] has ten days labor with the power company, obtained by our district Councilman. One of us should get on with the PWA [Public Works Administration].
>
> The County pays our rent, public utilities and some foods.
>
> I bought a milk goat this week and will get some chickens and rabbits when I earn a few more dollars. With milk, eggs and meat from our backyard ranch we can manage until something can be done about this rotten situation.

Six weeks later, Charles and Jackson bought a Model T Ford for fifteen dollars and set out to visit their mother for the first time since their father's death. (On returning to New York they would sell it for twice the cost.) Like so many other Americans they were taking to the road, not looking for work but to see how their fellow citizens were faring. Their elaborate itinerary, which took them through scenes of intense labour conflict such as Harlan County, Kentucky, and steel towns near Pittsburgh and Birmingham, shows how politically engaged Charles had become. The ten letters he wrote to his first wife, Elizabeth, are reports from the field to a keenly intelligent woman who was even more of an activist than he was. In the dry, hot landscape of Texas he is appalled by the condition of poverty-stricken blacks and Mexicans. "Even though this is beautiful country for these people [it] is indescribably barren and harsh."

As the book progresses, we watch Jackson's brothers, all political innocents at first, become inexorably radicalized, only to fall into confusion at the lack of democracy in the Party, at Stalin's purge trials and his anti-Trotsky campaign, and finally during the contorted aftermath of the Hitler–Stalin pact, which demanded adjustments no thoughtful person could manage. For the three who became artists, Charles, Sande and Jackson, their hopes and fears as well as their politics centred on the unprecedented arts funding set in motion by the New Deal, especially the Federal Art Project (FAP), a relief programme of the Works Progress Administration. As *American Letters* brings home, the WPA may not have produced seminal art but it did a remarkable job in keeping penniless artists from starving – at a time when the art

Jackson Pollock (centre, back) with his mother and brothers Charles, Frank, Marvin and Sanford, 1950

market and private patronage effectively did not exist. The FAP also covered the walls of innumerable public works erected by New Deal agencies. Jackson went on the mural project and Sande on the easel project almost as soon as they began in 1935. Though Jackson was taken off the project several times for behaving badly or not showing up, they essentially remained with it until the political Right finally killed the programme in 1943. By then, fortunately for Jackson, Peggy Guggenheim and her adventurous new gallery, Art of This Century, were waiting in the wings.

If Charles and Elizabeth are at the heart of the first half of the book, then the self-effacing Sande is the unassuming hero of its later pages. By the mid-1930s, the irascible Benton, disaffected with both the art scene and the political Left, abandoned New York and returned to the Midwest. Shocked that Benton had not taken him along as his assistant, Charles left town as well, first to Washington to take up a government job, then to Michigan to create a weekly paper for the United Auto Workers, serving as an editor and political cartoonist. The perpetual problem of Jack was left to Sande.

Sande's worries about Jackson, his constant fear that they would be thrown off the Project, and his growing vexation with left-wing politics and right-wing witch hunts, including McCarthyite investigations and loyalty oaths, add a plaintive note to the enforced optimism of his letters. He conceals the seriousness of Jack's erratic behaviour and alcohol problem from their mother and brothers, and bemoans his inability to find a role beyond that of Jackson's "wet nurse". He expresses guilt for not sending more support to their mother or bringing her to live with them, a matter on which the other brothers seem cavalier. (If Jackson, her favourite, felt any such responsibility, it doesn't come through.) "It is beyond me how I can be so damn negligible and still live with myself", Sande wrote to Charles. At first one imagines he meant "negligent", but it may also be that he felt "negligible", a mere shadow of the larger figures who surrounded him.

As a painter, Sande deemed himself a failure. "I feel that I have been called upon and found wanting." His kid brother was anything but a success but his iron determination, his sense of vocation, are unmistakable. It would be some time before Jackson's violent inner conflicts would find an effective outlet in his work. In a rare moment of candour, Sande describes Jackson's mental illness to Charles in 1937, though he saw no choice but to go on. "I would be fearful of the results if he were left alone with no one to keep him in check."

Jackson had a breakdown and was hospitalized in 1938, but Sande only revealed this to Charles, not very accurately, in an anguished letter of 1941. He and his wife decamped for Connecticut when Lee Krasner arrived on the scene and moved in. There's no way of knowing whether Sande's fierce protectiveness saved Jackson's life or prolonged his turmoil and dependency. Lee proved even more selfless, giving up her own painting for long periods, but she provided Jackson with the kind of happiness and validation that helped him break through in his work. They were married in 1945.

Sande's discretions and partial disclosures underline the limits of these letters, which can be read alongside the major Pollock biographies to fill in the gaps. Michael Leja's astute introduction also sketches out much of what's missing from the letters. Yet it would be hard to match the book as an account of this unusual family in its own varied voices, grounded in the larger struggles of the Depression, the shifting, sometimes dumbfounding politics of the Communist Left, the travails of an indispensable government arts programme, and the dilemmas of one driven artist who would take, it seemed, forever to find his way. Jackson Pollock's voice is the quietest here, whispery, almost inarticulate, yet so many of his family's problems circle around his. His triumphs would come later but would never fully put his demons to rest.