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He left a big mark

The Lansing legacy of artist and teacher Charles Pollock

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Lansing's Pollock has his day

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by LAWRENCE COSENTINO

Charles Pollock:

Modernism in the Making MSU Broad Art

Museum Aug. 21-Dec. 30, 2018 Free Broadmuseum.msu.edu

Broad Museum exhibit shines a light on Charles Pollock and his times

Let's get this out of the way. Yes, Charles Pollock, the star of this story and the centerpiece of a new exhibit at the MSU Broad Art Museum, was the oldest brother of world-renowned drip artist Jackson Pollock.

Charles Pollock was a master of color and form in his own right, a questing mind, a meticulous teacher and a great dancer to boot, but he was used to being introduced as the brother of Jackson. Far from complaining, he was pleased when his brother, his students and anyone else he loved did great things and became famous.

However, the Broad Museum exhibit rings a bell, loud and clear, for Charles, who taught for 26 years at MSU and left a lot of marks in Lansing — not just on walls, but on people.

The road to Michigan It doesn't look like much at first: A modest gallery, ringed by a dozen or so modernist canvases, one skinny sculpture and a glass case of letters and photographs. But they're enough to conjure a time when the cream of the art world came to MSU, drawn by friendship and respect for Charles Pollock.

Pollock was a professor of art at MSU from 1942 to 1968 before moving to Paris, where he died in 1988. His early work as an epic muralist can still be seen at Lansing's downtown Dye Water Conditioning Plant and MSU's Fairchild Auditorium.

The road to MSU led Pollock from the dusty Wild West and bounced off both coasts.

A year after Charles was born in Denver in 1902, his parents settled in the booming railroad and lumber town of Cody, Wyoming. Pollock's father worked at "Buffalo" Bill Cody's Irma Hotel as a handyman. As a tyke, Pollock played marbles with Buffalo Bill.

Early in his childhood, Pollock wandered into an abandoned log schoolhouse and was spellbound by the sight of thousands of writing exercise papers scattered over the floor. He later traced his lifelong fascination with printing and calligraphy to that day. He taught typography and graphic arts at MSU for over 20 years.

He took drawing lessons as a child, encouraged by his parents, but he traced his early love of art to the lavish comic strips of the time, especially Winsor McCay's surrealist masterpiece, "Little Nemo in Slumberland."

He moved to Los Angeles in 1922, working as a copyboy for the Los Angeles Times and attending art classes on the side. He moved to New York to study with American artist Thomas Hart Benton in 1926. The earthy, twisty, clay-like figures that populate Pollock's MSU and Lansing murals smack of Benton's sculptural style. Pollock even made a clay mockup of the Fairchild scene as a model, emulating Benton's technique.

Pollock came to Michigan in 1938 to be the assistant editor of the United Automobile Workers' newspaper. His gritty editorial cartoons lamented the Depressionera "waste land of want and loss" described by President Franklin Roosevelt.

But to Pollock, the union members seemed more interested in "parliamentary law, labor economics and bowling" than social justice, let alone art and culture.

In that distant day when the federal government employed artists to create public art, Pollock joined the Works Progress Administration's Federal Arts Project in Detroit as supervisor of mural painting and graphic arts.

All the while, via heartfelt correspondence, Charles kept encouraging his younger brother Jackson, who was struggling to find his way as an artist.

"I have been going through violent changes in the past couple of years," Jackson wrote Charles in 1940. "I'm glad you are back in the game again and good luck on the Social Security job."

Freedom to the free

Pollock's mural in the lobby of Lansing's downtown Dye Water Conditioning Plant — the "Social Security job" – is a utopian vision of technology serving agriculture and industry, full of purposeful looking men looking at gauges and measuring things. The hydroelectric dam at the center of Pollock's mural looks more than strong enough to stem fellow WPA artist Frank Cassara's raging flood in the plant's upper lobby, a paean to water's destructive and beneficial powers.

Pollock would soon reject such "socialist realist" propaganda, but not before tackling the project that brought him to MSU, an ambitious 1943 set of murals that still graces the Fairchild Auditorium.

At center stage is President Abraham Lincoln signing the Morrill Act, which led to the creation of land grant colleges like Michigan Agricultural College, later MSU. Sen. Justin Morrill himself is behind the president and abolitionist John Brown stands to the right. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation is rendered in Pollock's beautiful typography. The left panel, "We Assure Freedom to the Free," projects these ideals into the modern day, honoring Lincoln's statement that "in giving freedom to the slaves we assure freedom to the free." The right panel is a tribute to the vision of poet Walt Whitman.

Critics have noted that many of the figures in the mural, including Lincoln, resemble members of Pollock's family. The hand of God in the Fairchild murals was modeled after his father's hand.

The Fairchild murals also conceal multiple portraits of Pollock's first wife, Elizabeth Pollock, with her "sinewy physique" and "flimsy clothing," according to art critic and Pollock historian Terence Maloon.

But by then, Maloon wrote, their relationship had already grown "strained and was deteriorating."

Pollock's art was also undergoing a seismic change. He began to feel that documenting the lives of farmers, workers and ordinary Americans was a job better left to photographers like Walker Evans.

Artists could push the search for ideal beauty into new realms by mastering the infinite play of colors and forms.

Pollock went to Arizona and spent three months painting in the desert.

"I erased that whole social realist stuff," Pollock said later. "Abstract painting was simply bringing it back to where I'd started from if I'd had the sense to stay there."

Break-away

In 1955, Sylvia Winter, a precocious, 18-year-old graduate of the University of Chicago, took classes at MSU with 52-year-old Pollock in lettering and design.

"Charles had a special love of letters, that was evident, and he was a devoted teacher," Sylvia Winter Pollock said in an interview from her home in Paris. "His aim in those classes was to teach us technical skills and to train us in just seeing."

It wasn't long before the two were meeting at coffee shops, talking about art and politics, and falling in love.

"Charles and I were very clandestine," Sylvia Pollock said. "I think our relationship was against all the university rules. So we didn't go out together, didn't socialize."

"How strange is life? How unexpected its turns!" Pollock wrote her in 1954. "I do not hide from you that I am troubled in my mind. But in the end I am lost, and can only find great joy."

In Sylvia Pollock's second year, she studied graphic design with her future husband, but the aim of the class was not exactly to train students for the labor force.

"Charles' idea was to make us all, with our acquired competencies, so critical of the excessively consumer society the United States had already become, that we would be more or less unable to function in the mass-market advertising world," she said. She went on to a distinguished career in book design anyway.

Pollock explicitly linked his contrarian approach to art with his personal life in a letter to his future wife in 1955, after she had gone on to Yale to study graphic design, with his support.

"Art, like love, is not itself a pleasure but a passion, and involves a break-away from the world's values in favor of a value of its own, obsessive and all-powerful," he wrote. "The artist has need of others who share his passion and he can live fully only in their company."

In 1955, Pollock fulfilled a long-held dream of spending a year in Mexico, taking his first sabbatical from MSU.

"It was a very special time for him," Mrs. Pollock said.

"He had a whole year for his own work in a country he had always yearned to know, and at 54 he had fallen in love. He was full of creative energy."

She visited him in Mexico in the summers of 1954 and 1955, and then in the spring of 1956.

"I suppose I was, from that beginning, what some people would call his 'muse,'" she said. "And probably was that until the end of his life."

In March 1956 they decided to get married. "We may both have been apprehensive, and how could it have been otherwise?" Sylvia Pollock said. It helped her to think of her aunt, Ella Winter, who was married to

Lincoln Steffens, the muckraking journalist.

“Same age difference,” Mrs. Pollock said. “She didn’t think there was anything wrong with it.”

When Pollock fretted to his mother about the “possible disapproval or misunderstanding of many relatives,” she told him it was none of their business and wished them happiness. They married in Estes Park, Colorado, on Aug. 12, 1957.

“After that, we did all things everyone else did: dinners at The Poplars, concerts, parties with friends,” said Mrs. Pollock.

Soon after Pollock got back from Mexico, Elizabeth called to tell him that Jackson had been killed in a car crash. Mrs. Pollock was with him, visiting a friend’s house, when the call came. “A terrible shock, as I remember,” she said. “I spent the morning trying to get him a plane ticket to New York.”

It was a heavy blow for the entire family, and especially for Charles. Close family members and “a legion of Jackson Pollock researchers” tried for decades to “detect the smallest streak of jealousy and resentment toward his brother’s achievement and fame,” wrote Maloon.

But Pollock never showed anything but brotherly love, a natural generosity of spirit and an abiding stoicism about being the “other” Pollock.

Three lives One afternoon in 1960, artist Irving Zane Taran, then a 20-year-old student at MSU, was absorbed in his latest work on the second floor of the art building when the phone rang.

“Charles here,” game a familiar growl. “Some of my friends are here. Would you like to come out and sit a bit?” Taran pleaded that he was dirty and spattered with paint.

“Just come.” He hopped on his bike and pedaled over to Okemos, a ride of about 15 minutes, speeding down the middle of the road.

“Hamilton Road was so quiet and slow back then, nobody would ever hit you,” Taran recalled.

He parked his bike at Pollock’s studio and caught his breath, only to have it taken away by the scene before him. Clement Greenberg, the dean of American art critics and leading theorist of modernism, was one of the sitting “friends.” Italian artist Piero Dorazio, creator of shimmering color fields, was another. Another famous American artist, Fairfield Porter, was also in the house.

Porter’s poetic, placid realism made him the odd man out in this group of abstract modernists, but Porter’s son, Larry, taught Romance languages at MSU.

After studying at MSU, Taran went on to become an internationally recognized artist and professor at MSU.

Back then, he felt more like a fly on the wall at a historic conclave of American artists, and it wasn’t the only time.

As Taran sees it, Pollock led three lives at MSU — one through his teaching, another through his art, and a third with his many friends, carefully minding the space between.

Pollock taught lettering and graphic design at MSU, but never painting.

“I enjoy teaching subjects that don’t impinge in any way on my painting,” he wrote later. He valued lettering as a form of almost abstract art he called “craft for art’s sake.”

When it came to painting, Taran said Pollock wasn’t interested in turning out “clones.”

“That’s important, because a lot of teachers paint their paintings on your canvas,” Taran said.

Each day, Taran recalled, Sylvia Pollock would arrive at the art building at about noon in a black VW Beetle, pick Pollock up and take him back to their home and studio in Okemos.

Taran was impressed by the strictness of the routine.

“That’s it, he was going home to paint,” he said.

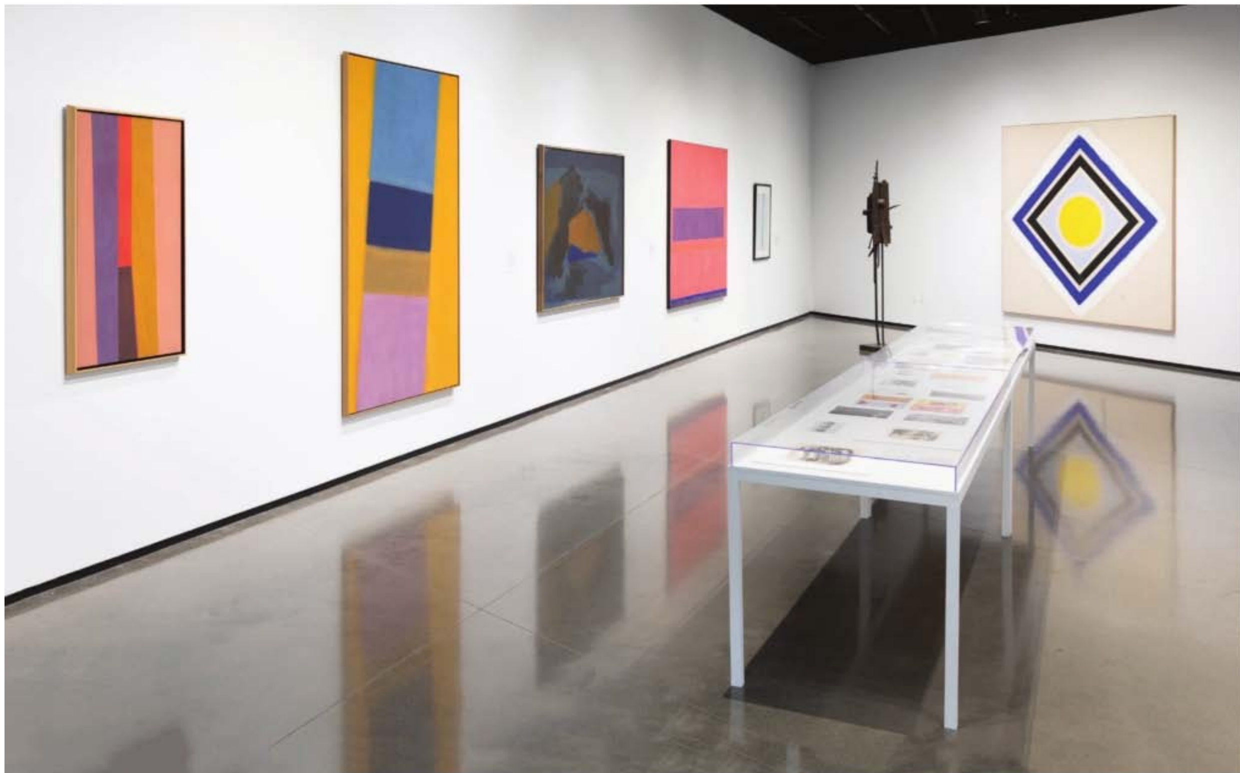
After a trip to Italy, Pollock came back with a series of 17 huge canvases that seemed to freeze war into peace, crystallizing jagged black shapes into permanent glory on a noble gray field.

“We unrolled them in the Kresge and they were breathtaking,” Taran said. Taran helped stretch the canvases and still cherishes Sylvia Pollock’s “angelic” smile when she said “thank you.”

And then there were the parties. “Charles had many, many friends, in the English Department in particular, and they were all partying people,” she said.

Everyone loved to invite Pollock to the party, Mrs.

Pollock wrote in 1978, “because he danced so well, he was a painter and not a dull academic.” She slipped the reminiscence into a journal 50 years ago and forgot about it until last month, when she found it while helping Broad Museum curator Steven Bridges research the exhibit. It’s at the museum, under glass.



Sweet piece of the world

Bridges decided it was time to delve into Pollock’s life and work at MSU while combing through the thousands of works of art in the former Kresge Art Museum collection.

Looking closer at the labels, Bridges kept running across the name “Greenberg” — the man Taran was amazed to see at Pollock’s house — usually after the words “gift of.” Why was such a major art critic and theorist so interested in MSU?

The answer is simple: A lot of art heavyweights liked Charles Pollock and admired his work.

“Charles brought a real sweet piece of the world here,” Taran said.

A postcard from Greenberg to Pollock cinched it for Bridges.

“The collection — thanks to you — is becoming an important one,” Pollock wrote to Greenberg in 1967. Pollock listed some major paintings that came to Kresge, in part or all because of Greenberg’s intercession.

“It is ironic that Detroit, which could well afford all of these — and more — will soon have to take second place to Kresge, thanks to you,” Pollock wrote, referring to the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Greenberg deflected the credit. “We wouldn’t have known of MSU’s situation but for you,” he wrote back.

Some of these works are part of the Broad’s Pollock exhibit. Kenneth Noland’s “Bell,” a ringing, bright yellow circle in a quadrilateral tunnel of blue and black bands, is one of the signal works at the Broad that other museums most often ask to borrow, according to Bridges.

Bridges posted an image of “Bell” on Instagram last week and was flooded with comments from people who couldn’t

believe that it's part of the collection.

One of the most interesting objects in the Broad exhibit is a totemic sculpture by Italo Scanga, exploding at eye level like an orgasm on ostrich legs, probably made while Scanga was still studying with Pollock at MSU.

Scanga's energized, scrounged-together sculptures, from the sacred to the humorous, are housed in museums around the world. "He's one of the great graduates to come out of here," Taran said. Taran still has a 1984 issue of ArtForum with Scanga on the cover.

One of Pollock's most gifted graphic arts students was Michael Cimino, who went on to direct such visually stunning films as "The Deer Hunter" and "Heaven's Gate."

While combing through the "historic" Broad collection, Bridges found another clue that Pollock's time at the university was a unique convergence of art history and MSU history.

At most museums, every artwork has an acquisition number with a code for the year it arrived. Bridges was amazed to see paintings finished in 1968 with "69" in their acquisition numbers, meaning they were practically wet when they came in the door.

"The collecting was happening in the moment these paintings were created," Bridges said. "That's very exciting and unique."

'Fairly content'

In a post-1960 art world gone berserk with big money and attention-grabbing trends and anti-trends, Pollock carried on his search for illumination and meaning.

In the later MSU paintings in the Broad exhibit, bands of color with gently diffused edges sound out quietly and deeply, like music.

Pollock retired from MSU in 1968, burned much of his earlier work, moved to New York and started a studio on the Bowery. "It was always his intention that we would move to New York when he retired," Mrs. Pollock said.

But he found New York "dirty and uncivil" and "an unfit place to live."

Charles and Sylvia Pollock moved to Paris in 1971 with his daughter, Francesca, where Mrs. Pollock had a job as a book designer. It started as a temporary move, but ended up being permanent.

In Paris, Pollock's work ethic never slackened. From the beginning of his time at MSU, a leading principle of his art was that there is no such thing as "empty space," in typography or painting or anything else. He urged his students to pay attention to gaps, negative space, the areas between things.

Whether he was rewarded with success or not, he felt an obligation to keep working and left no more "empty" spaces in his life than he did in his art.

"I am in my studio every day and am fairly content with what I'm doing," he wrote in 1977.

"His later years were quite stunning and outstanding," Taran said.

He reached a modest measure of success, crowned by a 1978 exhibition at the Acme Gallery in Covent Garden, where he was lionized by critics and art lovers 50 years younger than himself.

"To his London admirers, Charles seemed to personify Virtue Unrewarded," critic and biographer Terence Maloon wrote. "Charles was embraced as the representative of every true and excellent artist whom contemporary society spurns and ignores. The fate of 'Jackson Pollock's brother' was the fate of Everyman."

Pollock also enjoyed a one-man show at the Paris Art Center in 1981, shows in New York and Washington, D.C., in 1984 and a 1987 show in New York got a favorable review in the New York Times.

In 1982, Daniel Matson, director of DeWitt Art Gallery, sent Pollock a blast from the past: a copy of his old UAW cartoons.

"Awfully ancient history, I'm afraid, and intrinsically not very interesting," Pollock told Matson.

Charles Pollock died after a brief illness in 1988. Sylvia Pollock sees in his life and work "one of the myths of America in

action."

"From a rather modest farm family in the West, five boys can become, each in their own way, educated, articulate, interesting and productive men," she said.

Irving Zane Taran considered Pollock a mentor. "We had a lot of fun, looking at art, talking about art," he said. When Pollock didn't feel like talking about art, they talked about their mutual passion, Formula 1 racing.

"It set my life. It told me about how I could be, where ambition could lie."

On a visit to the Broad exhibit last week, a tear came to his eye.

"If you were in his life, you would be OK," Taran said. "To follow him was not to be lost. That's what he was for me as an artist. I had some very nice teachers, but you don't always get a beacon."

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