

JASON MCCOY GALLERY

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Between Lines and Drips

POLLOCK FAMILY SECRETS IN LETTERS

BY VALERIE GLADSTONE

With his much publicized personal life and groundbreaking technique, Jackson Pollock could be dubbed the Vincent van Gogh of 20th century art. Charismatic and tormented, he seized the public's imagination as the embodiment of the tortured artist. But while his reputation might have been well earned, he also had a full and interesting life before the drip paintings, his tempestuous marriage to painter Lee Krasner and his rampant alcoholism.

The Jason McCoy Gallery fills in some blanks with its excellent exhibition *American Letters 1927-1947: Jackson Pollock & Family*, in collaboration with the Charles Pollock Archives in Paris. The show's well-chosen paintings, sculpture and works on paper, many of them by Pollock's brother Charles and artists he admired—like Thomas Hart Benton—family photographs and previously unpublished letters provide a fascinating glimpse of the artist before fame and depression overtook him.

The letters cover the personal correspondence between the five Pollock brothers, their parents and wives. Through the observations of the correspondents and the works' subjects, we not only gain insight into the individuals but an era devastated by the Great Depression and World War II.

"To this day, we know little about where Pollock came from and what his personal, historical and emotional realities were during his formative years," said Stephanie Simmons, director of the Jason McCoy

Gallery. "This exhibition explores the chapter preceding this era, drawing inspiration and information from the letters."

Born in 1912 in Cody, Wyo., into a large family that traveled widely throughout his youth, Pollock, the youngest child, greatly benefited from the love and protection of his mother and four older brothers. Fragile and emotionally unstable from childhood, he relied heavily on their support and guidance. The letters reveal him as a young man uncertain in his direction and overwhelmed by the demands of becoming an artist. But as he studied at the Art Students League in New York with Benton and others, Pollock pushed himself, and soon a passion for making art overtook him.

It's illuminating to see Pollock's works alongside those of his heroes, like Benton, Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. Orozco's powerful "The Unemployed" shows men, faces set, bowed by their circumstances, and Benton's untitled painting of a heavy-limbed, abstract figure looks like a Henry Moore sculpture. Pollock may not have worked in their styles but he approached art with a similar forcefulness and sense of immediacy.

His eldest brother Charles, who was supposed to have become the famous artist in the family but never achieved Pollock's reputation, is also well represented here. His untitled portrait of their father, who died young, is especially touching. The father's face betrays the same sensitiv-



Jackson Pollock "Untitled," 1944, watercolor, gouache, india ink and sgraffito on paper mounted on blue paper, 10 3/8 x 10 9/16 inches. Private collection, New York.

ity as his son.

For anyone who has only seen Pollock's later paintings, it comes as a revelation to see his vibrant seascape from 1934, which surges with movement, as do the six etchings from 1944-45. They give some indication of the outpouring that would soon

come. Thanks to this exhibit, we now know a little more about how he got there.

American Letters 1927-1947: Jackson Pollock & Family

Through Dec. 16, Jason McCoy Gallery, 41 E. 57th St., 11th Fl., 212-319-1996, www.jasonmccoyinc.com.