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**JACKSON POLLOCK IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF AMERICA,
1943-1956: CLASS, "MESS," AND UNAMERICAN ACTIVITIES**

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by

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A close examination of the popular and art world reception of Jackson Pollock’s paintings from 1943 to 1956 indicates how troubling they were to average Americans. Much of the vast body of critical literature on Pollock over the past five decades focuses on his formal innovations, his position within advanced art or how his art relates to Clement Greenberg’s modernism. By evaluating primary source material, I argue that the contemporary reactions to Pollock’s work were motivated more by class issues and cultural battles than “art” *per se*. Pollock’s paintings and persona both ran strongly against consensus-era values associated with prestige and status. I develop the conceit of Pollock’s “messiness” to explore the contemporary response, which in the mass-market press ranges from ambivalence to outright hostility. Popular publications (e.g. *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*) were generally intolerant of the praise given Pollock by the cultural elite—the so-called “highbrows.” Studying the response to Pollock’s art reveals how vitriolic the battle over cultural capital was, especially when the country’s economic landscape after World War II offered hope that more Americans could be educated to improve their taste.

Beyond spurring potent cultural arguments, Pollock’s “mess” also had deep political implications in the late 1940s. I draw parallels between the language used in

Pollock criticism and containment-era rhetoric that began to develop within the United States government around 1947. Despite the fact that Pollock's paintings are overtly non-political, his "mess" fueled communist fears in popular publications. Historians who deal with the matter tend to generalize a potential link to left-wing politics and move on. Yet Pollock was the ultimate mid-century uncontained artist. I locate specific avenues through which his art was covertly attacked and allied to communism by the mass-market press. This dissertation restores vigor to a frequently overlooked cultural debate, making Pollock's eventual "triumph" seem all the more divisive and surprising.

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Introduction

“At least you’d know where you stand.” Jackson Pollock, 1956

“Here as elsewhere, it is the inarticulate response that counts....”

T. J. Clark (on Courbet), 1973

Two months before his death, Jackson Pollock had a conversation with poet and author Selden Rodman at the artist’s Long Island home. Rodman’s *The Eye of Man* (1955) was published the year before. In it he questioned Clement Greenberg’s and Thomas Hess’s preoccupation with formal concerns. *The Eye of Man*, with its celebration of “content” and “human meaning” expressed largely through traditional western art, was justifiably controversial in downtown New York circles. That summer day, Rodman told Pollock he really had nothing against art like Willem de Kooning’s, he was only “against making a cult or dogma out of it.” Rodman took issue with Hess, the executive editor of *Art News*, for “ruling out other ways of painting.” Pollock responded:

I’m with you there. None of the art magazines are worth anything. Nobody takes them seriously. They’re a bunch of snobs. Hess is scared—scared of being wrong. I hate to admit it, but I prefer the approach of *Time*. I’d rather have one of my pictures reproduced in *Collier’s* or *The Saturday Evening Post* than in any of the art magazines. At least you’d know where you stand. They don’t pretend to like our work.¹

Pollock’s statement should be considered through several filters: the apparent slackening of critical support for his art in the mid-fifties, his heavy drinking and likely emotional instability, Pollock’s general discomfort with verbalizing ideas, and Selden Rodman’s

¹ Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1957), p. 85. Pollock never had a painting reproduced in *Collier’s*, but he did vicariously have one “reproduced” as a *Saturday Evening Post* cover when Norman Rockwell published *The Connoisseur (Abstract and Concrete)* in 1962.

practice of taking notes—instead of taping—conversations.² But Pollock’s comments sound plausible, given the artist’s well-known disdain for “bullshit.” At least with the popular magazines, Pollock knew where he stood.³ Standing, “knowing where you stand,” is crucial to my project. The certainty of an unfriendly response may have been grounding—even liberating—to a painter having trouble finding direction.

Both inside and outside of the art world, the concept of social standing was a frequent topic in popular magazines such as *Collier’s*, *The Saturday Evening Post* or *Life*. Numerous articles were published to help individuals determine their own standing in an economically bountiful but deeply stratified society. It was important for Americans to know their places, explained contemporary sociologists, particularly if they hoped to improve their positions. According to Russell Lynes in 1949, economic class distinction was slowly being supplanted by brow distinction: highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow were replacing the old high, middle and lower class, respectively. Brow distinctions were determined by taste.

Pollock’s quip implicitly alludes to class differences between the popular press and the art magazines: he labels the latter “a bunch of snobs.” A snob was a “highbrow,” a term coined early in the century but popularized in the late 1940s. Snob and highbrow were interchangeable in the popular press and in more specialized magazines like *Harper’s*.⁴ (Understandably, true highbrow magazines, such as *Partisan Review*, seldom use words like highbrow or snob.) The popular press was aimed at a middlebrow readership: mass-market magazines took the measure of their audience and reflected

² I question Rodman in calling Pollock Benton’s “star pupil” and stating that Pollock’s “weblike style” began in 1942, see Rodman, p. 77. Herman Cherry published a scathing review of *Conversations with Artists*, which he supported by checking facts with several of the interviewed artists. “To sum up,” writes Cherry, “the book is shoddy, vicious and inept.” “U.S. Art Confidential,” *Art News* 56 (April 1957): 36-37, 61- 62. Rodman had shortcomings as an historian, but was skilled at engaging artists in conversation. Furthermore, his mild, possibly obsequious manner may have put Pollock at ease. Even if the precise words cannot be proved, Rodman seems to have preserved the essence of his conversation with Pollock.

³ It is easy to make more of Pollock’s comment: Despite the notoriety that came with *Life*’s 1949 coverage of the artist, it did make him famous. The circulations of *Life*, *Time*, *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier’s* in 1955 were each significantly larger than that of *Art News*.

⁴ A writer for *House & Garden* in 1946 put it in succinct layman’s terms: “The people who think your taste is bad are snobs or stuffed shirts. The people whose taste you think is bad are vulgarians,” Sanford Gerard, “How Good is Your Taste?”, *House & Garden* 90 (October 1946): 130.

middlebrow culture back to them. By and large, middlebrow readers belonged to the middle class. But many producers and consumers of highbrow culture—Greenberg and Hess included—also belonged to the middle class.

Greenberg was among the modern art defenders invited to *Life* magazine's "Round Table on Modern Art" (1948) and he eventually contributed essays to popular magazines. Pollock himself, whose paintings appealed to a decidedly highbrow audience, was of lower middle-class origins.⁵ Later, when he and his wife Lee Krasner began to live more comfortably in Eastern Long Island, he showed certain trappings of the *nouveau riche*, which was not the same as being upper class.⁶ It was a heady era for class and brow distinctions (full of contradiction and confusion in making such distinctions); art writing was not immune.

But if postwar bounty was supposed to allow America to finally become *classless* (as some interpreters still held), by bringing everyone into the middle class range, then how to explain the antagonistic and *classist* terms that persisted? As I will demonstrate, the rhetoric involved in making taste distinctions dimly echoed the revolutionary cry formerly associated with class warfare. The situation had mellowed since the Trotskyist days of *Partisan Review*, but the stakes were still high. Pollock's assertion, "Hess is scared of being wrong," suggests that the artist recognized the burden on art critics to make the right choices. Highbrow critics and editors were, after all, tastemakers. It was the highbrows' judgments that, in a classic trickle-down effect, would eventually be

⁵ If Pollock's work appealed to a highbrow audience, does that make him a middle class man of middle class tastes who produced highbrow paintings? Although the paintings appealed to highbrows, the techniques used in the poured paintings can arguably be labeled lowbrow. But according to William Barrett (associate editor of *Partisan Review*), the designations of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" were coined to describe people, not things. William Barrett, "Letter to the Editor," *Harper's* 198 (April 1949): 13-14.

⁶ The antique dining table at the Springs home was Spanish colonial, acquired by Krasner. Late in 1949 Pollock bought a two-year-old Cadillac convertible coupe. He acquired expensive clothes and kitchen accoutrements. In 1950, he wanted to eat at the Stork Club and the 21 Club in New York on the basis "of his reputation"; Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1989), pp. 622-623, 627. Ruth Kligman offers this view of the pantry at the Springs house: "[It] was so full of canned food, all expensive, special canned foods...of exquisite fruits, about six cans of each fruit, like blueberries, blackberries, and boysenberries, different kinds of pâtés, and fish, and chili and soups, and boxes of Knox Gelatine...our meals were very simple: steak, lobster, with sliced tomatoes;" Ruth Kligman, *Love Affair: A Memoir of Jackson Pollock* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1974), pp. 113-115. Richard Schiff has pointed out that some of these items may have been gifts.

picked up (and over) by the middlebrow public. No doubt Pollock himself suffered from the feeling of “being wrong”—a fear he attributes to Thomas Hess.⁷ In fact, in many ways and to many eyes, Pollock was all about being wrong. Maybe in that last recorded conversation, enjoying a drink at home with Selden Rodman, an unguarded Pollock was engaging in a bit of projection.

Pollock’s wrongness

Pollock’s work and his persona seemed wrong to the middlebrow public at a time when wrongness had real cultural resonance. The stereotypical image of the 1950s is one of conformity: starched white collars and smiling housewives tending Cape Cod-style homes in postwar suburbs like Levittown. Of course the reality was far more complex. But in catering to a middlebrow audience, the popular press contributed to and perpetuated stereotypes. Advertising, addressed to a mainstream audience, tended to adhere to stereotypes very closely. In so doing, it helped to maintain hegemonic values. Studying the advertisements that frame popular-press discussions of Pollock alters or enhances the content of the art essay. Sometimes the contrast between the ideals of mainstream advertisements and Pollock’s non-conformist style is striking.

It is safe to say middlebrow magazines never embraced Pollock. Nonetheless, they offered him the most publicity he would receive in his lifetime.⁸ Whatever Pollock may have felt about *Life*’s ambivalent treatment of him in August 1949, he kept multiple copies of that issue in his Springs home until his death. A careful reading of *Time* magazine, whose approach the artist claimed to prefer, shows the magazine’s editors found the artist’s paintings bogus. *Time* had no tolerance for highbrow jargon, repeatedly seizing on the critics’ hifalutin language. After Pollock’s 1955 exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery, the magazine wrote: “But when it came down to explaining just what

⁷ The most famous example of Pollock feeling wrong as an artist was conveyed by Lee Krasner. Around 1950, looking at a “very good painting” in the studio, he asked her “Is it a painting?” She comments that he wasn’t wondering “Is this a good painting, or a bad one, but a *painting!*” Barbara Rose, ed., “An Interview with Lee Krasner Pollock by B. H. Friedman,” *Pollock Painting* (New York: Agrinde Publications, Ltd.: 1978), unpaginated.

⁸ Bradford Collins has argued persuasively that the relationship between the abstract expressionists and *Life* magazine was closer to symbiosis: Bradford Collins, “*Life* Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-51: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise,” *Art Bulletin* 73 (June 1991): 283-308.

Pollock was up to, the critics retreated into a prose that rivaled his own gaudy drippings.” That statement was followed by excerpts from reviews, all of which assert the necessity of understanding the personal iconography of Pollock’s style. For example, the *New York Times* called it “inner-directed art” and *Arts* wrote it was “charged with [Pollock’s] personal mythology.”⁹ *Time*’s critic comments, “In other words, you can’t tell very much about the champ without a personal introduction.”¹⁰ *Time*’s coverage of Pollock is full of such take-no-prisoners assessments of the artist.

The *Time* essay touches on another status-oriented element of the middlebrow response: “the critics retreated into a prose that rivaled his own gaudy drippings.” That is to say the critics’ language is as tasteless as are the paintings themselves. In highbrow circles, it was understood that words could only approximate the visual experience of painting. Approximation lies at the heart of art criticism, in which visual language is translated into verbal. The two systems of language can function as parallels, but will never be exact equivalents. Repeatedly the middlebrow magazines seize on this disparity in Pollock’s case in particular, seeking a more tangible explanation for the paintings.¹¹ *Time*’s reference to the “gaudy drippings” of Pollock’s supporters amounts to a classist put-down. The popular press believed Pollock and his champions were attempting to put one over on them—and they would not stand for it.

The stereotypical image of the “lowbrow” is someone who says “I know what I like,” refusing to be educated beyond his or her instinctive response to pleasure. The lowbrow possesses uneducated, vulgar taste.¹² Paradoxically, the highbrow—e.g.

⁹ “Inner-directed art” was a current catch-phrase with great significance here; see Chapter 4 for further discussion.

¹⁰ “The Champ,” *Time* 66 (December 19, 1955): 65. This was *Time*’s final article on Pollock before his obituary the following summer. It is possible that when Pollock spoke with Rodman in 1956, this *Time* article was on his mind.

¹¹ The popular magazines were indeed ambivalent or hostile toward much abstract art in general, but there are plenty of cases where they tolerate contemporary abstraction or dutifully try to help its readers understand the trend.

¹² T. J. Clark’s 1994 essay “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism” characterizes Abstract Expressionist painting as vulgar. He emphasizes the betrayal of good taste by people who should otherwise know better; thus distinguishing it from the merely popular or lowbrow taste. Clark focuses on the artists’ production, not on its popular reception. I find Clark brings a European conception of “class” to a distinctly American situation. My objection extends to Clark’s other excellent and inspiring work on Pollock. The American

Clement Greenberg, whose aesthetic philosophy was inspired by Immanuel Kant—is equally averse to education (at least to *indicating* the judgment was an educated one). The highbrow bases his or her judgment on intuition: “I can tell this is good.” When questioned further, the highbrow might disavow the educational training behind the judgment. This is one reason why the highbrow got on well with the lowbrow. As Russell Lynes pointed out in 1949, the highbrow “feels an affinity with lowbrows and even envies their uncritical enjoyment of the things they like.”¹³

What a quandary this presents for the upwardly striving middlebrow, who is certainly educated beyond the lowbrow, but cannot grasp the mysterious taste of the highbrow. “What makes Pollock good?,” the middlebrow asks the highbrow. The middlebrow was met with a response that sounded patently incomprehensible.

Articulate drooling

Pollock’s verbal reticence is a theme that recurs in the following chapters. Unlike other several other members of the New York School, Pollock did not leave behind many critical writings or statements on his work. There are scant preserved letters. Seemingly defensive, Greenberg said that Pollock was the “most articulate, not in a verbal way, but articulate artist I ever met.”¹⁴ T. J. Clark’s remark on Gustave Courbet is well applied to Pollock: “It is the inarticulate response that counts, or rather, the response articulated in oil paint on canvas, with knife, and rags and brushes.”¹⁵ Pollock did not communicate well verbally, and the response was mixed as to how well his paintings communicated. That left a gap that had to be filled by critics and by the public. For example, *Life* seemed to think that Pollock could not express himself as well as the magazine’s editors could, so they used captions like “How Pollock paints (with enamel, sand and a trowel)” and “Pollock drools enamel paint on canvas.”

middle class may have a peer in the petty bourgeoisie, but the American class system does not carry the same historical burden as the British system. Timothy J. Clark, “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism,” *October* 69 (Summer 1994): 23-48.

¹³ Russell Lynes, “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow,” *Life* (April 11, 1949): 99.

¹⁴ By this time Greenberg was very much the elder statesman, featured in documentary films on Pollock, glossing over disagreements he may have had with the late artist. *Jackson Pollock: Portrait of an Artist*, Kim Evans, director (London Weekend Television, 1987), documentary film.

¹⁵ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 1973.

From the outset, Pollock has very few clear-writing, convincing supporters. Critics were unsure of how to describe or interpret his art: they often give inarticulate responses. Clement Greenberg seems like an obvious exception, but as I will demonstrate, his assessments fail to persuade the broader public. Pollock's eventual fame and notoriety brings his art out of the elite realm—the realm in which viewers and reviewers accept that the meaning of the work cannot necessarily be accessed through language—into a world in which the average viewer demands that language explain the work adequately and persuasively. By the later 1940s—and especially with the advent of the “drip” paintings in 1947—the elaborate verbal means used by writers do not seem to support the seemingly simple technique of Pollock's work.¹⁶ The incongruity between the critical support and the appearance of the paintings will prompt some of the most voluble complaints from the middlebrow press and the public.

Taste

I am all too aware (and repeatedly reminded while reading from the era), that I risk being swallowed up by the cavernous abyss of “taste.” There is not much to do: status and taste are too closely intertwined. But I can look for markers and indicators of taste, rather than attempt to wrestle the subject itself. The subject itself and its analysis was examined intensively by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1980s. “Nothing,” observed Bourdieu, “more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works.”¹⁷ Today

¹⁶ After fifty years, there is still no generally accepted description of Pollock's revolutionary process. I will regularly use “drip” or “drip-style” for its widespread popular use and to simplify matters (except when I make specific points about how the paint was applied). The debate on whether to call Pollock's paintings “dripped” or “poured” will continue. Many terms are used by supporters and detractors, though “dripping” implies an accidental result and was frequently employed dismissively. The paintings are seldom fully dripped or poured; in many post-1947 paintings “directed dripping” is more accurate. Many “classic” paintings do include drip marks. I agree with William Rubin who wrote, in a slightly different context, that “it was not the dripping, pouring or spattering *per se*, but what Pollock did with them that counted,” “Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition, Part IV: An Aspect of Automatism,” *Artforum* (May 1967): 28. Also see E. A. Carmean on “Pollock's Classic Paintings,” in Carmean, Eliza E. Rathbone and Thomas B. Hess, *American Art at Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artists* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1978).

¹⁷ Bourdieu disagrees with intellectuals like Daniel Bell who looked at the 1940s and professed that cultural differences are being replaced by a common culture. Bourdieu points out that the pioneers of sociology of culture such as W. Lloyd Warner, Russell Lynes, and even market research recognize the persistence of

Jackson Pollock is the starting point for virtually any discussion of postwar art. But in the immediate postwar years, his eventual status had yet to be decided. In 1953, sociologist C. Wright Mills summed up the challenge of claiming status: “Prestige involves at least two persons: one to claim it and another to honor the claim.”¹⁸ That presented a problem in Pollock’s reception regarding his legitimacy: who would honor the claim?

This is one reason why I am so intrigued by the contemporary response. The serious critics struggled to define Pollock’s achievement (or lack thereof). The mass-market art writers show a variety of responses that are often hostile, sometimes working hard to undermine what would be Pollock’s eventual cultural domination. The readers show a range of responses, occasionally contradicting the mass market’s conclusions. And Clement Greenberg, who today is both credited and blamed for wielding power, was regularly prodded by the middlebrow press. To read the contemporary interpretations is to be witness to a vast and dirty battle. No victor would emerge until later in the 1950s—and even today that victor is subjected to endless reassessment.¹⁹

Methodology

This project has changed somewhat from what I first proposed to the Art History faculty at the University of Texas at Austin. My current methodology evolved via the process of arriving at the Pollock topic. Originally I planned for my dissertation to consider both Jackson Pollock and Norman Rockwell as exemplary representatives of two different kinds of taste operating in America after World War II. At some point, each artist’s production was directly influenced by tastemakers. (Early on, Rockwell’s “Greenberg” was *Saturday Evening Post* editor George Horace Lorimer.) I was interested in the same general ideas as I am here: cultural pressures on taste, the changing landscape of the American social structure (both real and imagined), and the popular

class distinctions (See *Preface to the English Language Edition*). I thank Peter Jelavich for first bringing this to my attention; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

¹⁸ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar*, p. 239.

¹⁹ Anecdotal evidence suggests that even today (in 2006), many viewers are skeptical toward Pollock’s paintings.

response to the artists. As an art historian, my focus is always grounded in the paintings themselves. What do they *look* like? What formal problems did each artist confront, and how did he solve them? And how is the critical and popular response affected, then, when the majority of each artist's viewing audience sees only reproductions of his work? It is imperative to remember that most of the "popular audience" never saw an original Rockwell or Pollock painting.²⁰

After conducting research at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, I turned my attention to Jackson Pollock. As I progressed through material written about him during his lifetime, a very different "Pollock" began to emerge. This was not the triumphant American avant-garde artist of later decades. Rather, this was a young painter caught in the midst of potent cultural and political battles. I was surprised at the level of ambivalence and outright hostility directed at both the man and his art. The highbrow press seemed challenged repeatedly to explain Pollock's vocabulary and artistic language. A cycle emerged in which a critic addressed Pollock's work, the popular press caught wind of it, and then used the critic's statement as if to prove the simultaneous inadequacy of highbrow criticism as well as its subject. This cycle followed significant periods of exposure for the artist, such as after *Life's* Round Table on Modern Art in 1948 article, or near the time of the 1950 Venice Biennale.

I came to realize that the later literature on Pollock—an ever-expanding collection of essays, histories and biographies, catholic in range—tends to accept Pollock's position as an advanced painter and move forth from there.²¹ His status as modernist master is

²⁰ Rockwell knew his paintings would be reproduced, most often as magazine covers; he created his compositions and colors accordingly. But Pollock's work requires (as most paintings do) the first-hand experience of a viewer in front of the work. Nonetheless, both artists received their biggest audiences via magazine reproductions.

²¹ Pollock's position as a preeminent painter of the twentieth century is not in doubt here. My point is that during the artist's lifetime, his later status was in no way assured. Some of the later writers whose work I find most interesting are (in alphabetical order): T. J. Clark, Daniel Belgrad, Claude Cernuschi, Erika Doss, E.A. Carmean, Serge Guilbaut, Pepe Karmel, Rosalind Krauss, Michael Leja, Ellen Landau, Elizabeth Langhorne, Francis V. O'Connor, Stephen Polcari, William Rubin, Jackson Rushing, Deborah Solomon and Kirk Varnedoe. See, for example, Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); E. A. Carmean, Jr., "Jackson Pollock's Classic Paintings," in *American Art at Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artists*

secure. Even invaluable contributions that recontextualize the artist within his historical period (investigations by Serge Guilbaut and Michael Leja stand out in this category) still presume his canonical status. Yet it was obvious that most Americans did not seem to care for Pollock's paintings. What would happen if we looked at the response to Pollock as his art developed, beginning with his first prominent exposure in 1943? Would it affect how we perceive his art?

I set Norman Rockwell aside (temporarily, I hope) and focused exclusively on the popular and critical response to Pollock from 1943 until his death in 1956. By concentrating on the contemporary response, Pollock's ultimate victory seems all the more hard won. His unusual art and methods brought both rancorous and enthusiastic responses, suggesting that his art touched more than one nerve. In the following chapters I try to explore which nerves were stimulated—and why. For example, I knew that later writers group Pollock in with the New York School as politically left-leaning in a time of heightened conservatism. But the mass-market magazines—many of which tended to lean right—do not cite Pollock for being Red. Instead, they find a number of other coded ways to condemn him for being unAmerican. Often, he was criticized for his formal methods. I wondered what specifically about his formal approach made his art seem suspect.

Because my study is confined to the response to Pollock in his day, the following four chapters deal almost exclusively with primary source material. References to secondary sources are usually confined to the footnotes. Although there are limitations to

(Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1978); Claude Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock: Meaning and Significance* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992); Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983); Guilbaut, *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945-1964* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990); Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1994); Ellen G Landau, *Jackson Pollock*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989; William Rubin, "Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition," Parts I-IV, *Artforum* 5, no.6 (February 1967): 14-22; no.7 (March 1967): 28-37; no. 8 (April 1967): 18-31; no.9 (May 1967): 28-33; W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1995); Deborah Solomon, *Jackson Pollock: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998); Varnedoe and Karmel, eds., *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999).

using mass-market periodicals to gauge middlebrow taste, they are an indicator of what the popular mind was exposed to and responded to.²² Producers of mass media and advertising invest tremendous resources into catering to the average person. Mass production of any sort aims for an *average* of consumer tastes, in lieu of developing or cultivating autonomous ones.²³ Thus there is a pejorative nuance to the word “mass.” At midcentury, there was a *mass* production of culture, but a *popular* response to and interest in that culture. I will use “mass”, “public” and “popular,” but attempt to keep “mass” as a descriptor for processes of communication, not people.²⁴

My topic necessarily posits an average American of middlebrow tastes. Most likely, this person was a member of the expansive new middle class. This person could have regularly read magazines such as *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek* or the *Saturday Evening Post*. Such a person is outlined in influential works of sociology, including W. Lloyd Warner’s *Jonesville* (a composite of several middle American cities) or Robert and Helen Lynd’s *Middletown* volumes (intensive studies of a town in Indiana), both of which I discuss in the following chapter.²⁵ The average American, according to the Lynds, is a middle-of-the-roader who possesses tried and true tastes. This person’s demands are reasonably modest: a secure job, family, social and religious membership, in addition to the occasional updating of durable and consumable goods. He or she willingly conforms to the expectations of the company, family, friends, and the community.

²² In his study on the American Dream, Charles Hearn wrote, “The very fact that a magazine achieves mass circulation suggests it reflects attitudes, tastes and values appealing to a large number of people.” Charles A. Hearn, *The American Dream in the Great Depression* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), p. 20.

²³ This sentence comes from Ernest van den Haag, as does “Initiative, and power to bestow prestige and income, have shifted from the elite to the mass.” Ernest van den Haag, “A Dissent,” in *Culture for the Millions: Mass Media in Modern Society*, Norman Jacobs, Ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 1965 (second printing). Van den Haag challenges Edward Shils’s contention that mass society has a more *refined* taste. *Culture for the Millions* is based on papers presented in 1959.

²⁴ On mass and popular culture in the postwar years, see Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1989), pp. 52-61.

²⁵ W. Lloyd Warner, Marchia Meeker and Kenneth Eells, *Social Class in America: A Manual of Procedure for the Measurement of Social Status* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1949); Robert Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study of Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929); and Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937). The Lynds’ studies, published two decades earlier than the period of my focus, were hugely influential on 1940s sociologists and comprehensively described the middle class American whose values and beliefs only intensified in the late 1940s.

The new middle class is filled with people who have substituted the Puritan's Protestant ethic with what William H. Whyte Jr. calls the "social ethic." Whyte's social ethic has three interrelated characteristics: a *belief in the group as the source of creativity* (not the individual), a belief that the individual's *ultimate need is to belong to the group*, and a belief in the *application of science* to achieve this sense of belonging. The social ethic has resulted in the severely diminished creative impulses in business managers. The dominant ideological drift in this society has been toward "idolatry of the system" itself and the misuse of science to enact it.²⁶ Whyte's theses are in many ways borne out in the contemporary literature on Pollock.

The hypothetical "average" American is interested in advancing his or her knowledge of various subjects. He or she might have read Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and might even call someone "a Babbitt" during a discussion of social standing. This person would not have read James Joyce's *Ulysses*. He or she is not accustomed to highbrow art writing, nor versed in discussions of the European avant-garde. Education of all varieties remains fundamental for business and/or social advancement. But the average person is more at ease with "technician talk": the language of statistics, numbers, charts and graphs.

This dissertation also considers how people read: sometimes a popular magazine reader might be thorough and systematic. At other times, readers scan headlines or subheadings only, or they might only look at the reproduction of a painting and its caption, or pause to read an advertisement. Inevitably, peripheral vision and the subconscious will register nearby text or images. Like many readers, readers of popular magazines are affected by contiguous matter.²⁷ Marshall McLuhan's first book, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), questions and dissects print media, especially advertising,

²⁶ William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1957; first published 1956 Simon and Schuster), p. 7. I have added the italics; otherwise the section above paraphrases Whyte's three major propositions for the "social ethic."

²⁷ Cultural historian Francis Frascina argued for the significance of such seemingly random connections because of their effect on cultural memory: "In the so-called escapist weekend experience of 'arts and leisure' the processes of cultural memory embedded in a representation are often passively received." Francis Frascina, "Revision, Revisionism and Rehabilitation, 1959/1999: The American Century, ModernStarts and Cultural Memory," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39:1 (2004): 93-116.

news and comics. As he notes in the Preface, “Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control is the object now. And to generate heat not light is the intention.”²⁸ McLuhan’s prescience in 1951 is noteworthy; he recognized how the “brow” struggle was played out in the pages of mass-market magazines and observed that in America, “low, middle, high are consumer ratings and nothing more.”²⁹

In the first chapter, “The ‘Classless Society’ in America,” I explore economic and cultural factors that led to a midcentury America obsessed with status and consumption. Chapter Two, “Pollock’s Mess: The Response,” concentrates on the critical and popular response to the artist. I theorize that many authors respond to a perceived “mess” in the artist’s paintings or even in his physical appearance. Pollock’s “mess” contradicts the established values and mores of the conformist-era postwar society. The third chapter, “UnAmerican Messes,” links messiness and disorder to communism. In that chapter I review the link between modern art and communism, especially how Cold War germophobic discourses were applied to modern art. My point is to remind the reader (or in some cases introduce the reader) to the pervasiveness of the ideology. More significantly, Chapter Three takes the container metaphor of postwar security discourses and applies it to modern art. This sets the stage for Chapter Four, “Pollock’s Mess, Revisited: Are You Now or Have You Ever Been a Member of the Drip-Method Party?”, which I see as a case study for how zealous anticommunist ideology actually functions in the popular press response to Pollock.

My recurring question is why did his decidedly non-political paintings rub so many people the wrong way? The answer involves connecting the dots between many Americans’ discomfort with modernism, their fear of communism, the moral imperative

²⁸ Herbert Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967; reprint of New York: Vanguard Press edition, 1951), p. v.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59. At the risk of sounding trite, it must be said that *The Mechanical Bride* was ahead of its time. It sold only a few hundred copies (see Philip B. Meggs’s Introduction to the 50th anniversary edition (Corte Madeira, California: Gingko Press, 2002)).

to exhibit and bring democracy to the world, and specific improprieties attributed, rightly or wrongly, to Jackson Pollock.

Chapter One:
The “Classless Society” in America

*Whatever else we are, we certainly are the world's most self-proclaimed
equalitarian people.* Vance Packard³⁰

The majority of Americans who heard of Jackson Pollock from the late 1940s to the middle 1950s read about him in mass-market magazines and newspapers. To understand this audience, it is important to be aware of the economic and sociological history that shaped the period and three crucial changes that took effect. First, Americans made a decisive shift in the 1940s from being a society of producers to a society of consumers. Although the evolution was decades in the making, the Second World War hastened the change. Second is the simple fact that many more Americans attended college after 1945. The third change is intertwined with the other two: the era was profoundly marked by status consciousness and anxiety. These factors—consumption, education and status—would play strongly into the popular and critical reception of Jackson Pollock’s paintings.

In the years 1943 to 1956, the popular response to Jackson Pollock was affected by attitudes about status and what it meant to be an American during an era of heightened patriotism. This chapter addresses crucial ideological concepts, such as the American

³⁰ Vance Packard, *The Status Seekers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1959), p. 2.

Dream, the American way of life, social standing, the “brow” hierarchy and the myth of the classless society.³¹

In 1949, the social critic Russell Lynes published an essay that playfully circumvented the sticky problem of hardening class boundaries. Traditional class lines are on the wane, Lynes asserted, soon to be replaced by a taste-based system of social mobility. His taste-based hierarchy divided subjects into the categories “highbrow,” “middlebrow” and “lowbrow.”³² If Lynes’s observations were accurate, then Americans could raise their status level by adopting new tastes.

Accordingly, within the discourse of brow distinction, one could remain firmly middle *class* while possessing *upperbrow* tastes. Such distinction was significant in a period when many intellectuals (art writers included) earned wages equal to or even less than the average middle class professional. *Life* magazine charted the possibilities of Lynes’ taxonomy with humor: if you forsook your Grand Rapids Chippendale chair for a sleek Eames, your upgraded taste might elevate you from the lower-middlebrow to the highbrow (Figure 1).

³¹ “Middlebrow” was a term used by contemporary cultural critics, including Russell Lynes, Dwight MacDonal, Leslie Fiedler and Clement Greenberg. It is more useful than “middle class” or “new class” because it veers away from the strict economic definition, instead connoting a hegemonic system of tastes and preferences. I will use “middlebrow” to denote a popular, mass taste. For more on “middlebrow,” see the discussion later in this chapter.

³² Although occasionally the terms appear hyphenated, more often they are spelled “highbrow,” “lowbrow,” and “middlebrow.” I follow that spelling.



Figure 1. "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow," *Life*, April 11, 1949, pages 100-101.

The tongue-in-cheek nature of these assertions glossed over Thorstein Veblen's turn-of-the-century observations regarding the American predatory culture and its attendant invidious distinctions.³³ In the eighteenth century, John Adams had remarked on the very human and very American passion for distinction. Through distinction, he wrote, every other attribute, "beauty in the face, elegance of figures, grace of attitude and motion,

³³ Societies evolved from savage to predatory states, wrote Veblen in *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Members of savage cultures used nature's resources freely, until the concept of private property developed. With the rise of private property, acts of seizure (Veblen's "war-like exploit") outranked productive labor on the status scale. In predatory cultures, then, status is displayed through symbols that deliberately flaunt their *non-labor* origins (such as seized property). Veblen notes that in America outright aggression has been socialized and subdued by the complicated industrialized system. But our bellicose instinct could not be suppressed; predatory instincts are alive and well in America's business class. Veblen coined the term "conspicuous consumption" which, along with "conspicuous waste" and "conspicuous leisure," denotes the aggressive display of goods that highlights the upper class's non-productivity. With keen foresight, Veblen observed the "invidious distinctions" by which Americans rank themselves against others. The burgeoning middle classes internalized invidious distinctions until signs of social standing—employment, neighborhood, style of home, club membership, personal possessions—became paramount.

riches, honors, everything is weighed in the scale and desired not so much for the pleasure they afford as for the attention they command.”³⁴ The subject had deep roots in American soil.³⁵

Those considered “middlebrow” relied on different markers of distinction or value than those known as “highbrow.” To an extent, *avant-gardes*—a subcategory of highbrows—have always distinguished themselves by assigning particular meanings to commonplace terms. That is to say, “middlebrows” and “highbrows” spoke different languages. Maintaining a discrete system of meaning was fine for the highbrow, but it rankled the middlebrow. Language itself was one of the key ways in which art criticism was inaccessible to a broader middlebrow public. Although the contemporary discussion on Pollock sometimes sounds pedestrian or innocuous, it should be read with an ear to subtleties of class distinction. This chapter outlines what was at stake to a rapidly growing American middle class, during the period that “advance-guard” critics worked to position Pollock in the postwar era.³⁶

The United States was on the brink of a new era at the end of the Second World War. Soldiers returned home, G.I. Bill in hand, settled down and boosted enrollment at colleges and universities by the millions. Vast suburban tracts of Cape Cod-style houses like Levittown, New York sprang up with help from government incentives that made

³⁴ John Adams, “Discourses on Davila,” *The Political Writings of John Adams*, George A. Peek Jr., ed. (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1954), p. 176, quoted in David P. Haney, “From the Leisure Class to Radical Chic: Prophets of Social Status in America” (M.A. Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1990), p. 5.

³⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*, 1951, p. 59. I mentioned McLuhan in the Introduction. It is edifying to read more of his observations on “Highbrow, Middlebrow, Lowbrow”: “In America, low, middle, high are consumer ratings, and nothing more. But woe to the indigent intellectual who accidentally acquires a ‘high’ rating without the economic appendages. He is undermining the system....But those who, like Mr. Lynes and *Life*, pretend to use low, middle, and high as real indications of levels of intellectual activity, are corrupters of the currency of speech and thought. The mind is, in varying degrees, dead or alive, and high and low may be used as an index of vitality. Naturally, the low-vitality mind tends toward the robot categories of Lynes and *Life*, regardless of economic or consumer status. And, just as naturally, the alert and detached mind ignores such categories.”

³⁶ *Life* magazine referred to Greenberg as an “advance-guard” critic in the famous article, “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” (August 8, 1949): 42. The sense of radicalism latent in the term “advance-guard” is significant: Russell Lynes’s “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow” also uses a demilitarized version of military rhetoric (*Life*, April 11, 1949: 99-102).

purchasing a home cheaper than renting.³⁷ In the early 1960s, economist Harold Vatter summed up the distinguishing characteristics of the era as the abundant economy, elimination of mass unemployment, large government budgets, the expanding population, and dramatic technological advances.³⁸ In the immediate postwar years, the American Dream lacked the ironic patina it would later acquire. It was embedded in the minds of the burgeoning middle classes and seemed tantalizingly near.

The debate about social status, which had raged earlier in the century, was largely quiet during the Depression years. It returned with vigor in the 1940s. Observers from the academic and popular arenas became enthralled with the new middle class, the fastest growing social group in America.³⁹ In theory, America's postwar economic boom offered the country a chance to rid itself of its class system. Ideally, newfound prosperity would be spread among all Americans, shrinking the economic gap between the very rich and the very poor. If economic discrepancies between rich and poor were ironed out, greater social harmony would ostensibly follow. This was the dream of the classless society.

In actuality, "classlessness" meant that more Americans would join the middle classes. The poorest would move upward; those already within the middle class would rise to the upper-middle class range. (What would happen to the upper classes—those with the greatest, and often inherited, incomes—was not clear, but "classless society" was never the battle cry of the upper classes.) Thus on one hand there was solid evidence of increased education and subsequently increased earnings for many citizens. But on the

³⁷ The G.I. Bill was the nickname for the official Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944. Under the G.I. Bill, every veteran was allocated enough money to attend the school of his choice for at least three and a half years. "By 1947-48, the Veterans Administration was paying the bills for almost 50 percent of the male students in institutions of higher learning. . . . 2,232,000 veterans attended college under the first GI Bill." James Gilbert, *Another Chance: Postwar America 1945-1968* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), p. 22. Between 1944 and 1950, housing starts climbed from 114,000 to an astonishing 1,692,000. "Veterans could buy homes in Levittown. . . with a thirty-year mortgage and no down payment, by spending only \$56 per month. . . . the average apartment rental in many cities was \$93." Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1988), p. 169.

³⁸ Harold Vatter, *The U.S. Economy in the 1950's: An Economic History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), Chapter 1.

³⁹ I use "observers" to refer to a spectrum popular writers, critics, academics and average Americans.

other hand there were ossifying class lines that restricted mobility, according to sociologists and historians.⁴⁰ By 1959, the popular social commentator Vance Packard looked back and wondered what happened to the notion of “a classless society” in the fifteen years since the war.⁴¹ The very term “classless society” was loaded, calling to mind “Europeans” and communism; both were un-American. So with more and more citizens inhabiting a similar economic plain, was it ever possible to achieve a uniquely American brand of classlessness?

There were many reasons to hope so; foremost among them was that America might not *be* America without the dream of upward mobility. The vexing issue and its implications hastened renewed debate on what constitutes “America” and “the American way of life.”

W. Lloyd Warner Looks at an American Community

In 1949, the enormously popular photo journal magazine, *Life*, published an eleven-page essay on how to rate and score social standing in America (Figure 2).⁴² The *Life* essay sums up the era’s mores and the complexities of ascertaining social class by offering a noteworthy introduction to American social life—written in a language accessible to the popular reader. It was based on a study by University of Chicago sociologist/anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, whose full-length academic book *Social Class in America* had been recently published.⁴³ Warner, a professor of anthropology and

⁴⁰ Much of this work originated in university sociology departments between the wars. It entailed complicated statistics based on broad scales of class-determining factors; these methods and resultant interpretations reflected a dominant mode of communication after the war, what I call the technicians’ talk. (See below, “The Rise of Technician Talk.”)

⁴¹ See Chapter One, “A Classless Society?,” in Packard’s *The Status Seekers*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1959).

⁴² “A Sociologist Looks at an American Community: He finds that Rockford, Ill., like rest of U.S. has six social classes,” *Life* (September 12, 1949): 108-119. As with many of *Life*’s essays during this period, no author is cited. The essay introduces W. Lloyd Warner and then summarizes many of his findings in *Social Class in America*.

⁴³ W. Lloyd Warner, *Social Class in America: A Manual of Procedure for the Measurement of Social Status* (Science Research Associates, Inc, 1949; reprint, Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1957.) Chicago was an early center for the developing field of sociology. Thorstein Veblen, an economist by training who held socio-psychological theories, taught at the University of Chicago at the turn of the century. In the 1920s W. Lloyd Warner and his team worked there. David Riesman taught social science



Figure 2. "A Sociologist Looks at an American Community," *Life*, September 12, 1949, page 109.

sociology at the University of Chicago, was one of the best-known sociologists of the 1930s and 1940s. His five-volume study of the fictional composite town, *Yankee City: The Social Life of a Modern Community*, was published in 1941, followed in 1944 by *Who Shall Be Educated?*, an examination of educational disparities in America.⁴⁴ A

at the University of Chicago from 1949 until he accepted a Harvard post in 1958. Postwar, the two most prestigious departments of sociology were Harvard and Columbia.

⁴⁴ W. Lloyd Warner et al., *Yankee City Series* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1941-1959). *Yankee City* was based on research in Newburyport, Massachusetts. John P. Marquand's best-selling novel about the hazards of upward mobility, *Point of No Return* (1949), was based on Warner's *Yankee City* studies. Marquand lived in Newburyport. See also, W. Lloyd Warner, Robert J. Havighurst, and Martin B. Loeb, *Who Shall Be Educated?* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1944).

hallmark of *Life*'s journalistic style was to go directly to the experts on a given subject; W. Lloyd Warner had clout and crossover appeal.⁴⁵

The *Life* article, titled "A Sociologist Looks at an American Community," examines the social classes in Rockford, Illinois. Rockford was one of three towns Warner assessed to create the fictional composite, Jonesville. The essay is dominated with photographs and charts.⁴⁶ As the magazine explains:

Warner's study merely organizes into a sociological system [...], and therefore helps to clarify, what every American knows but frequently forgets: his democracy is like a ladder. Anyone can climb it, but there are already some who have reached the rungs above and there are others who are coming up from below. On the next 10 pages, *LIFE* shows what this imaginary ladder looks like in Rockford, Ill.

The rest of the text is distilled into key paragraphs that read like a primer on the American Dream:

Within the middle class, for example, there are people who have just moved up from the lower class and others who are ready to move on into the upper class. This phenomenon of social "mobility"—the opportunity to move rapidly upward through the levels of society—is the distinguishing characteristic of U.S. democracy and the thing for which it is famous and envied throughout the world.⁴⁷

A single Rockford citizen, illustrated in portrait photographs and "candid" scenes showing typical events in his or her daily life, represents each class.⁴⁸ A large inset box explains "How Social Standing Is Scored." Warner assigned mathematical ratings to four major factors to create a "mathematical yardstick": house, dwelling area, occupation and

⁴⁵ *Life* was the leader of American magazines for many years. Surely part of its success was due to its patented go-to-the-experts-and-popularize-it approach. The Warner and Lynes essays (below) are strong examples of this type of journalism. Another postwar essay featuring charts and graphs is "Personality Tests: Ink Blots are Used to Learn How People's Minds Work," *Life* (October 7, 1946): 56-59.

⁴⁶ The photographs are by Margaret Bourke White, who had been personally recruited by Henry Luce in 1929 for Time-Life, Inc. She had recently returned from documenting the war and the Nazi concentration camps in Europe.

⁴⁷ "A Sociologist Looks at an American Community," p. 109.

⁴⁸ All six of the citizens are white. Five are male. One (upper-lower) emigrated from Italy in 1914; another (upper-middle) from Austria in 1903; a third (lower-upper) from Sweden in 1910. The highest-ranking citizen (upper-upper), Mrs. Walter Forbes, "Rockford's grand old lady," is also the only woman featured in the essay.

source of income. “It is not an arbitrary system...” assert *Life*’s editors, “Warner rates each factor mathematically. The lower the total score the higher the subject’s social class.”⁴⁹ Each factor is represented by a bold black and white symbol: “dwelling area” is shown as a cross-shaped intersection with a house at the corner; “occupation” is a man in a cap swinging a mallet, and so forth (Figure 3).

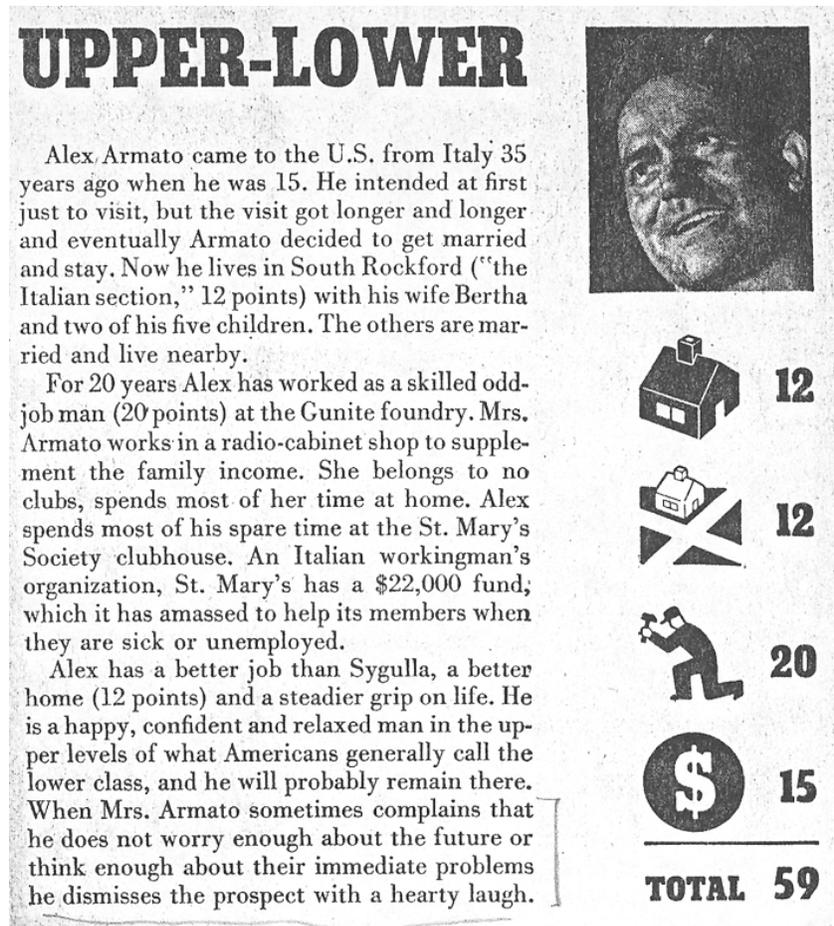


Figure 3. “A Sociologist Looks at an American Community,” *Life*, 1949, detail of Alex Armato’s status chart.

The numerical value of each factor is printed to the icon’s right; at the bottom the sum total appears underneath a bar. The visual dynamics emphasize the “mathematical” model, repeating it within each citizen’s social standing profile.

⁴⁹ “A Sociologist Looks at an American Community,” p. 109.

According to Warner, Rockport is just like the rest of the United States; it can be divided into six social classes, from lower-lower through upper-upper. “Warner’s reason for this subdivision is that the social structure of the U.S. is too complex to be explained in terms of three groups,” *Life* wrote. (Warner later would identify forty-seven subclasses in American society.)

The *Life* article shows the confluence of several social trends. The dominant subject is the American Dream, a topic of unmitigated interest to *Life*’s readers. The language is technical, with a sociologist’s dialect of rating systems and statistical evidence. Warner’s method also offers a how-to system purporting to demystify the process and make it available for do-it-yourselfers. The how-to system helps define social standing, but discerning do-it-yourselfers will also find between the lines tips that *increase* social standing. For example, Alex Armato’s upper-lower class seven-room house rates twelve points, as does his neighborhood (“across the tracks from Rockford’s main residential district. Negro families live on both sides of it.”) Although Stan Wentland (lower-middle) stands one rung up the ladder from Alex Armato, his dwelling rates a “notch lower” than Armato’s because he and his family live in six rooms above the family grocery store. Stan Wentland, however, resides in a better neighborhood, thus compensating for his weaker dwelling score.⁵⁰ Theoretically, each Rockford citizen could move to a higher-rated neighborhood or dwelling to raise social standing scores.

Life’s essay is filled with optimistic assessments: Sam Sygulla (lower-lower class) is “at the bottom of the ladder. *But he has dreams.*” The Wentlands, grocery-store proprietors, are forced to keep longer hours to compete with larger chain stores. But “the sense of personal accomplishment this gives them is worth the loss of free time.” Rockford’s “Grand Old Lady,” Mrs. Walter Forbes (“strictly upper-upper”), supported a controversial welfare resolution favoring more state aid for needy children.⁵¹ That is, the

⁵⁰ The Wentlands’ precise neighborhood is not described, except that the Wentland store is the “only one in the neighborhood,” suggesting the street is residential. Although it is not stated, presumably there are no “Negro families” in the Wentlands’ higher-scoring neighborhood. The numerical difference between the Wentlands’ neighborhood and the Armatos’ is four points.

⁵¹ Emphasis added, see “A Sociologist Looks at an American Community,” pp. 110, 113 and 116, respectively.

members of each class transcend their assignments through fantasy life, rationalization or charity work.

Despite the cheery tone, a more subdued prognosis appears on the final pages. “There’s not supposed to be classes in this town,” remarks one of Warner’s Rockford interviewees, “but actually there are.”⁵² The statement signals the confusion surrounding the notion of a “classless society,” and it sounds ingenuous in an article that seals class identity through unyielding numerical assignments. A “classless” America implies that classes are traversable, not obsolete. The problem, explains Warner, is that mobility in America is slowing down. Education, the favored remedy for class inequities, is not accessible to all. Societies with a large population must have a division of labor to perform tasks necessary for survival: “And no society can exist without a system of rank to channel this energy.” As if to offset the harsher findings of Warner’s twenty years in the field, *Life*’s concluding sentences recapitulate the familiar American storyline: “Though all are not equal in ability, the Dream is still true. For given the education, the will to do and *a little luck*, we can start at the bottom and climb to the top.”⁵³

The *Life*/Warner essay addresses virtually every key topic on the subject of class and social standing: the economic abundance of postwar America, the mixed fate of “a classless society,” the Horatio Alger hero, the system of rating, status consciousness, the do-it-yourself trend and, of course, the American Dream. Each of these subjects deserves greater scrutiny.

⁵² Ibid., p. 118.

⁵³ Emphasis added; “A Sociologist Looks at an American Community,” p. 119. As noted below, “luck” was a critical part of Horatio Alger heroes’ success, although it was frequently omitted in the common version of the story. Luck is fundamental to other manifestations of the American Dream. “The old American dream,” writes H. W. Brands in a book on the California Gold Rush, “the dream inherited from ten generations of ancestors, was the dream of the Puritans, of Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard, of Thomas Jefferson’s yeoman farmers: of men and women content to accumulate their modest fortunes a little at a time, year by year by year. The new dream was the dream of instant wealth, won in a twinkling by audacity and good luck.” H. W. Brands, *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream* (New York: Doubleday, 2002). My source is Janet Maslin, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times* (August 19, 2002): B7.

Luck ensures that *truly anyone* can achieve fortune, despite educational or hereditary handicaps. In contemporary America, consider the ideological importance of state lotteries and interstate Powerball, *particularly among the under classes*. The lottery’s success is based on the naïve hopes of a predominantly undereducated segment of American society.

“What is Measurable is Better”: Postwar Economic Landscape and Goals

“Private capitalism,” John Kenneth Galbraith wrote, “is inherently unstable.”⁵⁴ The spectre of the Depression haunted the financial world throughout the 1930s, keeping Americans perpetually braced for another downturn. President Roosevelt worked to check federal spending even as he implemented massive government programs intended to lift the nation out of the Depression.⁵⁵ Although the New Deal met with limited success, it would be a full decade before the country could recover.

The 1930s had confirmed a long-known glitch to the capitalist system: it unintentionally fostered periods of stagnation, resulting in cyclical depression and unemployment. American economic theorists, Galbraith chief among them, were heavily indebted to the theories of Englishman John Maynard Keynes, who kept a close watch on the intriguing and relatively youthful American system.⁵⁶ As Keynes knew, governments could intervene to affect capitalism’s cycles through taxation or deficit spending, but what finally altered this country’s financial outlook was preparation for and involvement in the war. The country’s remarkable capacity to produce proved economically palliative. From nylon stockings to the atomic bomb, the American ability to churn things out defied expectations.⁵⁷

As Frederick Lewis Allen wrote in *The Big Change* (1952), the wartime question was, “How many can you make, and how fast?”

The American manufacturer responded to the challenge with zest. For it appealed to that peculiar enthusiasm for record breaking which seems to blossom in the air of a land where radio listeners to ball games are informed by record-conscious broadcasters that so-and-so’s triple with the bases full is the first triple made in the first game of a World Series since

⁵⁴ John Kenneth Galbraith, *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, first published 1952), p. 5.

⁵⁵ John Maynard Keynes wrote to Roosevelt in 1938 explaining why Americans should *spend* to counteract recession. His advice was ignored. It was not until the Truman administration that Keynes became more accepted in American policy. See Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (Garden City and New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), p. 78 and Gilbert, *Another Chance*, p. 12.

⁵⁶ For a summary of the American reformulation of Keynes, see Hodgson, *America in Our Time*, especially pp. 77ff. and 246-48.

⁵⁷ From 1945-1960, the U.S. gross national product increased 250%; consumption of personal services grew 300%; new construction skyrocketed by 900%; see David Abrahamson, *Magazine-Made America: The Cultural Transformation of the Postwar Periodical* (Cresskill, NJ: The Hampton Press, 1996), p. 10.

1927, and where schoolboy runners dream dreams of being the first man in history to achieve a four-minute mile.⁵⁸

Allen was a noted social historian and editor-in-chief of *Harper's* magazine.⁵⁹ He identifies a psychological component behind wartime rallying as a uniquely American blend of competitive instinct and unfettered idealism. By 1945 the country's gross national product of goods and services amounted to \$215 billion, more than double the \$91 billion gross national product of 1939. Yet such all-out production came at a steep cost to the government.

The war made spending a necessity. The vociferous complaints once leveled against the New Deal about "bankrupting the government" seemed quaint by comparison. Under Roosevelt, government spending accounted for about one tenth of the national income. After the war, spending surged to one-fifth of the national income.⁶⁰ From 1939 to 1946, the national debt catapulted from \$40 billion to \$269 billion.⁶¹

"Growthmanship" was a deliberately awkward term invented by 1950s commentators as they reflected on the previous decade. It summed up the midcentury's unprecedented obsession with every variety of material expansion.⁶² In foreign affairs, growthmanship coincided with America's softening of its isolationist stance. The passage of the Lend-Lease Act and eventual full-fledged involvement in the war was matched with ever-mounting domestic production. Perhaps as never before, domestic economic policy and international relations were joined at the hip. But even if 1950s economists scoffed at growthmanship, most continued to emphasize the benefits of business expansion.⁶³

⁵⁸ Frederick Lewis Allen, *The Big Change: America Transforms Itself, 1900-1950* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1952), p. 166. Allen observes the American fascination with statistics. As I note, it is a language in which the technically oriented middle class is well versed.

⁵⁹ Allen was chief Editor at *Harper's* from 1941 until his death in 1954.

⁶⁰ Daniel Bell, "America's Unmarxist Revolution," *Commentary* 7 (March 1949): 207-216.

⁶¹ Allen, *Big Change*, p. 166.

⁶² Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Chapter One.

⁶³ Although growth was the governing economic principle of the day, its beneficiaries were select. Despite an increase in aggregate family personal income between 1929 and 1957, the highest twenty percent of

By the 1950s, the Soviet Union, which had successfully detonated an atomic device in September 1949, was reportedly increasing its gross national product at a faster rate than the United States.⁶⁴ As Robert Collins notes in his study of the period, “In the end, the productivity of the American economy counted heavily in what one military historian has characterized as a ‘gross national product war’—a contest that turned largely on the matter of which coalition could outproduce the other.”⁶⁵ Growth remained the dominant economic policy throughout the 1950s. It did not let up.⁶⁶

Liberal-minded economists such as James Tobin and Galbraith favored routing surpluses into public institutions such as schools. Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society*, although not published until 1958, effectively summed up the economic thinking of postwar America.⁶⁷ He argued that current economic thought is based on the century-old belief in the value of sheer machine production. But by the early 1950s, the United States produced more than enough to substantially lift the standard of living. Galbraith writes, “The production of material goods is the accepted measure of our progress,” resulting in a society that believes “what is measurable is better.”⁶⁸ The problem is that profits are privatized, and American public services—which are paid for through taxation—are considered a burden on private industry. *The Affluent Society* ends with a plea to educate young Americans in order to raise publicly minded individuals with a strong ethical sense.⁶⁹

Americans continued to fare dramatically better than the lowest twenty percent (Collins, *More*, p. 42). The results of this polarity are evident in *Life’s* Warner essay.

⁶⁴ Collins quotes Allen Dulles, head of the CIA, in 1959 testimony to the Joint Economic Committee: the Soviet GNP “has also been growing twice as rapidly as that of the United States over the past eight years.” *More*, p. 47. See also E. Ray Canterbury, *Economics on a New Frontier* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1968), p. 28.

⁶⁵ Collins, *More*, p. 12. Collins’s “military historian” is Russell Weigley, who published *The American Way of War* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 146, cited in Collins, *More*, p. 243.

⁶⁶ Again in 1958, the economic policy panel of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund issued a report advising that America “must accelerate our rate of growth.” Collins, *More*, p. 48.

⁶⁷ *The Affluent Society* had “extraordinary public appeal;” Rutledge Vining, “The Affluent Society: A Review Article,” *American Economic Review* 49 (1959): 112. The book was hailed in numerous publications, including lead reviews in the *New York Times* (June 1, 1958) and the *British Listener* (September 28, 1958).

⁶⁸ J. K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), p. 268.

⁶⁹ Galbraith had that rare ability to merge scientific rigor with common sense, even if his prognostications were sometimes inaccurate. He stated things in such a way that they seemed self-evident. For example, he

After 1945, the country's prodigious capacity to make things was met by an unleashed desire to consume. Consumption, after all, is the corollary to an economy based on production. Someone has to purchase all the new cars, garbage disposals and instant decaffeinated coffee. As Richard Wightman Fox has noted, "The ideal of fulfillment through consumption and leisure was if anything furthered by the experience of involuntary deprivation" during the Depression and War years.⁷⁰ Whatever psychological motivations lay behind Americans' newly discovered wants, they were coupled with an official economic policy dependent on massive demand for supply. The relationship was symbiotic, reinforced through governmental, commercial and peer-reinforced channels. Economists, noted Galbraith in the 1950s, have "closed their eyes to modern want creation." It is the producer who both makes "the goods and makes the desires for them."⁷¹

What all this suggests is that while there was a real economic basis for redistributing wealth and achieving something akin to a "classless society," American policy kept those hopes illusory. The country's laissez-faire capitalist foundation and its subsequent growth favored the "haves." But this trend was not so commonly recognized

noted that part of the attractiveness of the new class was how it offered a vicarious feeling of superiority. (Galbraith read Veblen.) Children of the new class are "carefully indoctrinated" in the importance of finding an occupation from which they will derive satisfaction. They are not focused on the toil of manual labor, but rather the enjoyment of their field. There should be every reason, argued Galbraith, to *expand* this class (see p. 265).

⁷⁰ Richard W. Fox and Jackson Lears, *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 103. Of the younger couples inhabiting the suburban communities like Park Forest and Levittown, William H. Whyte, Jr. writes, "Depression? They don't even think about it." This new generation has faith that "the government not only wants to keep prosperity from slipping, but knows exactly how to do." William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), p. 353.

⁷¹ Galbraith calls this the "Dependence Effect," according to which our higher level of production results in a higher level of want and of want satisfaction. See *The Affluent Society*, pp. 127-129.

Historian George Lipsitz used the term "corporate liberalism" to describe the philosophy by which the government steps in to balance the power of major interest groups ("corporate") while offering concessions to non-conforming groups ("liberalism") so they will feel they are a part of the system. The rationale is that such intervention will keep the economy stable. However, corporate liberalism tends to favor big businesses and monopolies, since those large groups are in a position to stabilize the nation's economy. As Lipsitz points out, this use of "liberalism" is not laissez-faire: rather it is "a kind a neo-paternalism in which a system can appear legitimate by making concessions to potentially dissident groups in order to give them a stake in preserving the system." George Lipsitz, *Class and Culture in Cold War America: A Rainbow at Midnight* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1982), pp. 5-6.

in the 1940s, when the country was largely unified by an idealism that seemed justified by the Allied victory. Galbraith's premise in *The Affluent Society* was that economists and the general public erroneously believed the country's progress was measured by the production of material goods.⁷²

Class and Sociology

After the war, the subject of "class" increasingly fascinated Americans. Class referred to the stratification of people according to economic, occupational, and social status.⁷³ At midcentury, there were two major conceptions of class. The most traditional definition, associated with Karl Marx, was largely determined by economics.⁷⁴ The second definition of class was broader and more slippery. Closer to W. Lloyd Warner's conception, this second definition considered economic standing, but also occupation, status, group identification, level of consumption, family background, and other factors (mostly related to social prestige, as opposed to capital).

A 1949 study by sociologist Milton Gordon surveyed the state-of-the-research on the subject of class. Gordon found that "social class" had no agreed-upon definition as a research tool.⁷⁵ Why, he asked, have American sociologists failed to develop *a coherent theory of class*? It was odd, mused Gordon, given that the sociology pioneers stressed class as a necessary concept for examining economic stratification and its attendant

⁷² Galbraith's notion has an analog in popular attitudes toward art. The public prefers art that is figurative and representational: art that gives the viewer something tangible to behold. Traditional art was valued for its "beauty," which could be seen in the depiction of a mountain or the likeness of a person's face. In the case of Jackson Pollock's paintings, there was nothing familiar to behold. There was no tangible way to measure either their aesthetic value or the artist's unorthodox handling of the brush. Yet Pollock was still hailed as one of the "greatest" painters. In a society that tended to quantify success via figures, charts and graphs, such superlatives were useless. Pollock's paintings did sell (and had some market value), but that did not help explain their aesthetic value.

⁷³ These definitions of class are based on contemporary sources but owe largely to Milton M. Gordon's "Social Class in American Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 55 (November 1949): pp. 262-268.

⁷⁴ As Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Lipset pointed out in 1953, Marx knew that income or occupation alone does not define class position. Two people may "belong to the same occupation, but to different social classes." Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset, *Class, Status and Power: A Reader in Social Stratification* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1953), p. 29.

⁷⁵ See Gordon, "Social Class in American Sociology," pp. 262-268; August B. Hollingshead, "Trends in Social Stratification: A Case Study," *American Sociological Review* 17 (December 1952): 679-686; John W. Bennet and Melvin M. Tumin, *Social Life: Structure and Function* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 473; Walter Goldschmidt, "Social Class in America: A Critical Review," *American Anthropologist* 52 (October-December 1950): 483-498.

psychological repercussions. But by the 1920s, noted Gordon, there was “little class research in progress, a minimum of theoretical consideration of the precise meaning of the term, and practically no recognition of the class framework as a major area of investigation within the discipline.”⁷⁶

Gordon cited three primary reasons for this lapse: the American insistence that class distinctions did not exist in America, a general “distrust of the term itself because of its close association with Marxian and other revolutionary ‘foreign’ doctrines,” and the substantial prosperity of the 1920s and accompanying rise in living standards for much of the population.⁷⁷ He then made a perceptive observation: “Social scientists were apparently not unaffected by these ideological and behavioral phenomena in the general population, the cumulative effect of which was calculated to diminish their interest in class.”⁷⁸ That is to say, social scientists were just as likely to be swayed by existing perceptions as the broader population. But the altered landscape of postwar America, with its potential for social change, refocused the attention of sociologists.

Gordon proposed that the most efficacious definition of class should be determined through five key categories: economic power (income and occupation), status ascription (subjective views of one’s class by oneself and others), group life, social mobility, and ethnic stratification. W. Lloyd Warner’s 1949 *Social Class in America* employed virtually all of these criteria. Its subtitle, “A Manual of Procedure for the Measurement of Social Status,” indicates its scientific aspirations. “The lives of many are destroyed because they do not understand the workings of social class,” notes Warner ominously in the opening chapter.⁷⁹ He offered the book as a “corrective instrument”—a “scientific tool”—to help men and women better evaluate their social situations and learn

⁷⁶ Milton Gordon begins with a summary of Charles Page’s survey on class in early American sociology. The foundational scholars include Lester Ward, William Graham Sumner, Albion Small, Franklin H. Giddings, Charles Horton Cooley and E. A. Ross. To Page’s list, Gordon adds Thorstein Veblen. (See Gordon’s explanation, “Social Class in American Sociology,” p. 263.)

⁷⁷ Gordon, “Social Class in American Sociology,” p. 265.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁷⁹ Warner, *Social Class in America*, p. 5. Warner’s foreboding sentence is footnoted with a study by Jurgen Ruesch *et al.* that showed “how certain serious physical and mental ailments are directly attributable to social class and mobility strivings and anxieties.” Again, recall that Marquand’s *Point of No Return*—a novel that deals with psychological malaise—was inspired in part by Warner’s Yankee City study.

to adapt. Warner’s two primary procedures, the “Evaluated Participation (E.P.)” and “Index of Status Characteristics (I.S.C.),” accompanied by ten charts and thirty-two tables, are full of mind-numbing statistics (Figure 4). *Social Class in America* was markedly simplified for the *Life* feature, but it is easy to see why *Life* sought Warner’s expertise.

TABLE 28
ACCURACY IN PREDICTION OF SOCIAL-CLASS PARTICIPATION ON THE
BASIS OF THE REVISED I.S.C., BY TYPE OF ETHNIC

PLACEMENT	OLD AMERICANS			ETHNIC		
	Number of Cases	Per Cent of Total	Cumulative Percentage	Number of Cases	Per Cent of Total	Cumulative Percentage
Correct Class Placement and Correct Position within Class	87	41.8%	41.8%	23	24.7%	24.7%
Correct Class Placement but Incorrect Position within Class	88	42.2	84.1	44	47.3	72.0
Incorrect Class Placement	33	15.9	100.0	26	28.0	100.0
Totals*	208	100.0%	—	93	100.0%	—

* In all cases in which an error in the social class itself was made, the class predicted was always one immediately adjacent to the actual class. In no case, either Old American or ethnic, did the prediction differ from the actual placement by more than one social class.

Figure 4. W. Lloyd Warner’s Table 28 of the Index of Status Characteristics, from *Social Class in America* (1949)

A scan of midcentury sociological texts suggests the discipline strove for respect in part by relying on hard numbers and hard facts. As Gordon observed, sociologists documenting the ascendancy of the new middle class were not immune to that class’s ideological underpinnings. The sociologists’ subjects were in many ways the same as their audience: middle class Americans with an interest in status mobility. (Who, after all, was *not* interested in raising his or her status level?) Sociology itself was a relatively new discipline whose methodology derived from established fields, including economics, political theory, anthropology and statistics. Because sociologists used self- and peer-reported measures, there was a strong subjective element to their determinations. To prove itself, the new field adopted rigorous evaluative tools and terminology. The very

fact that Gordon calls practitioners “social *scientists*”—when he could have used “sociologists”—is indicative of that striving.⁸⁰

The Classless Society and the American Dream

The American eschewal of overt class distinctions stretched back to the colonists and pioneers. All the clichés about the United States—fabled land of abundance, land of opportunity, melting pot—hinged on the assumed absence of traditional class barriers.

One of the most active proponents of the classless society ideal was James Bryant Conant, a pioneer in organic chemistry theory who was President of Harvard University from 1933 to 1953. Conant strove to reshape the American education system.⁸¹ In 1946, he was the subject of a *Time* magazine cover story celebrating his deep intellect and lack of “snobbishness.”⁸²

Conant chose the classless ideal as the theme of his 1940 charter-day address to the University of California. He emphasized a return to the Jeffersonian tradition of universal schooling. His wartime speech, intended to inspire educators and students across the country, summarized the classless dream:

Until fairly recently it was taken for granted that the American republic could be described as classless. For a century and a half Americans have been saying with pride, “This is a free country. There are no classes in the United States.” Note these words carefully, for the denial of classes in America is the denial of hereditary classes, not the denial of temporary

⁸⁰ “Social sciences” include anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology. However, the contemporary literature tends to use these terms interchangeably.

Sociology suffered an identity crisis in the 1940s. The field was plagued with internecine conflicts pertaining to sociology’s own quest for scientific legitimacy. As David Haney points out in his dissertation, C. Wright Mills was especially vitriolic in his attacks on his own field, believing modern sociology confused the scientific *method* (statistics and data-gathering) for real science. (Mills singled out Warner for attack.) Modern empirical sociology was engaged in a copycat style of scientific method that only “encouraged the production of studies for their own sake, rather than to fulfill larger theoretical or social objectives.” Mills contrasted sociology with the hard science of physics: a discipline that had advanced markedly because physicists added creativity and original thinking to their empirical research. David P. Haney, “Democratic Ideals, Scientific Identities and the Struggle for a Public Sociology in the United States, 1945-1962,” (Ph.D. Diss. University of Texas at Austin, 1998), p. 191. Haney’s Chapter Four, “The Assault on Sociological Scientism from Within,” is particularly relevant to my own findings.

⁸¹ James Bryant Conant (1893-1978), a scientist by training, served as chair of the National Defense Research Committee that provided advice for atomic research. After the war he was instrumental in creating the national Educational Testing Service and laying the groundwork for the Standardized Achievement Tests.

⁸² *Time* (September 23, 1946): 53.

groupings based on economic differences.... The number of times these two sentences have been sincerely spoken could be recorded only by a figure of astronomical magnitude. Were they ever an approximately accurate description of typical American society? My answer would be yes.⁸³

Conant was at pains to extricate classlessness from the near-at-hand example: “Obviously [the classless ideal] cannot long survive a victory of the socialistic Left—there is no place for such ideas in a classless society on the Russian model.” Many advocates of a classless society would try to reconcile the “Russian model” with the American version. Conant understands the subtle distinction between classlessness and stratification.

In a 1950 issue of *House Beautiful* on American style and taste, historian Arthur Schlesinger furthered the classless argument within a popular venue. In America, anybody can climb the ladder:

The European conception of a graded society, with each class everlastingly performing its allotted function, vanished quickly amidst primitive surroundings that invited the humblest to move upward as well as outward. Instead of everybody being nobody, they found that anybody might become somebody.⁸⁴

Unlike James Conant’s a decade earlier, Schlesinger’s America is unthreatened. He distinguishes America from all of Europe, thereby eluding the historical problems across the Atlantic.

A less familiar, but deeply concerned voice, took up America’s disengagement from Europe: Frederick Martin Stern, a German-born naturalized U.S. citizen. Stern’s *Capitalism in America: A Classless Society* (1950) describes victory in the Second World War as the culmination of 175 years of struggle with class hierarchy:

In this country there is a consistent trend toward the classless society that stems right from the American Revolution....The reason the colonists demanded independence from Britain was a desire for fuller democratic rights. There was no dynasty, aristocracy, or plutocracy in America that

⁸³ Conant’s charter-day address was published in *Atlantic Monthly* 165 (May 1940): 593-602. The following month, it was published in *Reader’s Digest* 36 (June 1940): 1-5, with the title “To Keep Our People Free.” In 2006 it was accessible at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/95sep/ets/edcla.htm>.

⁸⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, from *Paths to the Present*, quoted in “American Style and American Taste,” *House Beautiful* (May 1950): 145. Schlesinger was then teaching history at Harvard University; he had been awarded his first Pulitzer Prize in 1945.

wanted to gain more power by shaking off British domination. The revolution was made by townspeople and farmers, educated and illiterate, rich and poor—and especially the poor.... Americans would not put up any longer with European class and caste ideas.⁸⁵

The U.S. has *already* achieved a form of classlessness, and is in the process of “[raising] up the lower class and abolish poverty, servitude and humiliation for all.” By contrast, explains Stern, the Soviet Union uses “the steamroller method [to] depress and degrade the upper class, and abolish well-being, freedom and dignity for all.” His zealot’s embrace of America was not uncommon during the early Cold War.⁸⁶

Horatio Alger’s Heroes

A key figure in America’s “classless” ideology is the self-made man. Cited by Arthur Schlesinger as a pivotal figure in American history, the self-made man was both a reality—Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie—and the fictional hero of Horatio Alger’s stories.

Horatio Alger (1832-1899) was a New England minister and author of enormously popular stories that were often serialized in boys’ magazines. They were set in late nineteenth-century urban centers familiar to Alger from his work at a New York City home for runaway boys and orphans. The popularized understanding of the typical Alger story is this: a young working-class man (often of uncertain origins) finds himself

⁸⁵ Frederick Martin Stern, *Capitalism in America: A Classless Society* (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc, 1950), pp. 10-11. Stern originally published sections of his highly personal book privately under the title, *Classless Capitalism in the U.S.A.?*

Many writers cautiously detailed the differences between America and England. James Bryant Conant was equally careful as Stern: “To contrast the social history of the United States and that of even so closely related a country as Great Britain is illuminating. If we examine, for example, the recent history by G. D. H. Cole entitled *The British Common People, 1746-1938*, we shall see portrayed the evolution of one type of political democracy within a highly stratified caste system. Compare this picture with the history of the growth of this republic by expansion through the frontier in the last one hundred years—a history in which social castes can be ignored; a history where, by and large, opportunity awaited the able and daring youths of each new generation.... Failure to give due weight to the differences between a casteless society and a stratified society has had unfortunate consequences for our thinking.” Conant, “Education for a Classless Society,” *Atlantic Monthly* 165 (May 1940): 593-602.

⁸⁶ Stern barely mentions his German birth in his book. Rather, he repeatedly emphasizes his “European” roots. *Capitalism in America* had at least two printings and was later published in Spanish. In 1957, Stern wrote *The Citizen Army: Key to Defense in the Atomic Age*. By 1975, he had achieved a sufficient reputation to have sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset introduce his book, *Life and Liberty: A Return to First Principles*. In the introduction, Lipset finds an affinity between Stern and Alexis de Tocqueville.

in dismal circumstances. Through hard work, he ascends to a respectable, financially successful position. Along the way, the protagonist wins the heart of a higher-stationed young woman. Because it emblemized the American Dream and the wishful fantasies of so many young men, the Horatio Alger story retained powerful resonance well into the middle of the twentieth century.⁸⁷

Attempts to loosen the novels' mythic hold were unsuccessful. In 1953, R. Richard Wohl detailed how the popularized version of Alger's "rags-to-riches" hero differs from the novels' actual plotlines. For example, Americans believe Alger's heroes are lower class, but in reality Alger's formulaic novels were about *middle* class young men. The boys' ultimate successes were nearly always the result of divine providence.⁸⁸ In other words, the heroes got a lucky break. By the 1950s Alger's books had been out of print for years, conveniently allowing the stories to be verbally revised to fit the rags-to-riches theme. The midcentury understanding of the story was stripped of the moralistic overtones and shoddy craftsmanship of the original books, conjuring an America in which class lines are still traversable.⁸⁹ Wohl's critique of Alger was greeted with hostility by the right as well as the left. However phantasmal, the popular version of the Alger hero is the embodiment of the American Dream.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Even in the 1940s and 1950s, the Horatio Alger hero continued to stand for a "fundamental and crucial aspect of American culture." R. Richard Wohl, "The 'Rags to Riches Story': An Episode of Secular Idealism," in Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset, *Class, Status and Power: A Reader in Social Stratification* (1953; reprint, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960), pp. 388-395. According to Wohl, in almost every instance, "they are well-brought-up, comfortably nourished middle class boys, the sons of property owners with substantial social reputation" (p. 390). The hero gains advantage with his middle class upbringing, speaks perfect English, is thoroughly moral and reads good books. He works hard to overcome some unfortunate situation, but his situation never changes until he suddenly and unwittingly finds a benefactor. Alger's stories invariably employ a *deus ex machina*. As Wohl notes, this formula suits Alger's Puritan ethic, which dictated that "pay-off and virtue should be decently separated" (p. 391).

⁸⁸ Wohl based his findings on fifty Alger novels.

⁸⁹ The Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans was founded in 1947. It gave the Horatio Alger award to those who have "climbed the ladder of success through toil and diligence and responsible application of his talents to whatever tasks were his" (Wohl, p. 394). The Horatio Alger Foundation claimed to give away over \$5 million in 2005 to fund college educations.

⁹⁰ Although the conventional interpretation of the American Dream is that anyone can achieve a goal through hard work, lucky breaks (e.g. gold prospecting, inheritance) do constitute an element of the Dream. Perhaps that is why it is called the American "Dream," as opposed to the "American Way of Life," another ideological phrase that gains currency in the 1940s and 1950s and is bandied about in Cold War rhetoric.

A January 1946 *Magazine of Art* report on the state of art in America (based on questionnaires sent to "leading" artists) shows the currency of the Alger hero. "Can America afford art?" asks author

Scholars who analyzed the American Dream knew that it was, at best, an ideal. (Today we readily label the Dream an ideology.) William H. Whyte Jr.'s research indicated that while the older generation served as guardians of the Dream; the younger generation had no such illusions. As Whyte puts it, "People grow restive with a mythology that is too distant from the way things actually are, and as more and more lives have been encompassed by the organization way of life, the pressures for an accompanying ideological shift have been mounting."⁹¹

Middletown, U.S.A.

W. Lloyd Warner's Yankee City series and *Social Class in America* confirmed that classlessness was more fiction than reality. Warner's decades of research convinced him class lines were hardening, despite the rosy gloss the *Life* essay might have offered. The majority of social critics and sociologists shared Warner's opinion.

A groundbreaking sociological investigation of the twentieth century was by Robert and Helen Lynd. Just as Warner dubbed his conglomeration of towns the fictional "Yankee City" and "Jonesville," the Lynds had their "Middletown" (Muncie, Indiana). The two Middletown volumes, published in 1929 and 1937, were among the first thorough sociological studies in America.⁹² Although both predate the Second World War, their findings remained highly applicable to later class studies and to the developing new class. Muncie was deeply affected by modernization since the First World War: two primary effects were the increased efficiency of private business and the onslaught of advertising.⁹³ The Lynds' research, adapted from anthropology, involved personal interviews, economic and occupational data, religious affiliation, and actual participation

Elizabeth McCausland. "If America can't, why not? Does the time-honored Alger formula of rags to riches, beloved of American folklore, mean that the worthy painter or sculptor can always rise to economic security and affluence, assuming he or she is smart enough to marry the boss' daughter or son?" Elizabeth McCausland, "Why Can't America Afford Art?," *Magazine of Art* 39 (January 1946): 18.

⁹¹ William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1956) p. 6. I discuss Whyte's *Organization Man* in Chapter Two. Whyte was a long-time editor at *Fortune* magazine and had plentiful contacts and research.

⁹² Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study of Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929); Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937).

⁹³ The Lynds originally set out to study the religious life of Muncie, Indiana. (Robert Lynd trained at the Princeton Theological Seminary.)

in the town's life. They found hardening class lines and business-class domination, and deemed Muncie typical of much of America.

In Middletown they observed a rudimentary class system divided into working and business class. Middletown presented empirical proof of certain Veblenesque observations regarding conspicuous consumption, with which the Lynds were familiar. For example, automobiles had become a crucial indicator of prestige by 1925: one interviewee stated that her family would “rather give up clothes than give up the car.”⁹⁴ This remark signaled a more disturbing trend: the working class no longer took personal pride in a job well done or a problem intelligently solved. Instead, pride was linked to external, commodity symbols. Advances in mechanization created a working class whose jobs were repetitious and mundane. Meanwhile it was the business class—whose members dealt with promoting consumable goods or ideas—that gained status. Civic occupations, such as judges or teachers, held far less prestige.

Over the next decade, Robert Lynd joined the department of sociology at Columbia University.⁹⁵ In 1935, he returned to Muncie to see how the town was faring in the Depression years.⁹⁶ His analyses are more deeply Veblenesque in the second Middletown volume, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*, likely due to his disillusionment with Muncie's direction. “A pecuniary culture that buys its way step by step through life,” writes Lynd, “identifies the achievement of business success

⁹⁴ *Middletown*, p. 166. I was alerted to this quotation by David Haney, “From the Leisure Class to Radical Chic,” p. 22.

⁹⁵ He began zeroing in on the relationship between big business and the consumer, a topic he was exposed to in the *Middletown* research.

Richard Wrightman Fox's “Epitaph for Middletown: Robert S. Lynd and the Analysis of Consumer Culture” provides a valuable psychobiographical reading of Lynd's career. Fox notes, “The two Middletown volumes, along with Lynd's third and final book, *Knowledge for What?*, map his progression from Christian minister to secular sociologist, from cultural analyst to political activist, from outsider to member of the professional elite, from critic of American consumer capitalism to critic of the irrational American consumer. It was hardly a simple progression” (p. 105). See “Epitaph for Middletown,” in Fox and Lears, *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

⁹⁶ Originally Robert Lynd's plan was to only add an appendix to *Middletown*. But his fieldwork (with five assistants) convinced him to develop a second book. Helen Lynd did not participate in the 1935 fieldwork, but is given credit for her general contributions. See Acknowledgements, *Middletown in Transition*, 1937.

(which in this culture means the ‘making’ of money) with the creation of general welfare.”⁹⁷

Middletowners in general had become less civic-minded and more irrational. They were passive, even impotent, as consumers. He found the business class had gained even greater power and practiced an advanced form of Veblen’s pecuniary emulation. Lynd devoted an entire chapter to a single manufacturing family’s domination of the banks, churches, newspapers and factories. In “The X Family: A Pattern of Business-class Control,” he notes that the X Family is essentially “a reigning royal family” in Middletown.⁹⁸

Lynd’s typical Middletowner forecasts the business-oriented conformist culture of the later 1940s and 1950s. In many ways the Middletowner is the average American. He is a moderate, middle-of-the-roader who is married with children. He belongs to a church and a lodge, though he is not expected to attend regularly. (After all, he is a busy man.) His taste leans toward the tried and safe. If he has a hobby, it is neither too exceptional nor does it threaten to “distort” him. He must be active in trying to ‘get on’ in the world. The quality of his life is measured in terms of tangible success, achievement, ‘something to show for it,’ ‘ability to produce the goods,’ but this success is mistrusted unless it is won by hard work, common sense, and careful planning. Furthermore, his peers can overlook certain untoward qualities in the businessman if he possesses compensatory qualities. If he seems, for example, excessively shrewd, forceful, abrupt or even

⁹⁷ Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, pp. 420-421. In my opinion “general welfare” became equated with the individual making money through a migration of values. In the pioneer and farming days, production was always aimed at making things that were in universal demand: food, shelter and clothing. In the period when these habits were cooperative, what the individual produced *did* essentially stand for the good of the whole society. But the situation changed as private business superseded this pattern of reciprocal work. Money came to stand for goods; the contiguous ‘making’ of money by many private businessmen became, by a simple transfer of thought, still regarded as cooperative work. The older idea has been carried over in the form of the belief that acquisition of money means not only the production of wealth, but, as under earlier conditions, the production of common wealth, *i.e.* welfare.

Lynd includes a rare overt reference to Veblen, citing *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (1904) and noting that his own argument closely follows the economist’s. Lynd follows the trail of the insidious shift of “wealth” itself. In the historical slippage traced by Lynd, what once was “welfare” (or good will toward fellow men) is now “wealth.” The town’s attitude is paralogically founded on the conflation of “wealth” and “welfare.”

⁹⁸ Robert S. Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937), p. 77.

dictatorial, this is acceptable so long as he achieves business success. As Lynd put it, business success is a “taboo lifter.”⁹⁹

The town’s view on class distinctions is telling. The business class rails against “the iniquity of the New Deal.” (One of the chief American complaints about the New Deal is that it would destroy the self-help, up-by-the-bootstraps tradition.) Middletown’s institutions reflect the values of the business class; if there are problems with the institutions (e.g. corruption), then it is the individual’s duty to amend them. Thus, notes Lynd, “the reason Middletown’s business class is unable to see any sense in such a concept as ‘class differences’ is that it recognizes no relevant basis for ‘classes’ in the institutional system. And it does not recognize them because, according to its ways of viewing things, ‘getting ahead is a personal matter.’”¹⁰⁰ Thus if a businessman makes social transgressions, he is excused because he is busily attaining the “wealth” that in turn bolsters the town’s institutions. And if the institutions behave in an unethical way, they cannot be faulted because they are, after all, institutions and not people.

The mid-century notion of “class” was slippery at best. As sociologists worked to define class standing, the average American was understandably more interested in his or her piece of the pie. The classless society ideal, although optimistically promoted from high places, did not mesh with the actual sociological studies of the period.¹⁰¹ As Gideon Sjoberg wrote in 1951, “Implicitly or explicitly, most sociologists have taken for granted an increasing solidification of class lines in the United States during the past half-century.”¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, p. 420. Lynd’s Middletowner is generally male.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 494. Such logic is often voiced through the local newspaper editorials, which Lynd quotes at length.

¹⁰¹ James Bryant Conant’s speech on classlessness had a very specific audience: university officials and students. If the educational institution he addressed was going to succeed in the increasingly diversified America, his listeners needed to embrace the tenet of classlessness. Regarding Frederick Martin Stern, I have already noted that his letters were written in part to persuade his European friend to shun the Communist Party.

¹⁰² Gideon Sjoberg, *American Sociological Review* 16, no. 6 (December 1951): 775-783. Sjoberg actually represents a minority viewpoint, arguing that major social forces (i.e. the splintering of the power elite) have in fact retarded further rigidification. See esp. p. 775.

The Rise of Technician Talk

Like Robert Lynd, academics and social critics repeatedly remarked on the rise of a new middle class of workers. It was a class that grew in direct proportion to the rise of bureaucracies and technological changes related to capitalism. This group, as Lewis Corey noted in 1945, was composed of technical-managerial, professional and clerical employees.¹⁰³ By 1955, nearly sixty per cent of Americans had reached a “middle class” salary, defined as earning between three and ten thousand dollars per year.¹⁰⁴ As industry became more technical and scientific, it required workers whose knowledge base was narrower, but whose skills were more specialized. As production demands increased, so did the need for greater, faster distribution. Thus industry required more managers who were several times removed from actual production. Many of them were salaried, meaning their earnings bore little relation to their output. Among the specific professions were bankers, insurance agents, plant managers, salesmen, realtors, clerical workers, notaries, etc.

C. Wright Mills, a maverick Columbia University sociologist, was disenchanted with the “new professions”:

Most professionals are now salaried employees; much professional work has become divided and standardized and fitted into the new hierarchical organization of educated skill and service; intensive and narrow specialization has replaced self-cultivation and wide knowledge; assistants and sub-professionals perform routine, although often intricate, tasks, while successful professional men become more and more the managerial type.”¹⁰⁵

A keen analyst of the middle classes, Mills indicted the American economic system not so much for being capitalistic, but for its dehumanizing features. Like Karl Marx and

¹⁰³ The professional class is composed of physicians, dentists, lawyers, architects, artists, authors, etc. Technicians tend to be engineers (civil, chemical, mechanical, mining) or laboratory workers. Managerial employees are, expectedly, distributed throughout the technical, professional and clerk classes. See Lewis Corey, in Bendix and Lipset, *Class, Status and Power*, p. 375.

¹⁰⁴ The figure for reaching a middle class standard of living is in 1955 dollars. See David Abrahamson, *Magazine-Made America: The Cultural Transformation of the Postwar Periodical* (Creskill, New Jersey: The Hampton Press, 1996), p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 112.

Max Weber, Mills believed the central problem in modern society is alienation. But for Mills, the roots of man's alienation extend beyond capitalism (Marx faulted the owners of the means of production) to the modern division of labor itself. He condemned the modern bureaucracy that no longer allows pride in work or craftsmanship. Blue and white collar workers alike performed depressingly routine, mechanized tasks.¹⁰⁶ Mills's two major books, *White Collar* (1951) and *The Power Elite* (1956), were deeply critical of the American power structure.

Mills recognized the inadequacy of Marx's model for the American middle class in the twentieth century.¹⁰⁷ "The rise of [white-collar, salaried workers] as a problem for Marxists signaled a shift from the simple property versus no-property dichotomy to differentiations within the no-property groups." Not only was that dichotomy insufficient, but also the new middle classes—who by and large are propertyless—"did not readily take to the socialist ideology."¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, the new middle class is not interested in shattering the system that they rely on to advance. Even the phrase "upwardly mobile" presumes a metaphorical ladder that can be climbed. Mills found the white collar class—composed of essentially the same members as Lewis Corey's "new middle class"—politically inert. They were unlikely to create a political uprising: "Their occupational ideology is politically passive; they are not engaged in any economic struggle, except in the most scattered and fragmentary sense; they lack even a rudimentary awareness of their economic and political interests; they do not feel any sharp crisis specific to their stratum."¹⁰⁹

The language favored by this class was technical: they spoke in numbers and statistics. They preferred adding machines to pen and paper. By definition, a technician

¹⁰⁶ It is only the managerial level of the white collar that possesses any power, creating what is essentially the "status proletarianization of the white collar strata" (*White Collar*, p. 249). Power—a primary sign of status—is no longer located in the family or church, but in the interlocking hierarchies of state, corporation and the military (*Power Elite*, pp. 5-8). In postwar America, power has shifted to the militaristic, corporate and governmental spheres, making the notion of local status practically irrelevant. It is doubtful, he notes, whether the top of the entrepreneurial world is even part of the same class as the bottom.

¹⁰⁷ Mills, *White Collar*, pp. xix-xx. "We must," notes Mills, "accuse both John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx of having done their work a hundred years ago."

¹⁰⁸ *White Collar*, pp. 289 and 290 respectively.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

is someone versed in the technicalities of a subject, that is, the specific points, details, skills or terms that are relevant to that subject.¹¹⁰ It was the era of the tangible result, with success counted in dollars and cents. Technician discourse reflected the era's values; I call the language "technician talk." Significantly, technician talk was a form of populist discourse that was anti-elitist.

If W. Lloyd Warner, C. Wright Mills, or Robert and Helen Lynd detected that class lines were hardening, the proof was in the numbers. The case of Warner demonstrates how proper use of the technicians' language brought popular interest and publicity. The use of charts, graphs, tables and percentages lent credence to their endeavor, showing that sociologists were versed in technical language. *Life's* essay on Warner literally and figuratively illustrates the merging of sociological research and technician talk.

Raising Brows: The Middlebrow-Highbrow Debate in Postwar America

For American Dream-makers and postwar propaganda, the discrepancy between economic bounty and decreased mobility presented a dilemma. More than ever, the American Way of Life had to be visible, tangible—and democratically accessible. The July 1959 Moscow "kitchen debate" between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev emblemized the Cold War climate. Touting American superiority at a Moscow trade exhibition, the American Vice President faced off against the Soviet Premier in the kitchen of a model American home. Not exactly Sputnik, the Whirlpool kitchen included a robotic "Mechanical Maid" to scrub the floor and a dishwasher that moved itself to the dining table for convenient loading.¹¹¹ The American Dream could be packaged for foreign audiences. The rise in homeownership and ubiquitous modern conveniences proved to Americans that they were equal to each other, at least as consumers.

¹¹⁰ Adapted from *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*. See also *White Collar*, pp. 112-113.

¹¹¹ "Don't you have a machine that puts food in the mouth and pushes it down?" scoffed Khrushchev; David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Fawcett-Columbine, 1993), p. 724. Sputnik was launched in October 1957, followed in November by Sputnik II, which carried the space dog Laika. For the Moscow Kitchen Debate, see also Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), Chapter 7, and Halberstam, *The Fifties*, pp. 723-724.

The materialist-democracy theme was also elucidated by David Potter in *People of Plenty*, but in a more positive light. Potter found that a single word characterizes what makes America so powerful: “abundance.” *People of Plenty* was one of the most widely read social science texts of the 1950s. The book remains crucial reading on the period, partly because Potter explicitly states that vast abundance permanently shaped the American landscape and sense of opportunity. For Potter, abundance lay beneath the American fascination with mobility and status. American bounty had formed and strengthened “the American ideal and practice of equality, with all that the ideal has implied for the individual in the way of opportunity to make his own place in society and of emancipation from a system of status.” Potter defined equality as universal opportunity “to move through a scale which traversed many levels.”¹¹² In common parlance, Potter’s “scale” would be called a “ladder.”

Potter deduced that America’s historical mission of spreading *political* democracy was mistaken. Rather, the American mission should be to spread abundance itself, best conveyed through products. In lieu of wielding a revolutionary ideological force, what America wielded “was, in fact, material.” He wrote, “It was not our ideal of democracy but our export of goods and gadgets, of cheap, machine-produced grain and magic-working medicines, which opened new vistas to the human mind and thus made us the terrible instigators of social change and revolution.”¹¹³

Potter cited a 1948 essay by Isabel Cary Lundberg as reinforcement. Lundberg had observed that during the war what every foreigner wanted from American G.I.s was, “the wrist watch, fountain pen, cigarettes, flashlight, chocolate bars, chewing gum...the jeep, the truck, and white bread. Very few Americans, picking and choosing among the

¹¹² Potter, p. 91

¹¹³ Potter, p. 135. The quotation “terrible instigators of social change and revolution” is from André Siegfried in 1932. Siegfried made the remarks on the American export of “mechanisms” like automobiles, radios and telephones to a French group of businessmen. Potter’s citations suggest that he found the Siegfried address discussed in a 1948 *Harper’s* essay by Isabel Cary Lundberg, “World Revolution, American Plan,” *Harper’s* 197 (December 1948): 38-46.

piles of white bread in a super-market, have ever appreciated the social standing of white bread elsewhere in the world.”¹¹⁴

White bread, then, embodied status. The personification of consumer items is fundamental to theories of the commodity.¹¹⁵ Such personification also played a major role in midcentury American social mobility. Products not only symbolized human values, they became synonymous with those values.

Consider an example from Robert Lynd’s second Middletown book. Lynd wrote a series of “postulates” on the social effects of increased urban populations. One postulate stated:

[P]ersonal means of placing one in the [social] group, involving considerations of the kind of person one is, yield to more quickly determinable, shorthand symbols, notably what one owns. This illustrates Veblen’s point of the paramount importance of ‘conspicuous consumption’ as an identifying device in a community grown too big for more subtle means of appraisal.¹¹⁶

The “shorthand symbol” of ownership supplanted “more subtle means of appraisal.” Recall that it was Lynd who discerned that “wealth” took on the attributes of “welfare” in the eyes of Middletown’s business class. The mechanism at work in both cases is similar. The more tangible, quantitative—indeed more “conspicuous”—means of determining status wins out. Whether it was through Isabel Cary Lundberg’s wry observation on the social standing of white bread or the more sober reference to conspicuous consumption, material goods were increasingly taking on lives of their own.

¹¹⁴ Potter is quoting Isabel Lundberg in this sentence. *People of Plenty*, p. 136.

¹¹⁵ An excellent essay on the commodity is by Paul Wood, “Commodity,” in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 257-280.

¹¹⁶ Emphasis added. *Middletown in Transition*, pp. 467-468. Lynd offers these postulates “very tentatively, since they lie for the most part in the no man’s land beyond the front edge of what social science as yet knows.” His “tentativeness” is an indication of what I note above as the newness of the field of sociology itself (see Lynd, p. 468). Lynd’s observations by the later Middletown study made him increasingly convinced of Veblen’s accuracy.

Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow:

Russell Lynes took a satirical approach to exploring the vicissitudes of material goods. He appreciated the social standing of white bread; despite white bread's standing abroad, at home it was middlebrow fare. Lynes, an author and editor at *Harper's Magazine*, explored the mercurial topics of taste, preferences and snobbery in American social life.¹¹⁷ His books ranged from tongue-in-cheek "how-to" manuals (*Snobs*, 1950; *Guests*, 1951) to more serious expositions on changing American taste and who influences it (*The Tastemakers*, 1954).

Early in 1949 Lynes published an ambitious essay on the new hierarchy in American class relations, "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow," in *Harper's*. The new categories, Lynes argued, are gradually replacing the traditional, economic-based system of upper, middle and lower classes. The new distinctions forego money or breeding; instead, the key determinant is "high thinking."

Our heroes now are not the Carnegies or the Morgans but the intellectuals—the atomic scientists, the cultural historians, the writers, the commentators—the thinkers of global thoughts who, we assume for lack of another faith, know better than anyone else how we should cope with what we call our national destiny. What we want are oracles, and the best substitute we can find are the intellectuals.¹¹⁸

America was part of a radically different world since the War's end. (The "atomic scientist" is listed first.) With sociologists and analysts doubting whether upward mobility was truly feasible, a vital component of the American Dream was in jeopardy. Russell Lynes's "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" essay can be seen as way of restoring hope: if class lines were no longer traversable, then why not change the terms of the argument?

¹¹⁷ Lynes' small "guidebook" on *Snobs*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), with drawings by Robert Osborn, was the outgrowth of a *Harper's* magazine essay. In 1951, he published *Guests, or How to Survive Hospitality*, with his own "casual drawings" (New York: Harper & Brothers).

¹¹⁸ Russell Lynes, "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow," *Harper's Magazine* (February 1949): 19. Lynes, whose father was the rector of a New England church, may intend the religious-mystical connotation of the word "oracle."

The intellectuals—the new oracles—are the highbrows. They stand at the apex of the new order. Beneath them are the middlebrows, who constitute the largest group; at bottom are the lowbrows.¹¹⁹ The highbrows share one abiding trait: the association of culture with every aspect of daily life, “from the design of his razor to the shape of the bottle that holds his sleeping pills.” The highbrow occasionally befriends the lowbrow because he is interested in certain art forms spawned from lowbrow culture, such as jazz. Besides, lowbrows constitute no threat to either highbrows or middlebrows. The lowbrow, however, is little more than amused by the highbrow’s attention and “doesn’t give a hang about art *qua* art.” Highbrows have historically inhabited major cities (because of their cultural amenities), but recently have been gravitating to the universities.

But no matter where they may make their homes, all highbrows live in a world which they believe is inhabited almost entirely by Philistines—those who through viciousness or smugness or the worship of materialism gnaw away at the foundations of culture. And the highbrow sees as his real enemy the middlebrow....¹²⁰

Like all the brows, highbrows may exist in any income bracket. (“Some highbrows eat caviar with their Proust; some eat hamburger when then can afford it.”) However, most highbrows still belong to “the ill-paid professions.”¹²¹ To categorize them, Lynes divided highbrows into “militant” and “passive” types. The first “carries the torch of culture,” the second “reads by its light.”

¹¹⁹ “Highbrow” entered the English language circa 1900 and is of unknown origin. “Highbrow” is a colloquial word, appearing in slang dictionaries and newer dictionaries of English, such as *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (second edition), which defines a highbrow as “a person having or affecting highly cultivated, intellectual tastes....often a term of contempt or derision.” (It is not included in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.) The American Van Wyck Brooks wrote a well-known essay on the historical cleavage of high- and lowbrow (see *America’s Coming of Age*, New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1915). “Highbrow” was used extensively by the Bloomsbury group—Virginia Woolf specifically discussed highbrows and lowbrows. By the time of *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942), Woolf had been using the term for decades. “Middlebrow” may not have appeared in print before the 1920s.

¹²⁰ Lynes, “Highbrow,” *Harper’s*, p. 21. I cite Lynes, “Highbrow,” *Harper’s* to distinguish the longer article from the *Life* version, which was digested and produced by a *Life* editor (possibly with Lynes’s input).

¹²¹ As Lynes makes clear, highbrows tend to belong to the middle class, not the upper classes.

Enter Clement Greenberg

If the description of the highbrow resembles Clement Greenberg, it is because Lynes modeled his “militant highbrow” on the New York critic. Lynes quoted directly from Greenberg when he wrote that middlebrow enemies were busy “devaluing the precious, infecting the healthy, corrupting the honest, and stultifying the wise.” With the postwar middle class boom, “the volume and weight of middlebrow culture” had multiplied at least tenfold. Although lowbrow forms like Tin Pan Alley or pulp novels were easily recognized as such, middlebrow culture thrives on abolishing such distinctions and “insinuates itself everywhere....Insidiousness is of its essence and in recent years its avenues of penetration have become infinitely more difficult to detect and block.”¹²² All of those quotations were from Greenberg on “The State of American Writing, 1948: A Symposium” in *Partisan Review*, via Russell Lynes’s in *Harper’s*. (I will revisit to this quotation and in Chapter Four.)

Greenberg’s polemical style in 1939 and the 1940s was tailor-made for Lynes’s “militant” highbrow role. Moreover, Lynes’s use of the word “militant” revealed a significant undertone to his essay, and indeed to American class distinctions in general. If the expanding middle class was truly making America more equal, one might have expected a parallel abeyance of interclass antagonism. This would have suited the postwar model of the American Dream, which conjured images of all stripes of Americans cheerily rubbing elbows as they shopped for new cleaning products and television sets. But Lynes’s essay retained the language of revolutionary struggle. The militant highbrows were the torchbearers: “What we are headed for is a sort of social structure in which the highbrows are the elite, the middlebrows are the bourgeoisie, and the lowbrows are the hoi polloi.”¹²³ Even if the substitution of “brows” for traditional

¹²² Lynes quotes Greenberg from “The State of American Writing, 1948: A Symposium,” *Partisan Review* (August 1948).

¹²³ “For the time being,” writes Lynes, “this is perhaps largely an urban phenomenon, and the true middlebrow may readily be mistaken in the small community for a genuine highbrow....” Lynes, “Highbrow,” *Harper’s*, p. 19. “Hoi polloi” is Greek, literally meaning “the people.” Members of a higher class looking down on the underlings often use the phrase contemptuously.

socioeconomic categories is playful, Lynes shows his teeth.¹²⁴ After summarizing Greenberg's harsh assessment of middlebrow culture, he wrote, "By no means all highbrows are so intolerant or so desperate as this, or so ambitious for authority." (Such a characterization also happens to apply Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin.) As Lynes tellingly noted in the introductory section to the essay, "[I]f we ever have intellectual totalitarianism, it may well be the lowbrows and the highbrows who will run things, and the middlebrows who will be exiled in boxcars to a collecting point probably in the vicinity of Independence, Missouri." His comment was funny; it was also morbidly serious.

One need only glance at the highbrow magazines Lynes borrowed from to see that the politically charged language speckling "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" was only partly in jest. For the writers and the editors of the "little magazines" in the 1940s, politics and culture were interdependent. For example, Lynes had been reading an essay by William Phillips (co-founder and editor of *Partisan Review*) that was published in the magazine *Horizon*. In the Harper's essay, Lynes also quoted Phillips from the 1947 *Horizon* essay: "Culturally what we have is a democratic free-for-all in which every individual, being as good as every other one, has the right to question any form of intellectual authority." What was needed was an "élite," or "a fluid body of intellectuals...whose accepted role in society is to perpetuate traditional ideas and values and to create new ones."¹²⁵ At the end of the *Horizon* article, in a passage not included by Lynes, Phillips observed that America historically has been nourished by Europe's

¹²⁴ It is conceivable that Russell Lynes, a significant but overlooked character in postwar identity fashioning, was irritated by much more than Greenberg's alleged snobbery. Greenberg was affiliated with a chauvinistic, macho New York intellectually elite society. Lynes was the brother of fashion and portrait photographer George Platt Lynes, whose work appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*, at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Pierre Matisse Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art. George Platt Lynes belonged to a homosexual circle that included Jared French, Paul Cadmus, and Lincoln Kirstein. Russell Lynes gave regular financial support to his brother; see David Leddick, *Intimate Companions: A Triography of George Platt Lynes, Paul Cadmus, Lincoln Kirstein and Their Circle* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 2000). The unfavorable review of that book by Jennifer A. Greenhill is significant; "Reviews," *Archives of American Art Journal* 39 (1999), pp. 42-45.

¹²⁵ Lynes, "Highbrow," *Harper's*, p. 21. Phillips uses the French form, *élite*, printed in italics and with an accent. When Lynes paraphrases Phillips, he spells the word "elite." Perhaps the "elite" spelling was an editorial decision; it may have been an intentional Americanizing and "middling" of the word. Whatever the case, Lynes misquotes Phillips "élite."

literary movements. But now “an impoverished and politically tottering Europe is not only dependent on the economic resources of the United States but is also, apparently, more receptive than ever before to its cultural advances.”¹²⁶ Phillips’s closing words in the original *Horizon* essay are worth quoting at length, as they illustrate both his commitment to and his assessment of the American role:

The historical irony in this dual role of the United States [as economic and cultural leader] is merely an extension of the contradiction at the heart of our civilization. For, on the one hand, our economic power and the democratic myths behind our institutions are all that stand in the path of a Stalinist enslavement of Europe. On the other hand, the United States might well become the greatest exporter of kitsch the world has ever seen. Not being art fetishists, most of us are willing to accept the cultural risks involved in preserving European political freedom. If, however, America is to be looked to, as do some of our European friends, as a source of literary salvation, then all I can say is—God Save the King.¹²⁷

Phillips’s grave analysis was in no way unusual among liberal intellectuals.¹²⁸ But such conviction would have seemed perplexing, indeed risible, to the middlebrow reader addressed by Lynes.

¹²⁶ William Phillips, “Portrait of the Artist as an American,” *Horizon* (October 1947): 19.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Phillips’s gravity is matched by Greenberg’s own commitment in 1939: “It is a platitude that art becomes caviar to the general when the reality it imitates no longer corresponds even roughly to the reality recognized by the general. Even then, however, the resentment the common man may feel is silenced by the awe in which he stands of the patrons of this art. Only when he becomes dissatisfied with the social order they administer does he begin to criticize their culture. Then the plebian finds courage for the first time to voice his opinions openly. Every man, from the Tammany alderman to the Austrian house-painter, finds that he is entitled to his opinion. Most often this resentment toward culture is to be found where the dissatisfaction with society is a reactionary dissatisfaction which expresses itself in revivalism and puritanism, and latest of all, in fascism. Here revolvers and torches begin to be mentioned in the same breath as culture. In the name of godliness of the blood’s health, in the name of simple ways and solid virtues, the statue-smashing commences.” Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* (Fall 1939): 46.

Of the vast literature on the American Left since the 1930s, see Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock’s “*Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*” in *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: University Press and New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996). For general histories, see Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

Lynes's own rancor toward the highbrow magazines was surely stronger than the joking tone of "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" implies. The essay to which Lynes referred, "The Artist as an American" by William Phillips, appeared in *Horizon's* double-issue on the state of American writing. In the introduction to that issue, *Horizon's* English editor Cyril Connolly struck closer to Lynes's own home. It is not apparent whether Lynes read Connolly's *Horizon* introduction (he did not mention it in the Highbrow essay), but it is quite plausible that he did.¹²⁹ Connolly's introduction discussed the careers of many writers and editors, observing the American phenomenon in which "some of the most interesting and sensitive minds" work for large-circulation magazines like *Life*, *Time*, and the *New Yorker*. But the managers of these middlebrow journals suffer from "the particular nemesis [of] ordeal by shiny paper," delivering *almost* their best work. The magazines "only just miss being completely honourable and serious journals, in fact 'highbrow.'"¹³⁰ Connolly's remarks were characteristic of the highbrow critique of middlebrow journalism.

Lynes, editor of the middlebrow *Harper's*, worked for just such a middlebrow "manager." He knew first-hand the world of middlebrow publishing.¹³¹ A self-described upper middlebrow, Lynes may well have delivered—in Connolly's words—"almost the best work of which [he] is capable."¹³² Lynes expounded at length about the "conscientious [upper middlebrow] publisher's" job. Whether or not Lynes was responding directly to Connolly, the following passage from Lynes sounds revealingly defensive:

¹²⁹ Lynes did read at least two other essays in the same issue: William Phillips, "Portrait of the Artist as an American," *Horizon* (October 1947): 12-19 and Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Paintings and Sculpture," *Horizon* (October 1947): 20-29.

¹³⁰ Cyril Connolly, "Introduction," *Horizon* (October 1947): 7. Connolly regarded America from an English perspective. It is doubtful that Clement Greenberg ever would have claimed that *Life*, *Time* and the *New Yorker* approximated highbrow journals.

¹³¹ Lynes was technically an editor and not a publisher, but his professional duties are similar to Connolly's "managers." Lynes's discussion of the "conscientious publisher" indicates his close acquaintance with the publishing world.

¹³² Lynes describes himself as "upper middlebrow" in "Highbrow," *Life*, p. 99; Connolly, "Introduction," *Horizon*, p. 7.

The conscientious publisher...believes in the importance of literature and the dignity of publishing as a profession. He spends a large part of his time on books that will not yield him a decent return on his investment. He searches out writers of promise; he pores over the 'little' magazines (or pays other people to); he leafs through hundreds of pages of manuscripts. He advises writers, encourages them, coaxes them to do their best work; he even advances them money. But he is not able to be a publisher at all (unless he is willing to put his personal fortune at the disposal of financially naive muses) if he does not publish to make money. In order to publish slender volumes of poetry he must also publish fat volumes of historical romance, and in order to encourage the first novel of a promising young writer he must sell tens of thousands of copies of a book by an old hand who grinds out one best seller a year. He must take the measure of popular taste and cater to it at the same time that he tries to create a taste for new talent.¹³³

Lynes characterized the upper-middlebrow publisher as exceedingly diligent, a true believer in literature and fiscally savvy. This last point is crucial, for it distinguishes the upper middlebrow from the highbrow in pecuniary terms. It restores economics to the brow distinctions. The upper-middlebrow publisher knew that in order to support "writers of promise," he must also publish middlebrow best sellers. The subtext is that the upper-middlebrow publisher is ultimately wiser than the highbrow because he can make a buck and still get highbrow work published. Lynes described the "conscientious publishers" as men and women who "devote themselves professionally to the dissemination of ideas and cultural artifacts and, *not in the least incidentally, make a living along the way.*" By contrast, "financially naive muses" govern the highbrow.¹³⁴

It is edifying to revisit Lynes's assessment of the new social order in light of the middlebrows' fiscal intelligence. Prestige may be based on "high thinking," not on "money or breeding," yet the highbrow is oblivious to financial matters. This befits a highbrow, who "is educated beyond his intelligence" (Lynes citing Brander Matthews)

¹³³ Lynes, "Highbrow," *Harper's*, pp. 25-26

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29, emphasis added.

and “who looks at a sausage and thinks of Picasso” (Lynes citing A. P. Herbert).¹³⁵ The highbrow may have commanded prestige, but he was out of touch with fiscal reality. In conclusion Lynes summed up, “the rungs of the ladder may be different, it may even be a different ladder, but it’s onward and upward just the same.” In short, “the highbrows haven’t a chance.”¹³⁶

Was Lynes’s skewering of the highbrow evidence of true rancor or lighthearted ribbing? Most likely it was somewhere in between. The highbrows’ seriousness made them an easy target for satire. In fact, “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow” caught the attention of *Partisan Review*, a reminder of how small the publishing world was in the 1940s. William Barrett, *Partisan Review*’s associate editor, penned a response to *Harper’s* and Lynes. The published response is lengthy (six paragraphs) for a letter to the editor. Barrett opened with calculated buoyancy, exclaiming that the editors at *Partisan Review* “enjoyed [Lynes’s] article like everybody else.”¹³⁷ The problem, Barrett explained, is that Lynes ascribes to the highbrows one overriding motivation: they are driven by “snobbery, display of superiority, and conspicuous consumption of learning.”¹³⁸

¹³⁵ These descriptions fit with the stereotypical image of a highbrow as the distracted, nearsighted professor who bumps into a tree and mutters “Excuse me, madam.” Lynes describes a highbrow as “a man who has found something more interesting than women” (Lynes quoting Edgar Wallace); *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28

¹³⁷ As I state in the text, William Barrett’s lighthearted response to *Harper’s* editors is studied. He wonders if the parlor game of “are you high, low, or middlebrow?” will sweep the country in the next few years, as Mah Jong did in the 1920s. Barrett claims the *Partisan Review* editors enjoyed the essay, although “according to Mr. Lynes what we should have done was merely turn up our supercilious brows at it. Could it be that the highbrow is not so humorless and inhuman, after all?” By the end of the essay, Barrett avows that the highbrows at *Partisan Review* “have something to say, and there seems to be nowhere else to say it. Otherwise, we might be glad to forget all about the battle of the brows and take a nice long low, or middlebrow, vacation.” William Barrett, “Letter to the Editor,” *Harper’s* 198 (April 1949): 13-14.

¹³⁸ The context of the *Harper’s* page (p. 13) with William Barrett’s letter to the editor is illuminating, given that both Lynes and Barrett earn a living as writers at upper-middlebrow or highbrow venues. Next to Barrett’s letter is a full-column advertisement for a correspondence course offered by the Newspaper Institute of America. After successfully passing an aptitude test, would-be writers gain instruction so that “writing soon becomes easy, absorbing. Profitable, too, as you gain the ‘professional’ touch that gets your material accepted by editors.” As the text notes, “newspaper copy desk editors waste no time on theories or ancient classics” (emphases added). The advertisement features a photograph of an attractive young woman described as a “beginner” who earned \$1819.00.

The appearance of the advertisement flush against Barrett’s response about highbrows who “have rugged time” of earning a living is coincidental but not unlikely. The advertiser knew (and paid for ad

Of course Mr. Lynes allows for rich highbrows; but most highbrows who earn their living (and have a rugged time of it) can't afford to run their life

on the basis of a luxury like snobbery. The highbrows we know got that way, and continue, because they happen to be really interested in certain things that the majority of people don't want to be bothered with....We could be wrong, but we believe we and our contributors have something to say, and there seems to be nowhere else to say it.¹³⁹

Lynes's essay, although it may have masqueraded as farce, touched on the sober issue of class relations in America. *Partisan Review's* letter is an illuminating example of highbrows from a "little" magazine responding directly to those they perceived as culturally dangerous middlebrows at a larger circulation magazine.

The Russell Lynes/*Partisan Review* contretemps might have ended there, but it did not. A few months after "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" appeared in *Harper's*, *Life* magazine published an identically titled essay. Just as *Life* sought out W. Lloyd Warner as the expert on social class, in 1948 they consulted Russell Lynes as the expert on the new taste-based hierarchy. *Life's* essay is tongue-in-cheek with a brief text. The opening page features three men who each represent a different "brow." The highbrow gazes at a Picasso (*left*), the lowbrow at a calendar girl (*center*), and the middlebrow at Grant Wood's *American Gothic* (*right*). The central image of the essay was the two-page color cartoon charting brow types and their various preferences (Figures 5 and 6).

space) that the *Harper's* audience included many would-be writers who have the "'germ' of writing in them [but] simply can't get started." These readers, the advertisers reckoned, were interested in making money from their writing. The Newspaper Institute of America would not have purchased advertising in *Partisan Review*.

¹³⁹ William Barrett, "Letter to the Editor," *Harper's* 198 (April 1949): 14.

Lynes's ideas as represented in *Life* combined a number of social trends that I have outlined in this chapter. "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" merged sociology, economics, technician talk, how-to fervor—while it retained democratic ideals of mobility. As with *Life*'s report on Warner, the popularized version of Lynes's essay was easy to read—and simplified with a chart. The significance of *Life*'s essay is two-fold: it reached millions of households, a stark contrast to the few hundred thousand who read *Harper's*; and those households were themselves occupied by a predominantly middlebrow group.

The beginning of this chapter dealt with monetary value and class standing. As postwar economic abundance solidified, the terms shifted subtly, and cultural value began to dominate. Economic terms themselves would migrate into cultural evaluations. The popular and critical response to Pollock incorporates many socioeconomic terms that are used to gauge the artist's worth. It would be *Life* magazine that would give Jackson Pollock the most publicity in his lifetime.

Chapter Two:
Pollock's Mess:
The Response

"What is measurable is better."
John Kenneth Galbraith



Figure 7. Jackson Pollock, *Cathedral*, 1947, enamel and aluminum paint on canvas, 71 ½ x 35".
2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Cathedral (1947) (Figure 7) was painted shortly after Pollock developed his “drip-style” method. It is among the most delicate and subtle of all Pollock’s paintings. From a distance, Cathedral appears predominantly gray with small spots of color. But it changes as one gets nearer to it. The painting is undergirded by vast areas of silvery aluminum paint that hug the cloth below, revealing a tight topography of woven canvas. There are smaller regions of bare and unprimed canvas, crisscrossing cotton showing the movement of the loom that made it. On top of this, layer after layer of thin skeins of cream, silver, orange, red, ochre yellow, and green intertwine over and under a black and white skeleton. The oranges and reds seem to rise off its surface. Pollock used a quick motion to disperse the orange in straight, staccato lines. Sometimes he daubed on paint with a brush, as with the bright blue touches and the quarter-sized dollop of black at below the center. With the blacks—the artist used both flat and shiny black enamels—he took a slower, more looping approach. He had learned which paints retained their structure and sheen when crossed by others, and which bled into to the surrounding wetter paint. Cathedral contains infinite permutations of viscosity, color and breadth of line.

The painting is vertically oriented, extending a bit above eye level and two shoulder widths across. It has a very human scale. The architectural title only enhances this sense: Cathedral is a framework for a human presence.¹⁴⁰

Today *Cathedral* is recognized as a major achievement in postwar art. Praised for its formal unity and sublimity, it is a canonical work of art.¹⁴¹ But the painting’s appeal and significance were not immediately apprehended by general viewers. The 1948 *Life* “Round Table on Modern Art” has preserved a range of contemporary responses. *Life*’s Round Table represents a milestone for disseminating an educated view of modern art to the public (Figure 8).

The Round Table sparked substantial responses to *Cathedral* (1947), which was presented for discussion because of Clement Greenberg’s presence on the panel.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ The italicized description of *Cathedral* is mine; it is meant as a current approach to the painting in my own voice, as a counterweight to the otherwise strictly contextual approach I take in the chapter bodies. I also describe *Number 23, 1949* at the beginning of Chapter Four.

¹⁴¹ *Cathedral* is in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art. See Robert Rosenblum “The Abstract Sublime,” *Art News* 59 (February 1961): 56; and Kirk Varnedoe, “Comet: Jackson Pollock’s Life and Works,” in Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1998), pp. 52-56.

¹⁴² Russell W. Davenport and Winthrop Sargeant, “A LIFE Round Table on Modern Art,” *Life* 25 (October 11, 1948): 58-70, 75-79. Pollock’s *Cathedral* had been recently extolled by Greenberg in a review of Pollock’s first Betty Parsons exhibition.

Editor Russell Davenport moderated the “fifteen distinguished critics and connoisseurs” in an attempt to determine how a “civilization like ours continue[s] to flourish without the humanizing influence of a living art that is understood and enjoyed by a large public?”¹⁴³ The Round Table shows *Life* at its American best, using the same journalistic tools as it



Figure 8. Photograph from “A *LIFE* Round Table on Modern Art,” October 11, 1948, page 58. Copyright Time-Life Inc.

¹⁴³ See my discussion of *Life*'s first Round Table in Chapter 3; “The Pursuit of Happiness,” by R.W. Davenport, *Life* (July 12, 1948): 65. *Life*'s second, the intercontinental Round Table on Modern Art, reminds us how small the taste-making world was in 1948. The panel included Greenberg, James Johnson Sweeney, James Thrall Soby, Francis Henry Taylor, Meyer Schapiro, and Alfred Frankfurter. Sam Lewisohn was an observer; he owned Georges Rouault's *Three Judges*, discussed by the table. The other panelists present were Davenport and James W. Fosburgh (both of *Life*), Aldous Huxley, Sir Leigh Ashton, Raymond Mortimer, George Duthuit, R. Kirk Askew Jr., Theodore Greene, Charles Sawyer, H.W. Janson, and A. Hyatt Mayor.

had in the W. Lloyd Warner and the Russell Lynes essays. The Round Table goes further, with editorial commentary and members offering both pros and cons to an escalating debate. Having gathered an impressive array of participants, the magazine makes a sincere attempt to communicate with its readership and take the material seriously, by and large avoiding deprecatory subtext.¹⁴⁴

In his introduction, Davenport explains to readers that the layman runs into two serious impediments with modern art: 1.) it is “*difficult to understand*” and 2.) “it does not concern itself with the ‘beautiful’ but with the ‘*ugly*’ or the *strange*” (original emphases).¹⁴⁵ These are absolutely typical concerns about “modern art” at mid-century; what is refreshing today is Davenport’s diplomacy in claiming the problems as “impediments” for laymen.

The published record of the Round Table is conspicuously free of Greenberg’s direct comments on *Cathedral*. The *Life* reader is told *Cathedral* “was championed by Mr. Greenberg who thought it a first-class example of Pollock’s work, and one of the best paintings recently produced in this country.”¹⁴⁶ As will become clear later in this chapter,

¹⁴⁴ Sometimes LIFE is spelled with all capitals, as on the magazine’s own cover; for simplicity, I will write it as *Life* except in some citations. *Life* weekly was the creation of Henry Luce in 1936, intended to take advantage of new modes of photojournalism. (Luce acquired the *Life* title by purchasing the old *Life* humor magazine.) From its inception to its eventual demise, the magazine was plagued by high costs. Nevertheless, Luce’s interests were not strictly pecuniary. The magazine was originally required to limit to circulation 1 million copies, the result of slow production and a finite supply of coated paper. “It was during its coverage of World War II that *Life* matured into the prestigious reflector of the cataclysmic events that transformed the United States and the world. The photographers that the magazine added to its staff at this time—in addition to the original team of [Margaret] Bourke-White, [Alfred] Eisenstadt, Thomas McAvoy, and Peter Stackpole—formed the core of photo journalistic talent that commanded great respect from *Life*’s competitors, critics, and readers.” See Diana A. Chlebek, “LIFE,” in Alan Nourie and Barbara Nourie, eds., *American Mass-Market Magazines* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 209.

Life, reflecting Luce’s personal values, firmly supported the war. Circulation increased from 2.8 million in 1940 to 5.2 million by the late 1940s. In 1948, *Life*’s total circulation was 5,435,735. See James Playsted Wood, *Magazines in the United States* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1949), p.193.

¹⁴⁵ Two panelists insist Joan Miró’s *Person Throwing a Stone at a Bird* seems made by “a one-year old” and painted “in a manner a child would be spanked for.”

¹⁴⁶ “Round Table on Modern Art,” p. 62. In his *Nation* review, Greenberg praised *Cathedral* for combining “style, harmony, and the inevitability of its logic.” He found it reminiscent of Pablo Picasso’s and Georges Braque’s masterpieces of 1912-1915, observing “there is something of the same encasement in a style that, so to speak, feels for the painter and relieves him of the anguish and awkwardness of invention, leaving his gift free to function almost automatically.” *The Nation* (January 24, 1948); reprinted in John O’Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 2, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 202. Hereafter I will refer to O’Brian’s volumes as “O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg: The*

Greenberg's pronouncements were seldom accompanied with reasoned explanations—the kind that *Life* preferred to publish for its readers. Of the published responses, Francis Henry Taylor and George Duthuit (labeled respectively as modern art “moderate” and “enthusiast”) find *Cathedral* “lovely.” Sir Leigh Ashton, a modern art “moderate,” says *Cathedral* would make “a most enchanting printed silk...but I do not think it has structural design.” Theodore Greene was left cold, finding *Cathedral* a “pleasant design for a necktie.” Aldous Huxley thought it “like a panel for a wallpaper”; A. Hyatt Mayor “suspect[s] any picture I think I could have made myself.”¹⁴⁷

Davenport summarized the discussion on the “Young American Extremists,” with whom Pollock is categorized. The discussion:

was notable for its lack of reliable standards of evaluation...few [panelists] were able to state with any clarity the reasons for their likes and dislikes, or to reach agreement on the standards by which they draw their conclusions. Had a typical layman been present, he would have been tempted to conclude that this was a rather good illustration of the vagueness and subjectivity of most contemporary art criticism.¹⁴⁸

The wildly disparate and subjective opinions made it easy for the magazine to conclude, “The critics, at any rate, leave us in confusion.”¹⁴⁹

As with *Life*'s previous Round Table on “The Pursuit of Happiness,” moral obligations come to the fore. Panelist Arnold Toynbee declares on the first page that “modern art is symptomatic of a decay of moral values of our age.”¹⁵⁰ Followers of *Life*'s Round Table symposia could, consciously or not, complete the rhetorical circuit themselves: if America is morally obligated to uphold freedom and the “American way,”

Collected Essays. In February 1949, Greenberg would call *Cathedral* “brilliant”; Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, and Josef Albers,” *The Nation* (February 19, 1949), reprinted in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays II*, p. 285.

¹⁴⁷ Greenberg had written “I already hear wallpaper patterns” in a January 1948 review of Pollock’s new paintings: Aldous Huxley fulfilled the prediction in 1949. By the time Harold Rosenberg made his now notorious reference to “apocalyptic wallpaper” in “American Action Painters” in December 1952 (*Art News*), the metaphor was familiar.

¹⁴⁸ “A Life Round Table on Modern Art,” p. 62.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

and if modern art reveals a “decay of moral values,” then modern art *must* be anti-American.

Readers’ responses overwhelmed *Life*’s offices, confirming the public’s disapproval.¹⁵¹ Although no published letter singled out Jackson Pollock, *Cathedral* was the most-discussed American painting at the Round Table. The first letter *Life* published was sent by a doctor, using medical terminology—the scientific category of what I characterized as “technician’s talk” in the previous chapter. Dr. Chester Waterman finds the “modernistic representations illustrated in *Life* in the same category” as “one of the most prevalent and malignant types of mental illness with which we, as psychiatrists, have been trying to cope for years...an insidious disorder of the mind in which the main feature is a departure from the world of reality to one of fantasy.” It is quite normal, continues Dr. Waterman, to engage in make-believe as a child, “but to carry such fantasy into adult life is most assuredly not conducive to good mental health.”¹⁵² Of the remaining twenty-one letters (or excerpts thereof) published, only six could be characterized as positive or neutral. The other fifteen range from dismissive to furious.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ *Life*’s editors said the “Modern Art” Round Table provoked an even greater response than the “Pursuit of Happiness” Round Table. For that reason, they devoted the entire Letters column of November 1, 1948 to “Modern Art” replies.

¹⁵² Chester Waterman, M.D., “Letter to the Editor,” *Life* (November 1, 1948): 13.

¹⁵³ Several readers focused on the artists’ shortcomings. E. R. Edmiston of Pennsylvania said that artists should not complain but instead “take a hand in shaping [their environment] into something better.” Harry J. Hahn wrote that only the “tedious process of fundamental academic training” gives a man the right to self-expression: “Art in its essential purpose is for the appreciation and the enlightenment of everybody and not a commercialized channel for the self-expression of doodlers.” Another writer agreed about contemporary artists’ lack of training, but disagreed with *Life*’s assessment of the layman’s confusion: “the main fault with modern art is not that the layman does not understand it. Indeed he understands it too quickly, and it is this very circumstance that confuses him. He looks—or feels—for something more and cannot find it.” Mary T. Army found a harrowing parallel between Picasso’s *Girl Before Mirror* and another picture in *Life*: a photograph of “a boy walking past stacks of corpses near a concentration camp.” The boy was so used to “corruption” that he did not even notice the corpses: “Many of us accept the right of the artist to purge his emotions, but reserve our right to turn the other way when passing the pathological excrement,” she wrote.

One of the most acerbic letters condemned the Round Table participants’ own use of language. The letter was written by well-known painter and teacher Thomas Hart Benton, with whom Jackson Pollock had studied in the late 1930s. *Life*’s Round Table, wrote Mr. Benton, bolsters Russia’s view that “contemporary Western art is illusory, decadent and given to an empty formalism utterly incapable of coming to grips with solid cultural meanings.” That is due in no small part, he continues, to the “peculiar language habits of the esthetes who interpret art and who make our intelligent people so sick of it....” Mr.

The reader responses to *Life*'s Round Table offer a sampling of how the average American responded to "modern art." The average reaction to Jackson Pollock's paintings during his lifetime was at least as chilly. In virtually every way, his art runs counter to the prevailing ideology of a middle class that was increasingly confident in its interpretive skills. If social standing could be charted and graphed numerically, then why not taste also? Popular magazine and newspaper articles helped Americans transfer their technical know-how into the vast arena of taste. The title of one 1946 essay in *House & Garden* put the question bluntly: "How good is your taste?"¹⁵⁴ Readers were prepared to wonder if their own taste was good enough. At the same time, advertisements in *Life* magazine gave them the chance to hone their skills at recognizing a high quality (figurative) painting (Figure 9).

The *Life* magazine version of Russell Lynes's "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" article offered a concrete example of how to chart and even change one's preferences. But how was it possible to measure the standing of Jackson Pollock's paintings when they were so hard to categorize? If good art should evidence skill and dedication—or, in the words of a *Life* reader, "fundamental academic training"—then Pollock's looked sloppy and ugly. It was easily described as childish "doodles" or (later) "splatters," but certain critics penned elaborate and seemingly incomprehensible prose to praise it.

Benton found only one sentence in the entire Round Table report which withstands close scrutiny: "Mr. Taylor's 'fifty thousand people is a lot of people.'"

¹⁵⁴ Sanford Gerard, "How Good is Your Taste?" *House & Garden* 90 (October 1946): 130-131, 184-185. Taste had become shorthand for *good* taste (as it is often used today), just as having "no taste" means to have *bad* taste. The same is true for other terms that stand as qualitative yardsticks. Advertising seems to play a role in turning neutral terms like "quality" into positive markers: stores and magazines sell "quality" products without distinguishing whether they are of good or poor quality.

How Good Is Your Taste?

Some nurse! Some nurse! But which picture would you select over the others on painting to illustrate the army nurse? Your good taste will help you decide. The "A" is a look to repeat instead of "B" the lightest. "C" is a look to repeat instead of "D" the lightest. "D" is a look to repeat instead of "B" the lightest. "A" is a look to repeat instead of "B" the lightest. "C" is a look to repeat instead of "D" the lightest. "D" is a look to repeat instead of "B" the lightest.

You Know You're Right!

You may not agree with the art critic but when it comes to chewing gum, your own good taste will agree with the sophisticated choice—Teaberry—so deliciously different! That mountain-grown teaberry flavor is so juicy-sweet, so fractionally stimulating! And you'll prefer the smoother, finer quality of the gum itself. Do try it!

CLARK'S TEABERRY GUM
Carry It with You Always

Packed with Good Taste!

Clark's Teaberry Gum Company of Pittsburgh, Pa., © 1947 C.B.C.G. Co.

Figure 9. Advertisement for Clark's Teaberry gum, *Life* magazine, 1949.

Much of Pollock's "wrongness" came from the ways in which his art appeared to contradict middle class values. His art proved to be incendiary in the battle between the middlebrows and the highbrows. The elite supporters of Pollock's art wrote explanations that made little sense to the average American, who then responded by deriding Pollock as well as his supporters. The supporters were accused of being intentionally difficult. And why wouldn't they make Pollock seem difficult? For one, the critics friendly to Pollock's work were themselves struggling with how to describe his paintings. Second, many critics were trying to determine how to fit such unusual paintings into the broader history of art. And third, inaccessibility is the last bastion of a highbrow culture threatened with losing its autonomy. If class hierarchies were becoming increasingly

leveled, then a hermetic language could successfully distinguish the highbrows from the middlebrows.¹⁵⁵

Pollock's Mess

Pollock's "mess" is the underlying theme of this chapter. Mess happens outside the bounds of conformity. It represents disorder in a society that valued manicured lawns, pristine kitchens and whitewall tires. "Mess" and its cognate "messiness" offer useful shorthand for Pollock's putative involvement with disorder, dirt and general untidiness. This is not to say Pollock's work was messy; it was not. But for the average viewer (who was really the average *reader* of the popular press), his art and methods opposed mores that signaled the attainment of taste, social class—even classiness.¹⁵⁶ The highbrow and middlebrow press frequently remark on the apparent disorder of Pollock's art, reading it as either positive or negative.¹⁵⁷ The literature is filled with binary oppositions revolving around the themes of messiness versus tidiness.¹⁵⁸ By the late 1940s, American society had reached such an advanced state of cleanliness that disorder could be confined to a canvas, hung on a wall, and admired in some circles as high art.

But as *Life's* Round Table proved, that did not mean the public accepted disorder as high art. In 1952 *Time* magazine reports that more and more U.S. painters are turning to abstract work.¹⁵⁹ But many such painters, like the article's subject, Philip Guston, are "trained, honest men who have already made reputations with pictures of recognizable things." Note how the character judgment, "trained, *honest* men," is attached to the

¹⁵⁵ It is beyond the scope of my study to determine whether highbrow critics were intentionally obfuscating. Possibly the hermetic language used was part of the territory of highbrow discourse (advanced education, European influences, etc).

¹⁵⁶ The artist Mark Schlessinger, who was a studio assistant to Lee Krasner in the 1970s, did not recall Krasner speaking of social class *per se*, but remembered she often referred to things and people as "classy." Interview with author, San Antonio, Texas, August 4, 2003.

¹⁵⁷ Sometimes paradoxically valuing a seemingly negative trait as positive, as is the case with much of Greenberg's criticism. See my discussion below on Greenberg and in Chapter 4.

¹⁵⁸ Examples are disciplined/undisciplined, explosive/controlled, unskilled/masterful, or disintegrates/coheres. Michael Leja addresses some of these binary oppositions in relation to early twentieth century "modern man" discourse; see Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), especially Chapter 5. In a sense, Leja's modern man inhabited a "messy" existence, as he was pulled in different directions by various new psychological and scientific theories.

¹⁵⁹ "One Explanation," *Time* 59 (January 7, 1952): 56.

description of these able painters. The converse may also be assumed to be true: a painter of unrecognizable things is untrained and dishonest. The magazine continues, “to most Americans, [these painters’] abstract work is messy and meaningless—an energetic mishmash of blobs and squiggles.” That final phrase is a not-so-veiled reference to Jackson Pollock, about whom *Time* frequently reported and who once painted in a more traditional, figurative style under Thomas Hart Benton’s tutelage. What one normally sees in fine art is a recognizable thing, the opposite of a mess.

A close examination of the Pollock criticism finds recurring themes that belong to a broader discourse on *mess*. Some critics literally find the work messy. Others invoke the metaphor of “childishness,” which hinges on the messy nature of children (before culture takes effect). Frequently, Pollock’s art is described as obscure or lacking clarity, which stymies efforts at critical interpretation. Such obscurity suggests messy ideas or origins.

The highbrow critic and reader shared an understanding that art—particularly abstract art—eludes adequate verbal descriptions. Like many abstract works, Pollock’s paintings represent a place where language is often inadequate or insufficient.¹⁶⁰ The highbrow understood that writing about art constituted at most an equivalence, while the middlebrow found the same writing equivocal. The middlebrow press and its readers consider this a critical failure, which only exacerbated Pollock’s inaccessibility in his day. This disagreement is apparent in the earliest reviews and becomes compounded as Pollock becomes more famous.

The history of modern art has a long engagement with messiness. Modern art developed in conjunction with newly industrialized societies, whose repressed waste products and marginalized social activities resurfaced with mediated visibility in art forms. Clement Greenberg, the American art critic who spent the 1940s and 1950s charting a streamlined modernist lineage, acknowledged modernism’s connection to the

¹⁶⁰ Ann Gibson perceptively discussed the failure of language to represent abstract expressionist paintings; pointing out that sometimes the artists rejected verbal descriptions of their paintings. She uses the succinct phrase “evasion of language” to describe the phenomenon; Ann Gibson, “Abstract Expressionism’s Evasion of Language,” *Art Journal* 47 (Fall 1988): 208-214.

unsanitary and unclean. But Greenberg had no patience for those who thought modernist art was *about* waste, a view held by many popular viewers as well as certain art world members. In a 1946 review of a Georgia O’Keeffe retrospective, Greenberg sums up the “confused” view of modernism. As is the case with so many of Greenberg’s reviews, a single exhibition gave him an opportunity to address an entire school (here, the Stieglitz circle), and then proceed to larger institutional or societal problems.

After explaining how the Stieglitz group misunderstood the lessons of the School of Paris early in the century, Greenberg concludes that the significance of O’Keeffe’s “pseudo-modern art is almost entirely historical and symptomatic,” with minimal inherent value.¹⁶¹ He calls the Museum of Modern Art’s decision to grant her a retrospective a “bad sign,” remarking:

I know that many experts—some of them on the museum’s own staff—identify the opposed extremes of hygiene and scatology with modern art, but the particular experts at the museum should have had at least enough sophistication to keep them apart.¹⁶²

A lot is at play here. Although he does not label O’Keeffe “kitsch,” that term is between the lines with full Greenbergian weight. Her “pseudo-modern art,” “her popularity,” and the “certain inevitable charm” of her brushwork identify it as the most pernicious kind of kitsch.¹⁶³ O’Keeffe’s art should not be confounded, as the Museum’s “experts” have done, with real avant-garde art.

¹⁶¹ According to Greenberg, the Stieglitz group misinterpreted the lessons of the School of Paris by believing it freed them to make highly esoteric, hermetic work that embraced “pantheism and pan-love” while repudiating “technics and rationalism.”

¹⁶² Greenberg, “Review of an Exhibition of Georgia O’Keeffe,” *The Nation* (June 15, 1946), reprinted in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays* II, pp. 84-86. Marcia Brennan offers a detailed discussion of this review and of Greenberg’s antagonism toward the Stieglitz circle in *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2001), Chapter 8: “The Contest for ‘the Greatest American Painter of the Twentieth Century,’” with perceptive observations on Pollock. Michael Leja touches on this same Greenberg review in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, pp. 34-36.

¹⁶³ Kitsch is ersatz culture. It is “mechanical and operates by formulas,” “vicarious experience and faked sensations.” Kitsch is “destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide.” Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* (Fall 1939), reprinted in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays* I, p. 12. O’Keeffe’s artwork must have been too literal for Greenberg, who disliked her type of precision

“*[O]pposed extremes of hygiene and scatology*” may be the clearest brief phrase ever offered by Greenberg on what he felt to be a very wrong attitude toward modern art.¹⁶⁴ By contrast, the critic’s very right modern artist, Jackson Pollock, neither mired himself in scatological realms nor exalted himself in cleanliness. Greenberg saw in the artist’s “inscribed mud” and “ugliness” a profoundly original new art that largely grasped Cubism’s essential lessons. Pollock’s art might be able to pick up where European modernism left off.

The concept of “mess” encompasses both painter and paintings. The two ultimately became fused, especially after Hans Namuth’s 1950 photographs gained wider visibility later in that decade. Ample evidence during the artist’s lifetime shows that writers looked to the man for clues to the work, and vice versa. Pollock himself gave license for this conflation in his second published statement in 1947. Explaining why he works on the floor, he said, “I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be *in* the painting.”¹⁶⁵ Toward the end of his life he was even more direct: “Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is.”¹⁶⁶ As Pollock gained fame, reviewers in the 1940s would refer with frustration to the private symbolism he used. By 1955, based on art press reviews that cited Pollock’s “personal mythology” and his “inner-directed” art, *Time* magazine concluded sardonically, “In other words you can’t tell very much about the champ without a personal introduction.”¹⁶⁷ *Time*’s column included a 1955 Hans Namuth photograph of an unshaven Pollock looking haggard, a cigarette dangling from his mouth

brushwork (one extreme form of hygiene) and her tendency to make flowers/landscapes that resemble female genitalia (a too apparent manifestation of personal hygiene).

¹⁶⁴ I have not determined whether Rosalind Krauss (see below on the *Informel*) addresses this particular phrase of Greenberg’s, but it does suggest what his opinion of both the *informel* and the *objet* might be.

¹⁶⁵ Original emphasis; Jackson Pollock, “My Painting,” *Possibilities* 1 (Winter 1947-48): 79.

¹⁶⁶ Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: The Devin-Adair Co., 1956), p. 82. As it happens, Alexander Eliot, *Time* magazine’s art writer in the 1950s, provided the introduction which includes this statement: “Communicating enjoyment of works of art and the conditions thereof is the critic’s chief concern, as it has been Rodman’s.”

¹⁶⁷ “The Champ,” *Time* (December 19, 1955): 65. *Time*’s first reference to Pollock occurred when a small reproduction of *The Key* (1946) was illustrated upside-down, without mention of the work’s or artist’s name; “Is any good art being painted in the U.S.?” the short article asks. “Art: The Best?” *Time* 50 (December 1, 1947): 55.

(Figure 10). The text, in combination with the photograph, suggests that he is a physical and psychological mess.¹⁶⁸

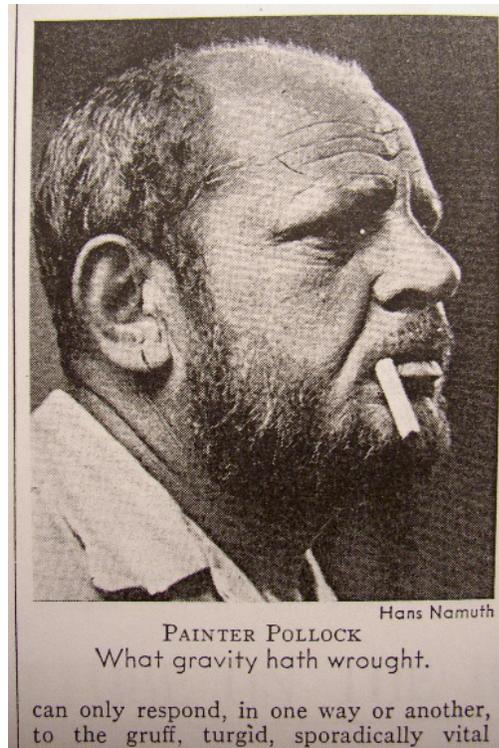


Figure 10. Hans Namuth, photograph of Jackson Pollock; reproduced in “The Champ,” *Time*, December 19, 1955, page 65.

Pollock welcomed the fusion of self and work. He knew he teetered on the edge of mess-making, and that he occasionally succumbed to it. The artist seems to be on the defensive in 1947, the year he began the “drip” paintings, “It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess.”¹⁶⁹ (Pollock’s published statements frequently

¹⁶⁸ I revisit this photograph in Chapter 4; “The Champ,” *Time*, p. 65. Pollock probably was a psychological mess for much of 1955. He was forty-three when the photograph was taken, but looks much older. Sandwiching the photo of Pollock, the text reads: “The New York *Times* regretted that ‘until psychology digs deeper into the working of the creative act, the spectator [**Pollock’s photo appears here in article*] can only respond, in one way or another, to the gruff, turgid, sporadically vital reelings and writhings of Pollock’s inner-directed art.’” The subtitle to the photo, “Painter Pollock: What gravity hath wrought,” plays on *Time’s* reference to his use of “gravity [to] accomplish” his “slosh-and-spatter school” paintings. The man and the work look the same.

¹⁶⁹ Pollock, “My Painting,” p. 79.

show him anticipating or responding to criticism of his work.¹⁷⁰) He needs *contact* with the painting, a sort of consummation between himself and his material. Prior to the advent of performance art in the 1960s, few artists had been more physically and kinetically associated with their work than Pollock.

Another type of “mess” peppers the literature. Critics likened Pollock’s paintings to “yesterday’s macaroni,” “baked macaroni,” and “half-baked macaroni,” as well as describing it with more standard connotations of “mess.”¹⁷¹ The first senses of “mess” denote a portion of food, specifically semiliquid, unappetizing or disagreeable concoctions.¹⁷² “Mess” in the military sense, as “kitchen,” especially connotes unappetizing food. Later, and more familiar, significations for mess include “state of confusion or muddle” and “disorder.”

The distinction here is that mess is often something human made. Unappealing foods, like resurrected macaroni dishes, are prepared by cooks. People, especially children, tend to be responsible for making messes.¹⁷³ Critics who refer to Pollock’s mess are speaking of his man-made creation of confusion. Despite once having made the pretentious-sounding claim to *be* nature, Pollock’s paintings tended to be viewed as *unnatural*, the inappropriate results of adult efforts. The nature/culture dichotomy rings

¹⁷⁰ After numerous reviewers noted the accidental quality of his work, Pollock pointedly told William Wright: “I don’t use the accident—‘cause I deny the accident.” (Interview with William Wright, taped in 1950 and broadcast on WERI in Westerly, RI. Transcript in O’Connor and Thaw, *JPCR* IV, p. 251. His telegram to *Time* magazine (discussed below) was also a direct response to the magazine selectively excerpting Bruno Alfieri’s remarks on Pollock’s “chaos,” a type of mess. It is fair to say Pollock, not prone to verbal or written statements, responded when provoked.

¹⁷¹ See below in this chapter for tracing the macaroni metaphors. The third dictionary sense of “mess” is “unappetizing food; disagreeable concoction.” The fifth sense of “mess” begins the non-food entries: “a disorderly or confused collection or mass of things; jumble; hodgepodge” and the sixth (b) is “a state of being disorderly, untidy, or dirty.” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language*, Second College Edition).

¹⁷² *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, Second Edition. The *Oxford English Dictionary* devotes substantial entries for the first two significations of “mess,” which relate to a “made dish,” and a liquid or pulpy food.

¹⁷³ It is, however, “natural” for a child to be messy. But a messy adult signifies something, specifically culture, gone wrong. The aftermath of a hurricane or tornado is often described as a “mess,” but those are disruptions (acts of nature) to nature’s generally ordered state.

with irony in Pollock's art, his view of himself and the response to both the man and his art.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Pollock's painting practice has profound centripetal force, pulling in various interpretations around the concept of messiness. Decades after its initial reception, his relation to messiness would become theorized by various parties as both "abjection" and the "*informe*." These later critics, most notably Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, focus on the transgressive qualities of Pollock's work, starting with his apparent disregard for bourgeois social values. Krauss and Bois intentionally want to reclaim Pollock for an alternate trajectory, in pointed opposition to Greenberg's.

Both the abject and the *informe* are concerned with transgressed boundaries. In theories of the abject, originating in the psychological explorations of Julia Kristeva, the early childhood subject/object division is transgressed. For the *informe*, put forth by Georges Bataille in the 1920s but theorized in relation to Pollock by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, the ruptured boundaries are formal (in both senses) hierarchies. Although I unite the abject and the *informe* here for brevity, Krauss distinguishes her project from the abject; she explains that the *informe* constitutes an operation, whereas the abject is a condition of being and is associated with the feminine. See Krauss's lengthy argument in "The Destiny of the *Informe*," in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997). Originally published in France as *L'Informe: mode d'emploi* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1996), the book is the catalogue of an exhibition held May 22-August 26, 1996, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Bois and Krauss's 'non-definition' of the *informe* derives from Bataille's 1929 "critical dictionary" entry. According to Bois and Krauss, the *informe* ("formless" in English) necessarily resists definition, but can be understood as a performative activity. It offers a way of uprooting, of slippage, or subverting expectation. Bois and Krauss use the *informe* to brush modernism against the grain through seemingly anti-modernist activities. They work against foundational postulates of a specifically (though not exclusively) Greenbergian modernism which is seen as unified and addressed to the upright position of the viewer. These postulates (or "myths") assume that 1.) visual art is addressed above all to the sense of sight; 2.) it is addressed to the subject as an erect being, standing vertically; 3.) pictures reveal themselves in an instant; and 4.) art is bounded, with a beginning and an end. To operate against these foundational tenets, the authors generate four countering categories, horizontality, base materialism, pulse, and entropy. These trajectories address a fragmented and unbounded subject, and encourage the viewer/reader to avoid sublimatory stances of false unification.

Krauss continues an argument that has long occupied her (see esp. *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1994.) A defining moment for Krauss was in 1947 when Pollock literally *lowered* (she emphasizes low, as in base) a painting from the wall to the floor, thus "attacking" the axis of verticality, striking at once against the form of the human body and vertically-functioning culture itself. In *Full Fathom Five* (1947), Pollock incorporated actual trash as if it were dropped from above and the resulting marks retain the reminder of a canvas created in supine form. Pollock's horizontality is his most significant contribution to an art of *bassesse*. (Greenberg, of course, read Pollock in the other direction, as shifting from the easel to the wall.)

Given that a fundamental objective behind the *Informe* exhibition/catalogue was to move against a particular high culture ideology, the authors seem to protest too much. The result perpetuates dialectical thinking: "formless" is better than "form," in a similar way that Greenberg privileged "form" over "content." Indeed, in his own way, Greenberg wished to elevate Pollock into an elite, clean canon. Even though Greenberg privileged the form of Pollock's paintings over other possible readings (psychological, metaphysical, political), he appreciated Pollock's mess and its subversive potential. Great art could be politically liberating. Statements such as "all profoundly original art looks ugly at first" carry tremendous ideological weight, including the notion that "ugly" art unsettles the bourgeois viewer.

Without question Pollock fits within the "informe" rubric (the authors had him in mind as they theorized it). One could argue that middlebrow Americans reacted to Pollock because his art was both

One of the very first published references to Jackson Pollock forecasts the artist's future reception as marked by questioning and polarization. The review is also significant for Greenberg's once-removed presence at Pollock's exhibition. A well-educated British freelance reporter for the *Nation*, Jean Connolly, reviewed the 1943 "Spring Salon for Young Artists" at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery. Connolly closed her brief notice as follows, "And there is a large painting by Jackson Pollock which, I am told, made the jury starry-eyed."¹⁷⁵ The painting was *Stenographic Figure* (1942, Figure 11).¹⁷⁶

By the summer of 1943, Jean Connolly—wife of *Horizon* editor Cyril Connolly—was living with Peggy Guggenheim in a Long Island duplex. It is plausible that Connolly discussed the show with her lover, Clement Greenberg, right before he left for Army Air Force duty. Connolly "kept Clem's seat warm at the *Nation*," and also happened to publish one of the first references to Jackson Pollock many months before Greenberg would.¹⁷⁷

abject and *informe*, modes which contradicted established values. Pollock even contradicted established modern painting at the time. However, I find it more edifying to use the contemporary terms (disorder, chaos, etc.) and to consider those terms within the historical context. My research has shown that American social class and status is key to understanding what was wrong about Pollock.

¹⁷⁵ Jean Connolly, "ART: Exhibition of Collage at Art of This Century," *The Nation* 156 (May 1, 1943): 643. The jury for the 1943 exhibition was filled with New York tastemakers: Alfred Barr, James J. Sweeney (who would write the text for Pollock's first one-man show), James Thrall Soby, Piet Mondrian, Marcel Duchamp, Howard Putzel and Guggenheim herself. Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1946/1979), p. 238.

¹⁷⁶ The exhibition, "Spring Salon for Young Artists," featured artists under thirty-five years old (including I. Rice Pereira, Robert Motherwell, Fanny Hillsmith, Ralph Rosenberg and William Baziotis).

¹⁷⁷ Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1946/1979), p. 248. On seat warming, see Florence Rubinfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life* (New York: Scribner, 1997), p. 72. Jean Connolly was the future Mrs. Laurence Vail. Her relationship with Greenberg occurred during the summer of 1940, then intermittently until 1943. I am grateful to Richard Shiff for calling my attention to the connection between Connolly and Greenberg. Not only does their affair underscore the intermingling of this tiny community in the early 1940s, it suggests the unseen influence of Greenberg on one of Pollock's first notices. For Greenberg's non-cerebral accounts of the relationship, see *The Harold Letters: 1928-1943*, ed. Janice Van Horne (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), pp. 216-228.



Figure 11. Jackson Pollock, *Stenographic Figure*, 1942, oil on linen, 40 x 56".
2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The Inaugural Mess, 1943

Pollock held his first solo exhibition at Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery. The responses to the show cover several mess-related issues. At the same time, the notices mark the failure of critical explication, indicating such problems existed long before the artist developed his classic "drip" method. Because of the number of themes that arise during Pollock's debut, the early responses merit closer scrutiny.

Pollock's exhibition opened on November 9, 1943. He was then making heavily encrusted, semi-figurative abstractions with Jungian or mythical subjects. The show included the paintings *Male and Female*, *The Guardians of the Secret*, *The She-Wolf*, *The Moon-Woman*, *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*, *The Mad Moon-Woman*, *Stenographic Figure*, *Conflict*, *The Magic Mirror*, plus six untitled paintings, gouaches and drawings. The exhibition's catalogue brochure was written by James Johnson Sweeney, a curator of paintings at the Museum of Modern Art who would become an editor at *Partisan Review* in 1948. Sweeney had seen Pollock's work a year earlier and convinced Peggy

Guggenheim to give the artist a show. As the author of the first extended discussion of Pollock, his engagement with “mess” discourse is noteworthy: “Pollock’s talent is volcanic. It has fire. It is unpredictable. It is undisciplined. It spills itself out in a mineral prodigality not yet crystallized. It is lavish, explosive, untidy.” Sweeney displays his own literary background, quoting from George Sand, Victor Hugo, and applying various nature metaphors to define Pollock’s talent and his creed (“the sea is inspiration”). This young artist, the reader is told, “showed a conventional academic competence” under Thomas Benton’s tutelage.¹⁷⁸ True, Sweeney says, the artist “needs self-discipline,” but his liberation is more profitable.

Based on the show’s reviews, Sweeney’s gallery brochure offered a much-needed crutch. Of five major published notices, three quote Sweeney.¹⁷⁹ The curator’s text never directly discusses a single work. Thus when others borrow from Sweeney’s brochure, they perpetuate a discourse about the paintings that lacks specific analysis of form or meaning. By relinquishing interpretive agency to Sweeney’s authorial voice, the reviewers avoid contending with the work both *in* and *on* their own terms.

For example, Edward Alden Jewell’s 1943 *New York Times* review is overwhelmed by Sweeney excerpts. Jewell explains that Pollock’s work cannot properly wear the label of “non-objective abstract art” (from Alfred Barr’s 1936 taxonomy, which he does not credit), since most of the works have naturalistic titles. Jewell struggles with classification, and his discussion of the actual paintings is limited:

What looks slightly like a dog begging turns out instead to be ‘Wounded Animal.’ The most recent canvas, a scattered design against pink, represents ‘Male and Female in Search of a Symbol.’ We are thrice introduced to the ‘Moon Woman’; once she is just herself, once cutting ‘the circle,’ and once she is mad....Here is

¹⁷⁸ The degree to which Pollock actually showed a “conventional academic competence” is debatable. See, for example, Clement Greenberg, “The Jackson Pollock Market Soars,” *New York Times Magazine* (April 30, 1961): 42 and Francis O’Connor’s “Letter to the Editor,” which is a reply to Greenberg.

¹⁷⁹ There are eight published references for this exhibition. One of these (“Young Man from Wyoming,” *Art Digest* [November 1, 1943]: 11) is an announcement of the upcoming show before the writer had seen it; the notice quotes from what I presume was Peggy Guggenheim’s press release. A second notice (*Art News*, November 1943) is very brief, though laudatory. A third is Robert Motherwell’s essay in *Partisan Review*. I discuss the five remaining substantial 1943 reviews.

obscurantism indeed, though it may become resolved and clarified as the artist proceeds.¹⁸⁰

Jewell's discussion of *Wounded Animal* (Figure 12) and *Male and Female in Search of a Symbol* (Figure 13) turns on his own thwarted expectations. The critic expects the titles to illuminate the paintings, but finds neither painting abides its name. As a result, for example, he avoids interpreting the "Moon Woman" (Figures 14, 15 and 17) paintings at all.

In lieu of discernible meaning, Jewell finds "obscurantism," which suggests the work is intentionally difficult, intentionally hard to decipher. He closes by quoting extensively from Sweeney, whom he finds "strikes exactly the right note."¹⁸¹ When confronted with such "obscure" work as Pollock's, Sweeney provides an authoritative voice that Jewell can present quasi-informatively to the reader. Jewell essentially abdicates his role as interpreter to Sweeney. But there is a twist: one suspects that Jewell, the more traditional art writer, finds Sweeney's text overwrought with metaphor and poetic allusion.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Edward Allen Jewell, "Briefer Mention," *New York Times* (November 14, 1943): 6X.

¹⁸¹ Jewell, "Briefer Mention," 1943, p. 6X. This opinion is odd, given that Sweeney's text is itself fairly obscure. He offers the longest quotation from Sweeney's text, echoing Sweeney's tone well. Sweeney does not talk about Pollock's paintings, but instead offers metaphorical descriptions of Pollock's "talent." He employs a meta-language that conveys the mood of Pollock's style, but offers no tangible description or explanation. Thus when Jewell and Maude Riley (in *Art Digest*) quote Sweeney, they effectively place themselves at an even further remove from the art.

¹⁸² By 1943 Jewell was a seasoned art reviewer. It is plausible that he intended Sweeney's forceful prose to act as a proxy for the experience of seeing Pollock's paintings.



Figure 12. Jackson Pollock, *Wounded Animal*, 1943
2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 13. Jackson Pollock, *Male and Female in Search of a Symbol*, 1943.
2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 14 (left). Jackson Pollock, *The Mad Moon Woman*, oil on canvas, 1941.
Figure 15 (right). Jackson Pollock, *The Moon Woman*, oil on canvas, 1942.
2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.

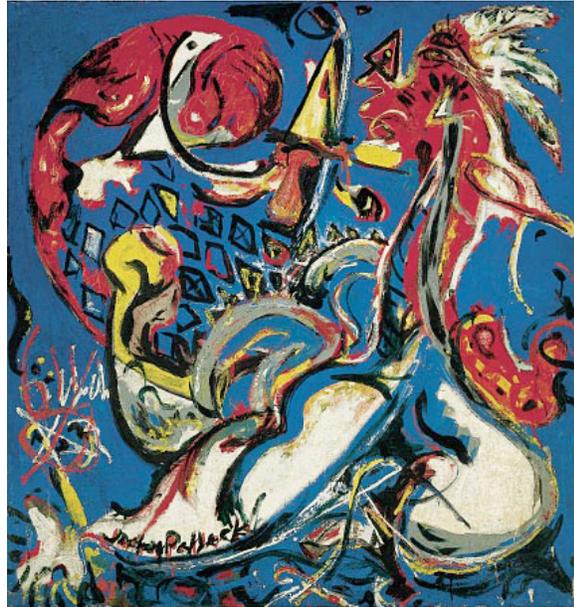


Figure 16 (left). Jackson Pollock, *Male and Female*, 1942, oil on canvas.
Figure 17 (right). Jackson Pollock, *The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle*, 1943,
oil on canvas.
2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Maude Riley's *Art Digest* review literally opens and closes with Sweeney. She begins with his colorful description, "it is lavish, explosive, untidy...." Like Jewell, she is drawn to the Moon Woman "pictures," but hampered from offering more information: "[They] allow full license of symbolism, form and explanation, for it is [Pollock's] legend, completely of his own devising." The artist's private symbolism prevents Riley from plowing beyond a cursory formal description: *She-Wolf* is "slaty blue and thoroughly mussed with animated white lines" (Figure 22). And, just as Jewell does, she

closes with Sweeney's haphazard remark that Pollock does not allow "the dish to chill in the serving."¹⁸³

In contrast to the confused but relatively benign tones of Edward Jewell and Maude Riley, Henry McBride of the *New York Sun* is hostile. McBride also quotes Sweeney—but as a foil:

Jackson Pollock...submits abstract paintings that are 'undisciplined, lavish, explosive and untidy,' just as James Johnson Sweeney says they are in a little preface to the catalogue. This is the reverse of praise, yet Mr. Sweeney seems to have been won to his cause because this new artist refuses to play for applause. Indifference to outside criticism is an asset, it is true, but without self-criticism one is scarcely an artist at all. Mr. Pollock's large compositions suggest a kaleidoscope that has been insufficiently shaken. Another shake or two might bring order into the flying particles of color—but the spectator is not too sure of this.¹⁸⁴

McBride unmasks the brochure's fallacious reasoning, making the review as much a condemnation of Sweeney as of Pollock. He gives no quarter for the curator's transformation of negative characteristics into positive ones. Pollock lacks qualities—discipline, order and self-criticism—essential to being "an artist at all." McBride makes the very early (the year is 1943) recognition that Pollock is praised for adverse qualities. This type of praise, which flavors so much of the later highbrow criticism, is an example of how Pollock's work and reception tend to invert traditional standards.

The same exhibition was reported on favorably by Robert Coates (for the *New Yorker*) and Clement Greenberg (for the *Nation*). But neither writer clearly explicates *why* Pollock's work is strong. For example, Coates calls Pollock's paintings "an authentic discovery," yet avoids explaining why that is. Could it be the "curious mixture of the abstract and the symbolic"? (If so, how can a reader envision those elements?) He also mentions Pollock's "persistent tendency to overwork his ideas," without identifying those ideas. (A reader might think "ideas" are precisely what a

¹⁸³ Maude Riley, "Fifty-Seventh Street in Review," *Art Digest* 19 (November 15, 1943): 18.

¹⁸⁴ Here McBride paraphrases Sweeney, who wrote, "It is undisciplined....It is lavish, explosive, untidy." Henry McBride, "Attractions in the Galleries," *New York Sun* (November 12, 1943): 30.

reviewer ought to address, particularly for abstract work.) The *New Yorker* review is brief—four sentences—and the final statement is characteristic of Coates’s overall tone:

But his color is always rich and daring, his approach mature, and his design remarkably fluent, and I had the satisfied feeling that in such pieces as ‘The Magic Mirror’ and ‘The Wounded Animal’ he had succeeded pretty well and pretty clearly in achieving just what he was aiming at.¹⁸⁵

The review is unquestionably laudatory. But *what* exactly was Pollock “aiming at”? Coates waffles with the use of “pretty well and pretty clearly.” The implication is that Coates operates on a hunch (a “satisfied feeling”), sharing an unnamed understanding with Pollock.

In a similar vein, Greenberg (recently discharged from the service) is favorably impressed. He tantalizingly states that *Conflict* and *Wounded Animal* “are among *the strongest abstract paintings* I have yet seen by an American.”¹⁸⁶ Yet should the reader try to discern what makes the work so “strong,” they find it is due to the “chalky incrustation” of *Wounded Animal* (Figure 12) and because both paintings are “more conclusive.” For anyone—highbrow, middlebrow or lowbrow—seeking enlightenment, Greenberg offers little assistance. Here is the first half of his account, which marks his earliest published discussion of the artist:

There are both surprise and fulfillment in Jackson Pollock’s not so abstract abstractions. He is the first painter I know of to have got something positive from the muddiness of color that so profoundly characterizes a great deal of American painting. It is the equivalent, even if in a negative, helpless way, of that American chiaroscuro which dominated Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, and has been best translated into painting by Blakelock and Ryder. The mud abounds in Pollock’s large works, and these, though the least consummated, are his most original and ambitious. Being young and full of energy, he takes orders he can’t fill....¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Robert Coates, “The Art Galleries: From Moscow to Harlem,” *New Yorker* 19 (May 29, 1943): 49.

Sweeney calls Pollock’s approach “mature,” which is the opposite of what many other critics state.

¹⁸⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 157 (November 27, 1943): 621. I have italicized “the strongest abstract paintings” to call attention to Robsjohn-Gibbins’s remark, below.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

The critic extrapolates, fitting the artist into a larger historical framework, as he would later do with Georgia O’Keeffe, to different ends. The Pollock notice displays Greenberg’s literary craftsmanship and fluency. But it is also surprisingly vague. Phrases like “not so abstract abstractions,” “something positive from the muddiness of color,” and “equivalent, even if in a negative, helpless way” do not communicate with precision. Such writing demands substantial foreknowledge on the reader’s part. Rhetorically, he praises the works through waffling or negative qualifiers. In fact, in a gesture recalling Henry McBride’s complaint about Sweeney (who had expressed what was normally “the reverse of praise”), Greenberg extols Pollock based on negative or inverted virtues.

Both Greenberg and Coates write in a private, esoteric language, all but impenetrable to the general reader. It is bad enough that art should need interpreters; worse still are critics who cannot explain the art. T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, the stridently anti-abstraction designer, spoke for many when he wrote in 1947 that American modern art hides its banality behind the incomprehensible gibberish of “true believers.” But these critics and curators “seemed unable actually to translate the meaning of the enigmatical pictures and sculptures.” He asserts:

It was not enough to look knowingly at one’s favorite abstraction and say:
“It has a lyrical quality, hasn’t it?” or “Don’t you think the forms are sensitive?”
or
“*It’s very strong, isn’t it?*”¹⁸⁸

Robsjohn-Gibbings was pleased to report that Americans demanded more.

If Edward Jewell and Maude Riley were uncertain of how to deal with Pollock, they shied away from making great claims. Henry McBride, perhaps more akin to Robsjohn-Gibbings, was dubious of both Pollock and Sweeney. McBride may have reflected the slant of the *New York Sun*. Presumably Greenberg and Coates wrote for audiences (of the *Nation* and *New Yorker*) who were more interested in cultural and

¹⁸⁸ Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Mona Lisa’s Mustache*, pp. 235-236, emphasis added.

political matters, but not dramatically more so than a reader of Jewell's *New York Times*. But critical praise would help earn Pollock entry into more prestigious exhibitions, which in turn gained the attention of the widely read popular press. The popular press then tried to make sense of the art by attending to the highbrow critical praise, which proved ineffectual for its readers.

It was a hopeless cycle. As Pollock gained fame in the small New York art community, he gained notoriety nationwide. The highbrow critical language seemed perfectly appropriate for an artist who was charting a new course. And Pollock's champion, Greenberg, was comfortable making grand assertions as he awaited the artist's further development.¹⁸⁹ Those grand assertions became Greenberg's most publicized expressions. Superlatives—"the greatest," "most powerful," "most important"—were transferred from the art world into mass-market venues. In the mass venues, there was no measurable standard for the paintings; the superlatives did not explain what made Pollock's work better than other art.

Aspects of Mess after 1943

As the decade progressed, so did the attention on Jackson Pollock. In 1944, his work appeared in seven group exhibitions (five in New York, plus two traveling exhibitions in the United States). In 1945, he was included in seven more national group exhibitions and held his second solo exhibition at Art of This Century. The reviews of this period tend to be less timid than those of 1943. They include superlatives ("the strongest painter of his generation," "masterful and miraculous," and "most influential young American abstractionist") as well as patently disparaging metaphors, such as "explosion in a shingle mill" and "baked macaroni."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ "It is indeed a mark of Pollock's powerful originality that he should present problems in judgment that must await the digestion of each new phase of his development before they can be solved. Since [John] Marin—with whom Pollock will in time be able to compete for recognition as the greatest American painter of the twentieth century—no other American artist has presented such a case." Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation* 166 (January 24, 1948): 108.

¹⁹⁰ "Strongest painter of his generation," Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation* (April 7, 1945); "masterful and miraculous," Manny Farber, "Jackson Pollock," *The New Republic* (June 25, 1945); "most influential young American abstractionist," *Art News* (May 1946); "explosion in a shingle mill", Howard Devree, "Among

One facet of “mess” is apparent in the complaints about Pollock’s disorder, obscurity, or lack of clarity. For example, Eleanor Jewett sees utter chaos: Pollock’s “trumpet has gone wild and he is sounding in all directions at once, like a weather vane in a high wind whirling in mad circles.”¹⁹¹ That same year, Howard Devree identifies the problem with Pollock’s lack of clarity: his “big, sprawling coloramas...surcharged with violent emotional reaction which never is clarified enough in the expression to allow true communication with the viewer.”¹⁹² *Art News*’s reporter observes the paint application in works like *The Night Dancer* (1944) and *There Were Seven in Eight* (1945, Figure 18). The reporter remarks on Pollock’s use of an elaborate network of white lines that “obscure the primary elements,” making it almost impossible to identify the forms, and concluding that Pollock suffers from a *horror vacui*.¹⁹³ Maude Riley is confounded by



Figure 18. Jackson Pollock, *There Were Seven in Eight*, 1945, oil on canvas. 2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

the New Exhibitions,” *The New York Times* (March 25 1945); “baked macaroni,” Parker Tyler, “Nature and Madness Among the Younger Painters,” *View* (May 1945)..

¹⁹¹ Eleanor Jewett, “Contrast Sharp at Art Club’s 2 New Exhibits,” *Chicago Tribune* (March 6, 1945): 13. Jewett’s horrendously mixed metaphor is nearly funny. One wonders if she is approximating the ‘raucous’ feel of Pollock’s paintings with her jumbled metaphors. More likely, she was writing on deadline.

¹⁹² Howard Devree, “Among the New Exhibitions,” *New York Times* (March 25 1945): 8X.

¹⁹³ [Anonymous], “The Passing Shows,” *Art News* (April 1-15, 1945): 6.

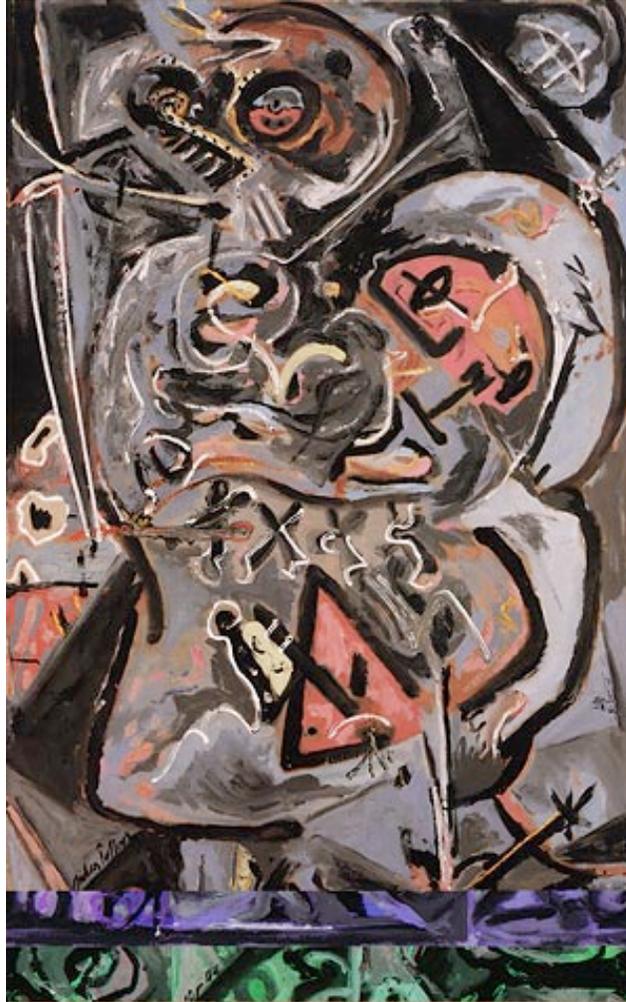


Figure 19. Jackson Pollock, *Totem Lesson I*, 1944, oil on canvas.
2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 20. Jackson Pollock, *Totem Lesson 2*, 1945, oil on canvas. 2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.

the “chaotic tangle” covering *There Were Seven In Eight*; *Totem Lesson 2* (Figure 20) is “pretty definitely a description of explosion.” Parker Tyler sees “too much of an air of baked-macaroni about some of his patterns, as though they were scrambled baroque designs.”¹⁹⁴

The positive reviews observe these very same formal elements, but instead the authors arrive at favorable conclusions. Alfred Frankenstein finds the artist’s “flare and spatter and fury” derives from “inspired improvisation rather than conscious planning.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Parker Tyler, “Nature and Madness Among the Younger Painters,” *View* (May 1945): 30.

¹⁹⁵ Alfred Frankenstein, “Some Young Americans Prophecy on a Prophecy,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (August 12, 1945): 8.

Greenberg, who had already observed the abundant “mud” and “muddiness of color” in 1943, directs his viewers toward the gouaches for achieving “greater clarity” for being “less suffocatingly packed than the oils.”¹⁹⁶ Manny Farber, in *The New Republic*, finds at least three paintings that are “masterful and miraculous.” One of them is *Mural* (1943, Figure 21), the twenty-foot-long painting commissioned by Peggy Guggenheim: “violent in expression, endlessly fascinating in detail, without superficiality, so *well ordered* that it composes the wall in a quiet, contained, buoyant way.”¹⁹⁷

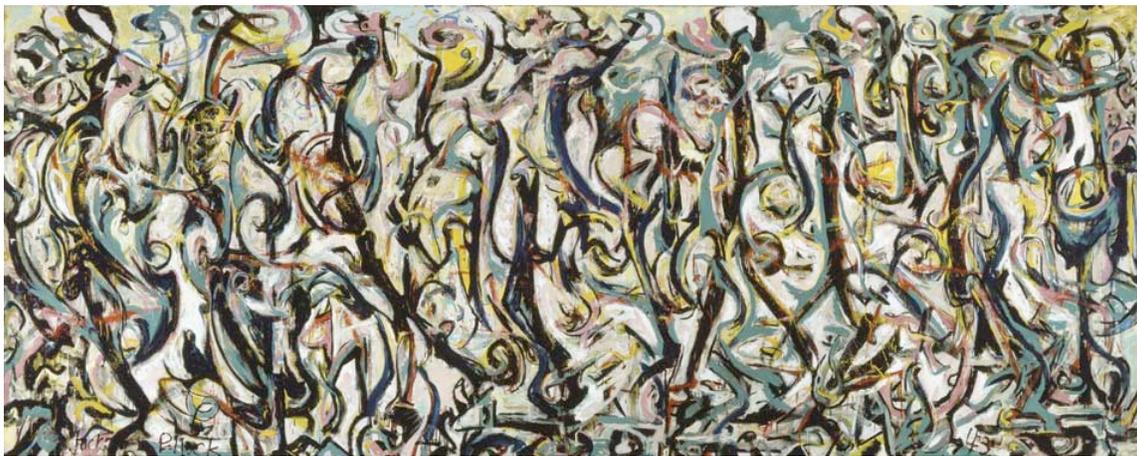


Figure 21. Jackson Pollock, *Mural*, 1943, oil on canvas.
2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Aesthetic Discipline for the Child

.....

Responding to the public hubbub that surrounded Pollock's art in the later 1940s, *Time* magazine quipped, “A Jackson Pollock painting is apt to resemble a child's contour map of Gettysburg. Nevertheless, he is the darling of a highbrow cult which considers him ‘the most powerful painter in America.’”¹⁹⁸ (That was Greenberg's estimation.) The

¹⁹⁶ Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* (April 7, 1945).

¹⁹⁷ Emphasis added: Manny Farber, “Jackson Pollock,” *The New Republic* (June 25, 1945): 871.

¹⁹⁸ “Art: Words,” *Time* 53 (February 7, 1949): 51. A note on *Time* and *Newsweek*: both magazines aimed at appealing to mass, middle-class America as they reported on current domestic and international events. During this period, *Time* and *Newsweek* did not credit individual authors of the “Art” sections. Rather, reporting was done by a small staff overseen by the magazine's editor. For this reason, I often refer to the author of an article as “*Time*” or “*Newsweek*,” or sometimes “*Time*'s editors,” because most likely at least one writer and one editor approved the essay for publication.

magazine knew its readers would agree: Pollock paints like a child. *Time* also knew its readers would scoff at the “highbrow cult’s” absurd inversion of standards, whereby childish painting is considered advanced.

The concept of aesthetic discipline blurred into personal or social discipline.¹⁹⁹ It was an easy step, then, to criticize the artist for painting like a child. Surely the topic resounded with Pollock, who had a long history of educational disobedience and personal unruliness.²⁰⁰ When James Johnson Sweeney twice made reference to it in 1943—the artist “needs self-discipline,” his talent is “undisciplined” —the thirty-one-year-old Pollock sought to redress the issue via a written postcard:

Dear Sweeney—I have read your forward to the catalogue, and I am excited. I am happy—The self-discipline you speak of—will come, I think, as a natural growth of a deeper, more integrated, experience. Many thanks—He will fulfill that promise—

Sincerely
Pollock²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Although my concern is domestic reception, here is a choice example of the migration of “discipline”: “I will not say that I was prejudiced against Mr. Pollock’s picture by the fact that he made it by pouring the paint on to a flat canvas out of a can and later... ‘slapping the huge canvas with his own paint-covered hands’ ...but I don’t think that, in this case, it was the canvas that deserved the slaps.” John Russell, “Modern Art in the United States,” *Sunday Times* [London] (January 8, 1956): 4.

²⁰⁰ Pollock struggled with discipline throughout his life, as every biographer has observed. It affected his education, career, and hobbies (“I still tamper with the mouth harp can’t play a damned thing”—O’Connor and Thaw, *JPCR* IV, p. 212). He desired training, but had an easily frustrated temperament. As an adolescent, he was expelled thrice from two different high schools. In a 1929 letter home, he wrote “I am doubtful of any talent, so what ever I choose to be will be accomplished only by long study and work”; O’Connor and Thaw, *JPCR* IV, p. 208. In 1930: “the truth of [my drawing] is I have never gotten down to real work and finish a piece I usually get disgusted with it and lose interest”; O’Connor and Thaw, *JPCR* IV, p. 209. He resisted Thomas Hart Benton’s teaching at the Art Students League, later claiming it was something to “react against.”

²⁰¹ Jackson Pollock Papers, 1912-1975, Archives of American Art, Reel 3046 (card to Sweeney is postmarked November 3, 1943). Also O’Connor and Thaw, *JPCR* IV, p. 230 (reproduces recto of card as holograph). I read Pollock’s handwriting as “He will fulfill that promise;” Pollock speaks of himself in the third person as Sweeney had in his review. However, O’Connor and Thaw transcribe it as “We will fulfill that promise.”

The psychological underpinning of Pollock’s postcard to Sweeney is worth noting: The tone (warm, self-effacing, promising to improve) is reminiscent of his letters to his own father, who died in 1933. For Michael Leja’s hypothetical exploration of Pollock’s stated “self-discipline” in relation to modern man literature, see *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, pp. 180-185.

Discipline was regularly discussed in Pollock's notices, causing him to be reminded of it often. In fact, Sweeney revisits the topic the following spring when he includes *The She-Wolf* (Figure 22) in a *Harper's Bazaar* feature on "Five American Painters." After praising the artist for his "fine intuitive ability" and natural draftsmanship, Sweeney explains that he "still needs to discipline his work considerably."²⁰² Pollock was still fulfilling "that promise."

Another concern about Pollock's aesthetic discipline is posed by Howard Devree, who wonders if Pollock might be engaged in "double escapism," both from the "discipline of art and...organization [...] and escape from any pronouncement on the breadth and profundity of human experience out of which art grows?" The absence of aesthetic discipline, then, results in an absence of relevant meaning. Pollock's private meanderings are equally evasive. Devree asks rhetorically, "Does his personal comment ever come through to us?"²⁰³



Figure 22. Jackson Pollock, *The She-Wolf*, 1943, oil on canvas.
2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.

²⁰² "But," Sweeney continued, "the discipline must not be bought at the sacrifice of boldness in color oppositions or force of brushwork." James Johnson Sweeney, "Five American Painters," *Harper's Bazaar*, (April 1944): 126. This was the first time a Jackson Pollock work was reproduced in the press.

²⁰³ Howard Devree, "Art of Today: One-Man Shows Include Recent Paintings by Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey," *New York Times* (December 3, 1950): 9X.

Children's art is judged according to different standards; they are not expected to be neat. Eleanor Jewett took Pollock to task in 1945 for "childishly scribbled" paintings.²⁰⁴ They are "effusive abstractions, which apparently owe a little to the influence of Edward Lear." Lear, no longer a household name, would have resonated to Jewett's readers as the English master of nonsense verse and children's books. As noted earlier, Jewett found chaos in Pollock's method.²⁰⁵

Assessing the simultaneous Chicago Arts Club exhibition, Jewett calls Irene Rice Pereira "a young woman of mathematical genius" whose work is "meticulous, detailed, orderly and leisured. Her art is a craft, exquisitely executed." Jewett dichotomizes the two painters' production: Pollock represents everything to be avoided (or outgrown); Pereira represents everything to be admired and emulated. (Appropriately, the title of the article is "Contrast Sharp in Art Club's 2 New Exhibits.") Both artists work in an abstract style, but Pereira is tidy and ordered, revealing structured geometry in lieu of Pollock's freeform expressions.

Jewett's review appears on page thirteen of Tuesday morning's *Chicago Tribune*, a page dedicated to weddings, social news, hygiene, and an advice column (Figures 23 and 24). One column to the right, "White Collar Girl" describes a young office worker's fine aesthetic sense. (She hangs van Gogh reproductions on her wall.)²⁰⁶ The Pollock review is not illustrated. However, the nearest photograph on the page shows a sullen toddler sitting in an armchair. The accompanying advice column, headlined "2 Year Old Child's 'No' Habit Should Be Treated with Tact," encourages parents to be "patient, gentle and tactful" during a toddler's rebellious phase. The proximity of the headline and the surly child to the description of Pollock's art as "restless and raucous" underscores the assumed childishness of Pollock's painterly behavior.

²⁰⁴ Jewett, "Contrast Sharp," p. 13. This exhibition (March 5-31, 1945) included seventeen Pollock paintings and drawings, a selection of which traveled to San Francisco (August 7-26, 1945). The catalogue for the exhibition reprinted Sweeney's 1943 essay from Pollock's Art of This Century solo show.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ruth Mac Kay, "White Collar Girl," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (March 6, 1945), p. 13.



Figure 23. Page 13, *Chicago Tribune*, March 6, 1945.



Figure 24. Page 13, *Chicago Tribune*, March 6, 1945 (detail).

Howard Devree, in the March 1945 *New York Times*, also declares Pollock the loser in an artistic match. The victor, Karl Knaths, is “one of the able and intelligent American artists” whose exhibition is “rewarding.” But Pollock “seems to me in other case [sic].”²⁰⁷ Devree continues, “...one or two of the other paintings might as well be called ‘explosion in a shingle mill,’ with their pother of paint and flying forms.” The allusion to Marcel Duchamp’s reception thirty years earlier at the Armory Show allies Pollock with European modernists—patently un-American.²⁰⁸ Pollock’s process suggests a complete lack of control, an immaturity marked by animated accident.

Maude Riley’s *Art Digest* columns reflect the conservative edge of a magazine whose primary subscribers were practicing figurative artists. In that first 1943 review, she found Pollock “out aquestioning and he goes hell-bent at each canvas...youthfully confident...and among the ‘untitled’ is a pink one he brought in, still wet with new birth, which probably pleased him no end, when hung.”²⁰⁹ Here the artist is an excitable young boy, his paintings babies fresh from the womb. At the 1943 exhibition “Insane, Natural or Surrealistic” at Art of This Century, Riley finds that some insane artists create “work

²⁰⁷ “In other case” seems to be an older form of “another case.” In a 1950 review, Devree compares Pollock with Mark Tobey, and writes that “Tobey is in different case.”

²⁰⁸ Howard Devree, “Among the New Exhibitions,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1945: 8X. In March, Devree likened Pollock’s paintings to an “‘explosion in a shingle mill,’ with their pother of paint and flying forms” (in quotation marks in the original). In June, Manny Farber’s *New Republic* review began, “The painting of Jackson Pollock, which has been called untalented and likened to ‘baked macaroni’ in *View* and to an ‘explosion in a shingle mill’ in the *New York Times*...” Devree’s remark recalled the reception of Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* (1912) at the 1913 Armory Show, described as an “explosion in a shingle factory.” It is possible “pother of paint” alludes to John Ruskin’s infamous accusation of Whistler “flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.” That painting, *Nocturne in Black and Gold/The Falling Rocket* (c. 1872-77) contains lightly spattered specks gold and red paint to suggest pyrotechnics. Devree’s allusions link Pollock to a European modernist context (even though Whistler was an American).

There is a problem of misquotation within the Pollock criticism. Such misquotation is worth discussion because it indicates how some writers operate via hearsay rather than direct knowledge of the reviews. Hearsay, like gossip, has a strong social element that has little to do with aesthetics. For example, *Life*’s 1956 obituary of Pollock states that Pollock’s work has been called “half-baked macaroni.” The original source for Pollock and macaroni is Parker Tyler’s 1945 *VIEW* review, but it is more likely that the obituary writer for *Time-Life* misremembered the already misquoted phrase from Dorothy Seiberling’s well-publicized article in *Life*, “Jackson Pollock: Is he the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” August 8, 1949. Seiberling writes, “Still others condemn his pictures as degenerate and find them as unpalatable as yesterday’s macaroni.” One wonders if “half-baked macaroni” and “yesterday’s macaroni” are more disparaging terms than “baked macaroni”?

²⁰⁹ M[au]de R[iley], “Degree of Sanity,” *Art Digest* 18 (December 15, 1943): 17.

like children.” But the insane are “far more pictorial” than the Surrealists, with whom Pollock is included. “This show,” she concludes, “...should not be offered for artistic evaluation. It is definitely one for a psychiatrist to muse on.”²¹⁰ Sixteen months later, she encounters Pollock’s “belligerence in the partnership of paints, which includes the subject, and you and me.”²¹¹

1948 Betty Parsons Gallery through 1956: The Mess Proliferates

.....
Pollock’s first exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery opened in January 1948. (Peggy Guggenheim had left for Europe in 1947; after much wrangling, Parsons agreed to take over Pollock’s contract.) This show largely consisted of his new “drip” style paintings, which he had begun the year before. The 1947 paintings included were *Alchemy*, *Cathedral*, *Comet*, *Enchanted Forest*, *Full Fathom Five*, *Magic Lantern*, *Lucifer*, *The Nest*, *Phosphorescence*, *Prism*, *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, *Sea Change*, *Shooting Star*, *Vortex* and *Watery Paths*, plus *Gothic* (1944), which had been previously exhibited in 1945.²¹² The predominance of poured and dripped lines and the virtual absence of recognizable subject matter made this new style radically different. Formally, however, the 1947 paintings addressed similar aesthetic concerns as the earlier work. The literature from 1948 through 1956 includes similar preoccupations with clarity and order—or lack thereof. But from 1948 on, the responses to the work become more polarized.

Alonzo Lansford, writing in the *Art Digest* in 1948, expresses disgust with Pollock’s untrained, automatic style and the attention it has garnered. The vitriol of Lansford’s commentary warrants a lengthy excerpt:

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Maude Riley, “Jackson Pollock,” *Art Digest* 19 (April 1, 1945): 59.

²¹² The Museum of Modern Art’s online Jackson Pollock exhibition history also lists a work called *Unfounded*, but I could not determine which painting it is or whether the name was changed.

You have to hand it to Jackson Pollock; he does get a rise out of his audience—either wild applause or thundering condemnation. Something must be said for such a performance, if only for the virtue of positiveness. At least two foremost critics here and in England have recently included Pollock in their lists of the half-dozen most important of America's 'advanced' painters; other equally prestigious [sic] authorities have dismissed him, at least verbally, with an oath.

Lansford next attends to Pollock's rejection of traditional means.

Pollock has said that Thomas Benton was a good teacher because he taught him how not to paint like Benton; that he doesn't is startlingly patent. Pollock's current method seems to be a sort of automatism: apparently, while staring steadily up into the sky, he lets go a loaded brush on the canvas, rapidly swirling and looping and wriggling till the paint runs out.²¹³

The artist's shamanistic gyrations create a literal mess, not worthy of serious discussion. Lansford's single allowance that this method "results in a colorful and exciting panel" is tempered by his snipe that "probably it also results in the severest pain in the neck since Michelangelo."

The same season, Robert Coates, earnestly trying to understand the artist, was wary of Pollock's total abandonment of recognizable symbols. In their place Coates found a vocabulary of sheer color and movement. But "such a style has its dangers, for the threads of communication between artist and viewer are so very tenuous that the utmost attention is required to get the message through." Despite "the best will in the world," Coates laments that *Lucifer*, *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, and *Cathedral* "seem

²¹³ A[lonzo] L[ansford], "Fifty-Seventh Street in Review: Automatic Pollock," *Art Digest* 22 (January 15, 1948): 19.

mere unorganized explosions of random energy, and therefore meaningless” (Figures 25, 26 [detail], 27, and Figure 7).²¹⁴



Figure 25. Jackson Pollock, *Lucifer*, 1947, oil, enamel and aluminum paint on canvas. 2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.

²¹⁴ Robert M. Coates, “The Art Galleries: Edward Hopper and Jackson Pollock,” *New Yorker* 23 (January 17, 1948): 57.



Figure 26. Jackson Pollock, *Lucifer*, 1947, detail, oil, enamel and aluminum paint on canvas.



Figure 27. Jackson Pollock, *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, 1947, oil on canvas. 2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Greenberg is pleased that the first Betty Parsons exhibition “signals another step forward.” The critic is on the defensive, anticipating viewers’ banal grievances, preempting them with sophisticated counterthrusts. Greenberg compares Pollock to Mondrian; *Cathedral* is reminiscent of Picasso’s and Braque’s best cubist years. Even when Greenberg hesitates, questioning the aluminum paint that runs “startlingly close to

prettiness,” he indicates such impressions may fade as one grows accustomed to Pollock’s new vein. Similarly, the quality of *Sea Change* and *Full Fathom Five* “still remains to be decided” (Figures 28 and 29).



Figure 28. Jackson Pollock, *Sea Change*, 1947, oil on canvas. 2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists’ Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 29. Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five*, 1947, oil on canvas with nails, tacks, buttons, key, coins, cigarettes, matches. 2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Yet “it is indeed a mark of Pollock’s powerful originality that he should present problems in judgment that must await the digestion of each new phase of his development before they can be solved.” (Here, in 1948, Pollock’s “originality” is linked to his presentation of problems in judgment. In 1945 Greenberg linked “originality” to ugliness. The meaning is similar in both cases: our judgment about whether the work is good, bad or ugly must wait.) Greenberg is certain that Pollock’s future work will take an even more innovative path. His self-assurance, matched by his crusade against philistinism, leads him to make numerous sweeping comments about Pollock that are later cited by *Life* and *Time* magazines.

“The Battle of Gettysburg,” February 7, 1949

In early 1949, *Time* magazine bluntly dismissed Pollock’s work, comparing it to “a child’s contour map of Gettysburg.” As an example the magazine illustrated *Number 11A* (1948), a lightly worked vertical canvas with skeins of grey and black (Figure 29). The “Gettysburg” article took a direct punch at the highbrows. After the opening lines, describing Pollock as “the darling of a highbrow cult,” *Time* asked, “So what was the cautious critic to write about Pollock’s latest show in a Manhattan gallery last week?”

The New York *Times*’s Sam Hunter covered it this way: “[The] show...certainly reflects the advanced stage of the disintegration of modern painting. But it is disintegration with a possibly liberating and cathartic effect and informed by a highly individual rhythm...At every point of concentration of these high-tension moments of bravura phrasing...there is a disappointing absence of resolution in an image or pictorial incident, for

all their magical diffusion of power...Certainly Pollock has carried the irrational quality of picture making to one extremity...And the danger for imitators in such a directly physical expression of states of being rather than of thinking or knowing is obvious...What does emerge is the large scale of Pollock's operations ..."²¹⁵ [End of article. All ellipses original.]



Figure 30. Jackson Pollock, *Number 11A*, 1948.
"Cathartic Disintegration." (Page 51, *Time*, February 7, 1949.)

²¹⁵ "Art: Words," *Time* 53 (February 7, 1949): 51.

Pollock's *Number 11A*²¹⁶ (Figure 30) is illustrated next to the column, with a caption derived from Sam Hunter: "Cathartic disintegration." Although both "cathartic" and "disintegration" appear in a long sentence in Hunter's original *New York Times* review, he never paired them. *Time*'s shorthand caption deliberately hooks a couple of "two-dollar words" together to mimic highbrow jargon.

Importantly, *Time* omits Hunter's most concrete observations, editing the original to retain only ethereal and conjectural remarks. For example, *Time* quotes Hunter as follows: "It is a disintegration with a possibly liberating and cathartic effect informed by a highly individual rhythm...." But Hunter's original text continues, "It would seem that the main intention of these curiously webbed linear variations—in clamant streaks and rays of aluminum and resonant blacks and grays for the most part—is a deliberate assault on our image-making faculty." Not only does the original text carefully describe, in relatively straightforward language, the style and color of Pollock's paint, it also states unequivocally that Pollock must be purposefully disturbing and disrupting our "image-making faculty." Such a "deliberate assault" hastens "the disintegration of modern painting." *Time*'s bowdlerized version suggests Pollock is a by-product of the disintegration of modern painting, as if an already corrupt school of painting is meeting its proper end in the figure of Pollock. But Hunter places more positive motivations in Pollock's hands: his "deliberate assault on our image-making faculty" is an *intentional strategy*, a way of surmounting problems raised by modern painting. It is potentially liberating for all art, not a nihilistic epitaph for modern art.²¹⁷

Time also borrows part of Hunter's sentence, "At every point of concentration of these high-tension moments of bravura phrasing," without including his parenthetical "(which visually are like agitated coils of barbed wire)." Again, Hunter's text offers a tangible visual parallel for the paintings, but *Time* excludes it. A typical reader could summon a mental image of "agitated coils of barbed wire" rather easily in order to

²¹⁶ *Time* identifies the painting as "Pollock's 'Number Eleven'."

²¹⁷ Sam Hunter, "Among the New Shows," *New York Times* (January 30, 1949): X9.

envision what Pollock's paintings look like. Indeed, the reproduction of *Number 11A* does resemble agitated coils of barbed wire.

Time ends the essay as follows, "...What does emerge is the large scale of Pollock's operations..." But Hunter had finished that sentence by writing, "[and] his highly personal rhythm and finally something like a pure calligraphic metaphor for ravaging, aggressive virility." Although Sam Hunter does not pretend to speak to the average American who has little sympathy for abstract painting, he does—contrary to *Time*'s excerpted rendering of it—include several concrete, descriptive explanations of the appearance of the paintings as well as possible significance to the paintings: "ravaging, aggressive virility."

A closer analysis of Hunter's review reveals his own self-conscious—and patently highbrow—awareness that painting and writing are only equivalents, never equal, "What does emerge is the large scale of Pollock's operations, his highly personal rhythm and finally something like a pure calligraphic metaphor for a ravaging, aggressive virility." By definition, a "metaphor" replaces something else. Pollock's work is "something *like* a pure calligraphic metaphor," but not precisely that. If Hunter had claimed that Pollock's painting is calligraphy, it would suggest his painting is writing, and thus presumably could be read like writing. But "calligraphic metaphor" indicates that it is not calligraphy *per se*, and cannot be read. Hunter communicates to his readers that the tools of his own trade—written words—cannot represent these paintings. So Hunter is left to create verbal approximations.²¹⁸

None of this is relevant to *Time*'s art writers, who find the critic's prose turgid and useless. Thus *Time* proposes a simpler route, describing a Pollock painting as like "a child's contour map of the Battle of Gettysburg." What is more, the magazine manages to make the comparison without recourse to complex similes or metaphors.

²¹⁸ Hunter compounds his metaphor with the phrase "*something like* a calligraphic metaphor," creating a simile out of a metaphor. Pollock's painting is not even a metaphor for calligraphy, but *something like* it. Whether Hunter consciously constructed a phrase that functions at a double remove from painting, I cannot know. However, it is clear Hunter was actively struggling with how to talk about work that resists language. In so doing, he managed to construct a layered phrase that indicates the challenge of his undertaking as a reviewer.

Time's presentation and selective excerpts condition a reader to respond ambiguously, at the very least. It would be hard for any reader to agree with Hunter's assessment based on *Time's* re-presentation of it and the small, single reproduction of a painting. But for any reader to do so would be to swim against a powerful current of middlebrow opinion. It would mean the reader would have to adopt a minority stand. And if there is a clubby component to the elite group of highbrows, there is perhaps an even more clubby quality to the middlebrow writers and readers who are struggling hard to gain acceptance through conformity of manners and taste.

Still the "Gettysburg" battle was not over. Three weeks later, *Time* published a letter from a medical doctor in Loudonville, New York (February 28, 1949). The doctor writes:

Sir:

Jackson Pollock's painting *Number Eleven*, pictured in the Art section of *TIME* [Feb.7], interpreted by Sam Hunter of the *New York Times* as "cathartic disintegration," is nothing of the sort. Any biologist will tell him the Mr. Pollock made a subconscious endeavor to paint a jumble of spermatozoa, probably of bovine origin. He must have seen these animalcules under the microscope or in a picture at one time. That past experience in the subconscious mind of the artist has forced him to splurge them on canvas, at a moment of "high tension." If there has been any disintegration, it has been in the painting of many abnormal forms, *microcephalic* (small-headed), *acephalic* (headless), *atrachous* (tailless) spermatozoa with a few typical specimens.

D.A. Berberian, M.D.
Loudonville, N.Y.

Dr. Berberian's letter is printed with a side-by-side comparison of Pollock's *Number 11A* and a slide image of "spermatozoa," complements of the American Genetic Association.²¹⁹ Underlying Dr. Berberian's satirical proposition is a pointed comment on Sam Hunter's lofty, snobbish description. (At least insofar as it was reprinted by *Time*.) Dr. Berberian's corrective offers respectable hard science to counter Hunter's ambling, metaphorical description. The doctor restores sensible, pragmatic logic to Pollock's

²¹⁹ Dr. Berberian's comparison to sperm is apt, given that abstract expressionism (and Pollock in particular) is so tightly bound to virility and masculinity.

painting. Not coincidentally, Dr. Berberian's training and pedigree of medical doctor bolsters his trustworthiness.

The lesson of the Battle of Gettysburg is that there must be a more plainspoken explanation of the mysterious Jackson Pollock. *Time* offered the simple "child's contour map of Gettysburg"; Dr. Berberian offered "bovine spermatozoa." The operative rule is that the simplest, most obvious explanation is truly "The Best."²²⁰

In early 1952, *Time*'s art editors twice published essays about adolescent boys who successfully fooled art experts with drip-style paintings. One Canadian boy retrieved from a trashcan a cardboard used by commercial artists to test their tools—and submitted it as an original painting to the Toronto Art Gallery. The article, "Out of the Wastebasket," appeared one week after *Time* explained how "Connoisseurs croon over the 'technical mastery' of Jackson Pollock (who dribbles his colors from pails of paint.)"²²¹

The following month, in an article titled "Little Dripper," *Time* reported on a fourteen-year-old prep school student who sold his handmade Pollock-style paintings to fellow students for twenty-five cents. Soon a Boston gallery was selling them for up to four dollars.

Was Renny Drew, then, really a future Jackson Pollock? His results were certainly somewhat similar (*see cut*), and so was his technique. But last week Renny himself pointed out the moral to his story: "Anybody can do it."²²²

²²⁰ "The Best?" is the title of *Time*'s essay that facetiously presented Greenberg's claims for Jackson Pollock, David Smith, and Hans Hofmann. "Art: The Best?," *Time* 50 (December 1, 1947): 55.

²²¹ "Out of the Wastebasket," *Time* 59 (February 18, 1952): 70; "Abstractions for Export," *Time* 59 (February 11, 1952): 71.

²²² "Art: Little Dripper," *Time* 59 (March 31, 1952): 74.

Renny Drew, at least, had his head on straight. In the accompanying photograph he sports close-cropped hair, a jacket and tie and proudly displays his mock Pollock (Figure 31).

The magazine explains Drew's process: "First he pulls the cardboard out of a shirt that has just come back from the laundry. Then he smears it over with a neutral color. After that he holds a brush above it and lets some house paint drip. Finally, he sprinkles the whole affair with gold or silver powder."²²³ (*Life* magazine had reported that Pollock used "house paint" as well as aluminum paint.)²²⁴ At the heart of the matter is distinction. How does one distinguish between "advanced art" and adolescent experiments? No elaborate rhetoric is needed to cloud the process of the Little Dripper's work. It is easy—kids' stuff—and anybody can do it.

In the case of the boy, Renny Drew, and the adult, Jackson Pollock, process is completely demystified. It is worth noting that critics seldom "explain" how a traditional painting is created. Audiences have at least a vague understanding that traditional oil painting involves a long, deliberate process, based on a preconceived design and composition. The average viewer's interest is in the end result (in "the story" told), and not the process of making the painting. The complexity of the process presumably yields

²²³ Pollock had been using aluminum ("silver") paint since 1947.

²²⁴ Compare the description of Little Dripper's method with Dorothy Seiberling's description of Pollock, in *Life*, 1949: "He surrounds himself with quart cans of aluminum paint and many hues of ordinary household enamel. Then, starting anywhere on the canvas, he goes to work. Sometimes he dribbles the paint on with a brush. Sometimes he scrawls it on with a stick." [Dorothy Seiberling], "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?" *Life* 27 (August 8, 1949): 42-43, 45.

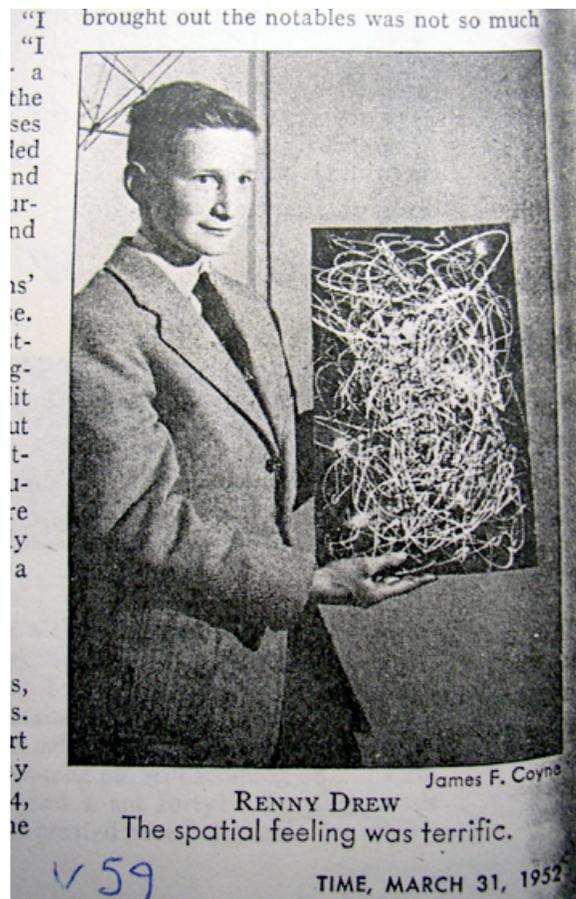


Figure 31. “Art: Little Dripper,” *Time* 59, March 31, 1952, page 74.

a parallel complexity in meaning. Unlike traditional or “conservative” painting, the drip method is easy to describe to a reader. The implication is that if it is so easy to explain, the end result is necessarily meaningless. *Time*’s earlier “Gettysburg” article set the stage for both “Out of the Wastebasket” and “Little Dripper”; the editors must have been tickled to report on the new generation of Jackson Pollocks.

Emily Genauer published a three-line summary of Pollock’s 1949 Betty Parsons show. Most of the paintings, Genauer claimed, “resemble nothing so much as a mop of tangled hair I have an irresistible urge to comb out. One or two of them manage to be

organized and interesting.”²²⁵ Her desire to groom Pollock’s “hair” echoes the grouching of an exasperated mother. It is noteworthy that here the painting itself is anthropomorphized into the artist. As is evident in Genauer’s 1949 report, this childlike adult’s need for discipline was exacerbated after the 1947 advent of the drip-style paintings. Similarly, John Graham, the European artistic mentor to Pollock from 1939-41, saw childishness in what others critics would soon call “mature Pollocks.” In the 1940s Graham made an about face, repudiating modernism. Of his former friend’s paintings, he allegedly huffed, “When a child pees on the street, it’s charming, but when an adult does, it is not charming.”²²⁶

Life Magazine: “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?”

Life’s August 1949 article, “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?,” provided the artist with the widest coverage in his lifetime. It is well known that the article was published the year after *Life*’s “Round Table on Modern Art,” at which Pollock’s *Cathedral* (1947, Figure 7) was discussed by the participants.²²⁷ Yet *Life*’s Pollock essay and the Round Table both may have been a direct response to *Life*’s biggest competitor, *Look* magazine.²²⁸ In February of the previous year *Look* published a “1948 Poll of Museum Directors and Art Critics.” Alongside photographs of the winning artists, *Look* asked, “Are These Men the Best Painters in America Today?” Jackson Pollock is not among them, appearing nowhere *on any list* of the leading museum directors, curator, and art critics. (Thirty-nine experts submitted lists of at least ten artists..) The winning results, *Look* noted, were “a high quality, middle-of-the-road

²²⁵ Genauer, 1949.

²²⁶ Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1989), p. 541.

²²⁷ *Harper’s Bazaar* was the first mass-market magazine to include his work (April 1944). *Vogue* published a color reproduction of *Reflections of the Big Dipper* in April 1948, *Time* first mentioned him in 1947, *Life* in 1948.

²²⁸ *Look* debuted one month after *Life* in January 1937. In contrast to *Life*, *Look* was biweekly, focusing on feature photographic articles, female movie stars, and female nude pictures. In August 1937, *Look* reportedly had a circulation over one million. Although *Look* was revived in the later 1970s, by 1971 its heyday was past. Alan Nourie, “*Look*,” in Alan Nourie and Barbara Nourie, eds., *American Mass-Market Magazines* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), pp. 225-233.

selection that will be questioned both by arch conservatives and by the most advanced abstractionists.”²²⁹ Despite *Look*’s snub, the omission may have aided Pollock’s case: in order for *Life* to outdo its competitor, the larger magazine selected an artist more radical and more controversial than any on *Look*’s top ten list.

Much the same the way that *Time* magazine’s epithet for Pollock, “Jack the Dripper,” has become comic shorthand, *Life*’s essay tends to receive a brief obligatory mention in the Pollock literature.²³⁰ The result is an overemphasis on Pollock’s meteoric rise to fame, Greenberg’s complicity in defining advanced American art and New York’s triumphant seizure of the title “art world capital.”²³¹ While these things did eventually happen, they are more a part of Pollock’s later reputation. Historians tend to omit the sociopolitical context of the *Life* essay and its genesis, the content and the readers’ responses. *Life* knew its readers would indignantly reject Pollock on the basis of their own American identity. It would have been hard for the magazine to find an artist who seemed more patently un-American.

Today it is known that the essay’s uncredited author was Dorothy Seiberling, *Life*’s art writer. The superlative “greatest” came, as *Life* explains on the essay’s first page, from “a formidably high-brow New York critic” (Figure 32). The unnamed critic is Clement Greenberg, who had praised Pollock during the previous fall’s Round Table.²³²

²²⁹ *Look*’s top ten list actually listed eleven artists—Lyonel Feininger and Jack Levine tied for tenth place. *Look*’s “Best Painter” contenders were, in descending order: John Marin, Max Weber, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Stuart Davis, Ben Shahn, Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield, George Grosz, Franklin Watkins and Feininger and Levine. “Are These Men the Best Painters in America Today?,” *Look* 12 (February 3, 1948): 44-47.

²³⁰ “The Wild Ones,” *Time* (February 20 1956): 70. My discussion of “Jack the Ripper” occurs at the end of this chapter.

²³¹ Serge Guilbaut’s groundbreaking book, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) was responsible for bringing many of these issues to the fore. He follows paths laid by Max Kozloff, Eva Cockcroft, William Hauptman, and Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock. Guilbaut’s analysis carefully restores the vivid political context to art of the late 1940s. I am in agreement with much of Guilbaut’s argument, although our projects have different focuses. Because he is interested in the immense power of Cold War governmental ideology and the eventual crowning of the New York School, he makes certain generalizations about the popular response that are not borne out in the periodicals. It is possible that the enormous impact of his book has caused later authors to reduce their attention on the popular reception.

²³² “Pollock will in time be able to compete for recognition as the greatest American painter of the twentieth century...”; Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 166 (January 24, 1948): 108.

(By this date, Greenberg had already claimed Pollock as the “strongest,” “best,” and “most powerful.”)



**JACKSON
POLLOCK**

Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?



Recently a formidably high-brow New York critic hailed the brooding, puzzled-looking man shown above as a major artist of our time and a fine candidate to become “the greatest American painter of the 20th Century.” Others believe that Jackson Pollock produces nothing more than interesting, if inexplicable, decorations. Still others condemn his pictures as degenerate and find them as unpalatable as yesterday’s macaroni. Even so, Pollock, at the age of 37, has burst forth as the shining new phenomenon of American art.

Pollock was virtually unknown in 1944. Now his paintings hang in five U.S. museums and 40 private collections. Exhibiting in New York last winter, he sold 12 out of 16 pictures. Moreover his work has stirred up a furore in Italy, and this autumn he is slated for a one-man show in cosmopolitan Paris, where he is fast becoming the most talked-of and controversial U.S. painter. He has also won a following among his own neighbors in the village of Springs, N.Y., who amuse themselves by trying to decide what his paintings are about. His grocer bought one which he identifies for bewildered visiting salesmen as an aerial view of Siberia. For Pollock’s own explanation of why he paints as he does, turn the page.

“NUMBER TWELVE” reveals Pollock’s liking for aluminum paint, which he applies freely straight out of the can. He feels that by using it with ordinary oil paint he gets an exciting textural contrast.

Figure 32. *Life* magazine, August 8, 1949, Page 42. Copyright Time-Life, Inc/Photograph of Jackson Pollock copyright Arnold Newman.

But historians rarely indicate that the “high-brow New York critic” had recently singled out *Life* magazine as a purveyor of philistinism.²³³ In the *Magazine of Art* a few months earlier, Greenberg argued that the art public had expanded to include a middle class “that becomes less and less willing to abide by the judgment of connoisseurs.” (Recall Robsjohn-Gibbings’ anti-modern rant and indictment of so-called connoisseurs and interpreters.) “People are no longer so ashamed as they used to be of bad taste,” wrote Greenberg, “Rather, without going to the trouble to improve it, they now defend it aggressively.” This expanded art public “expressly” does not want to be made conscious of its own inadequacy:

The new social areas that have been opened up for art consumption are able to make their wishes felt through such vessels of expression as *Life*, *Art News*, *Art Digest*, *Harper’s* and *Atlantic Monthly*. The philistinism that feels itself confirmed by this sort of art journalism is, I am afraid, more dangerous to culture than is generally realized.²³⁴

Greenberg’s remarks were a contribution to the *Magazine of Art’s* symposium on “The State of American Art.” What grabbed attention at the symposium was Greenberg’s solitary insistence that America—not Paris—was creating the strongest new art. (This assertion rankled Alfred Barr and James Thrall Soby, the latter of who retorted in the *Saturday Review of Literature*.) But whether the best art was coming from American or Europe, what Greenberg really skewered was the American public’s bad taste. The essay was a full-scale attack on American consumerism and vulgarity. It is the same Greenberg of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” now observing a middle class that had expanded dramatically since 1939. Surely his distinction between the “cultivated public” and the

²³³ This fact is almost never mentioned. Florence Rubinfeld, in her biography of Greenberg, addresses it referring to an argument between Greenberg and James Thrall Soby.

²³⁴ Clement Greenberg’s contribution to “A Symposium: The State of American Art,” *Magazine of Art* (March 1949): p. 92. The “symposium” was published as responses to the *Magazine of Art’s* questionnaire, introduced in the essay by relatively new editor Robert Goldwater. There were sixteen contributors. Three participants (Greenberg, James Thrall Soby and H. W. Janson) had also been in the *Life* Round Table. (A. Hyatt Mayor—also at *Life’s* Round Table—was not formally a part of the *Magazine of Art* symposium but was on its editorial board.) The other participants were Walter Abell, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Jacques Barzun, John I. H. Baur, Holger Cahill, Alfred Frankenstein, Lloyd Goodrich, George Heard Hamilton, Douglas MacAgy, Daniel Catton Rich, and Lionel Trilling. John Devoluy (*Paris Herald*) and Patrick Heron (*London New Statesman* and the *Nation*) offered the European perspective.

tasteless, consuming “art public” irritated the magazines he named, who catered to the latter “public.” One should not forget that Greenberg himself aided *Life* in their attempt to educate the new art public a few months earlier.

The great paradox is that Greenberg—despite his solitary position at the symposium that American artists are among the best “in the world”—sounds bitterly anti-democratic and anti-American in the *Magazine of Art* symposium. *Life* and its readers could now dislike Pollock on two counts: 1) Pollock’s work seemed absurd on its own, without anyone having to explain it; and 2) he was the favorite of a highbrow critic (and highbrows were seen as snobs).²³⁵

As for the content of the 1949 *Life* essay, it presents an engaging example of damning with facetious praise.²³⁶ The descriptions of Pollock and his working method repeatedly revisit the mess discourse and metaphors. The essay opens:

Recently, a formidably high-brow New York critic hailed the brooding, puzzled-looking man shown above as a major artist of our time and a fine candidate to become “the greatest American painter of the 20th century.” Others believe that Jackson Pollock produces nothing more than interesting, if inexplicable, decorations....Still others find it as unpalatable as yesterday’s macaroni.

What began in 1945 as “baked macaroni” here becomes “yesterday’s macaroni.” The description extends beyond the paintings to encompass the man himself. He has no control of anything, much less his own salivary functions: the caption of a photograph of Pollock at work reads, “Pollock drools enamel paint on canvas” (Figure 33). Drooling locates the source of his art at his mouth, emphasizing his inarticulateness in both words and pictures.

²³⁵ There is also the possibility that anti-Semitism played into the distrust of Greenberg, but that argument is beyond my scope here.

²³⁶ See Chapter Three for more on Henry Luce and *Life*’s editorial decisions. Luce eventually felt that *Life* was required to report on abstract expressionist painting, but insisted “the editors had an obligation to express their ‘attitude’ toward it.” Robert T. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise, Volume Two: 1941-1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 422.

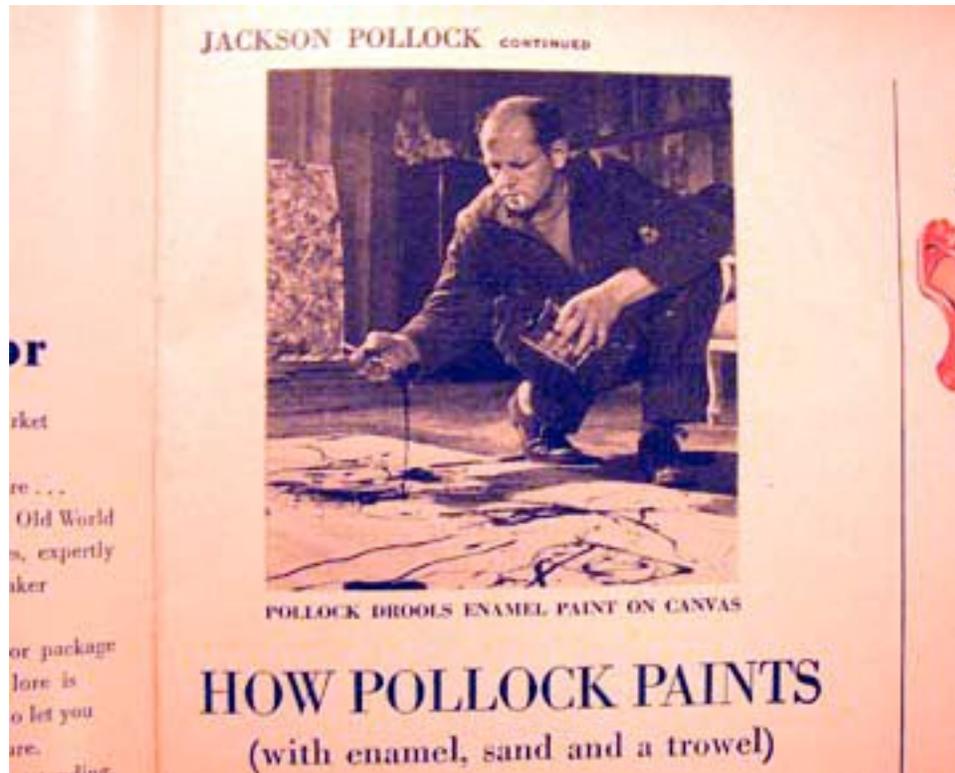


Figure 34. Detail from *Life* magazine, August 8, 1949, page 45.
Photograph copyright Martha Holmes.

Letters to Life: The Readers Reply

Life's readers were more vocal, if not always articulate. Regarding the question of whether Jackson Pollock was in fact the greatest living American painter, Time-Life chronicler Robert Elson later counted five hundred twelve letters that issued an unequivocal “no.” Only twenty readers responded favorably to *Life* in any way.²³⁷

²³⁷ The *Life* readers' letters were probably destroyed by Time-Life, Inc. around 1993. (Phone conversation with Pamela Wilson, Time-Life archivist, Fall 2002.) Time-Life had a policy of destroying documents after forty years, and Robert Elson finished his major book on the empire in 1973.

Of the twenty favorable responses, some writers did not support Pollock but commended *Life* for its daring reporting. Robert T. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise, Volume Two: 1941-1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 422.

Three weeks later after the Pollock essay appeared, *Life* published a selection of letters to the editors. Only one of the eight letters was positive; a fact that misrepresented the overwhelming actual ratio of negative to positive replies.²³⁸ *Life* appended an editorial note stating that when Pollock's *Number Seventeen* had recently been exhibited in Massachusetts, a ballot box was installed next to it with *Life*'s title question posted. After several days, the voting stood at thirteen yeses and one hundred fifty-three noes.²³⁹

Life published Frank Carselli's forthright response, which must have been one of many such letters: "Is Jackson Pollock the greatest living U.S. painter? No!" But Fred Boshaven Jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan) rephrased *Life*'s question: "Sirs: ...Is he a painter?"²⁴⁰

Burton Kessenick (Palos Verdes Estates, California) echoed two of the Round Table panelists in finding that *Number Nine* would make a splendid wallpaper panel, while the others would be exciting as fabric prints.

Mrs. F. D. O'Sullivan, Jr. submitted a photograph of her five and one half-year-old son standing next to his latest Pollock-like effort. *Life* published the photograph of the young "O'Sullivan and Work." Another writer, Preston Angell, submitted his own drip-method painting, titled "*Angell's Number One*," which the magazine also printed. In a perfect meeting of technician talk and modern art, Mr. Angell generated the figures: "Based on 23¢ per square inch for Jackson Pollock's *Number Nine*, Angell's Number One is valued at only \$21.65. However, a further calculation shows my time to be worth \$259.80 an hour, since I can turn them out all day at the rate of one every five minutes." What is measurable, Mr. Angell's calculations confirmed, is better. The final published letter was written by Peggy Dobbratz Abernethy of Vergennes, Vermont. She asked, "Sirs: ... Why use the word 'living' so loosely?"

²³⁸ The single published favorable response was a telegram from Chicago collector, Reginald R. Isaacs, who owned at least two Pollock paintings. Mr. Isaacs then sent Time-Life, Inc. a lengthier follow-up letter, retained in the Jackson Pollock archives. Reginald Isaacs (d. 1986) was an architect with an estimable career who collaborated with Gropius on *Walter Gropius: The Man and His Work*, which was published in two German volumes in the 1980s and posthumously in English.

²³⁹ Editor's note, "Letters to the Editor," *Life* (August 29, 1949): 9.

²⁴⁰ These and all the published letters I refer to are from "Letters to the Editor," *Life* (August 29, 1949), p. 9.

Letters to the East Hampton Post Office: More Readers Respond

More than five hundred people wrote to *Life* magazine. Many others wrote directly to Jackson Pollock in The Springs, New York.²⁴¹ Mrs. Helen K. Sellers wrote to the artist on August 8th, 1949, the date of the *Life* magazine essay:

Dear Mr. Pollock,

Just a few lines to tell you that my seven year old son Manning couldn't get over your picture Number Nine. Frankly, it looked like some of his finger-painting at school to me. However, he insisted that I write you to tell you that he cut it out of the "Life" and put it in his scrape-book [*sic*]²⁴²—the first painting that he has ever cut out.

He really has quite good taste as you can tell by the Cocker—Snafu—he is holding. He wanted you to have his picture in exchange for his copy of No. 9—which he loves.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Helen K. Sellers
1205 Montagne Ave
Palmetto Gardens
Charleston, S.C.²⁴²

Some letters express a genuine interest in further understanding Pollock's art. A nineteen-year-old asks Mr. Pollock if he would consider taking him on as an apprentice.²⁴³ Mr. W. W. Walker asks "why you paint as you do." Mr. Walker's long, handwritten letter explains that his father taught him about art, "such as depth, blending, texture (etc.)... [but] in your paintings I cannot see any of these." Other abstract paintings, he continues, have a "name so as to help the onlooker figure out what it is supposed to represent." Mr. Walker recalls how he was eventually able to see the figure in a painting called *A Nude Descending a Stair Case* "or something to that effect." But "yours however have no depth, or anything that I can see, you don't even follow a particular pattern." The letter continues:

²⁴¹ There were probably many more letters delivered to the Pollock's home in The Springs than are available today. Pollock's widow, Lee Krasner (or an assistant), must have sorted through the material before submitting it Pollock's papers to the Archives of American art.

²⁴² Jackson Pollock Papers, 1912-1975, Archives of American Art, Reel 3046. The photograph to which she refers is no longer in the collection.

²⁴³ Letter from Daniel D. McFarland, undated, Jackson Pollock Papers, 1912-1975, Archives of American Art, Reel 3046. A notation on Mr. McFarland's Handwritten letter reads "answered."

Instead of a name you number them, therefore abandoning the last means of trying to get across the meaning of your painting. I can't see what your paintings are supposed to represent. Just a pattern, or a picture of some sort. Another thing I can't understand is why you put sand on when the paint is still wet, other than to get it to stick. As for the odd fly and cigarette ash, I can't see any sense in the either.

If you would be so kind as to answer my letter and try and explain these points to me I will be more the grateful. I'll be waiting patiently and hope you don't take this letter as an insult, because it's not meant to be. I'm just a kid of 20 years old who has a few questions I would like answered please.

Yours truly,
W. W. Walker²⁴⁴

At least one letter requests that Pollock drip "a few drops" on an enclosed card and return it to the correspondent.²⁴⁵ It is likely that Pollock received many such requests in his lifetime. (In 1952, a writer asked Pollock to contribute to her class on modern art. If he is unable to do so, then "A dribble of aluminum paint and sand on a letter of refusal would be royally received, however!"²⁴⁶)

A fair comparison between the letters written to Jackson Pollock and the letters written to *Life* is unfortunately not possible, due to the selective preservation of documents. But some conclusions are warranted: *Life* magazine set its readers up with what one reader called the "semi-rhetorical question" of the essay's title. Once the magazine received the readers' letters, they were first edited and then excerpted for publication. The fact that some people wrote directly to the artist (an individual unknown to them) gave them a reason to be somewhat more polite. The extant letters to Pollock suggest that although people were confused about his art, they remained civil toward the artist.

Time magazine's infamous nickname for Pollock, "Jack the Dripper," indicates that magazine's opinion of him. Although the appellation was meant to earn chuckles

²⁴⁴ Letter from W. W. Walker of Fort Churchill, Manitoba, Canada, October 6, 1949, Jackson Pollock Papers, 1912-1975, Archives of American Art, Reel 3046.

²⁴⁵ Letter from H. M. Brehm, August 6, 1949, typed, New London, Wisconsin, Jackson Pollock Papers, 1912-1975, Archives of American Art, Reel 3046.

²⁴⁶ Letter from Priscilla Lindsay, March 7, 1952, typed, Jackson Pollock Papers, 1912-1975, Archives of American Art, Reel 3046.

from *Time*'s readers, it evokes a much darker aspect of Pollock's reception. The overt meaning is that Pollock is messy; the implication is that he is immoral. The actions of both Jack the Ripper and Jackson Pollock tore abruptly into the neatly woven fabric of their respective era's ideology and values.²⁴⁷ *Time*'s moniker "Jack the Dripper" links the violent—and gruesomely messy—murders of young women in the seemingly staid Victorian era to Pollock's social transgressions during the two most conformist decades of the twentieth century. "Jack the Dripper" intimates that violence and immorality inhabited Pollock's work as well.²⁴⁸ In midcentury America, messiness and immorality were in many ways inseparable.

²⁴⁷ "Jack the Dripper" was a subheading for *Time*'s Art column on "The Wild Ones," (February 20, 1956): 70. I am taking a step toward restoring cultural and historical weight to "Jack the Dripper," which has become a worn-out joke. If one is persuaded by that the Ripper murders were committed by Queen Victoria's renegade doctor in an attempt to cover up Prince Albert Edward's illegitimate child with the prostitute Alice Crook, then the murderer was protected—even authorized—by the Crown itself. Similarly, Pollock's work was later condoned and supported through secretive U.S. government channels, namely the CIA and the Congress for Cultural Freedom.

²⁴⁸ Of course, Victorian England was not nearly as prudish as popular imaginations have made it. Nor did every postwar American march in formation down acceptable middle class paths to success. From beneath homeowners' manicured lawns sprang film noir, jazz, be bop, violent detective fiction and Abstract Expressionist painting.

The innocuous interpretation of "Jack the Dripper" pervades the literature. For example, see the first page of Elizabeth Frank's biography: "[With Jack the Dripper] *Time* flashed its philistine wit....unable to see anything more than an aesthetic confidence game put over on a gullible public." Elizabeth Frank, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), p. 7.

Chapter Three:
UnAmerican Messes

“No man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do.”
William J. Levitt, 1948²⁴⁹

America “must recognize the Communist effort for what it is—an effort to inject poison into the bloodstream of America, to confuse, obscure and distort America’s vision of itself.”
J. Edgar Hoover, 1948²⁵⁰



If you could swab out
your sink drain...

you’d see this muck, crawling with sewer germs
that liquid disinfectants can’t hudge!

In every sink drain this nasty grease collects, making a
home for filthy sewer germs only inches from the family’s
food and dishes!

You can’t get rid of this grease with liquid disinfectants.
It takes Drano to *boil out* those solid fishes of filth and
close it down your drain!

Do this once a week, every week: Put a tablespoon of Drano
in your drain!

Drano’s special *observing, boiling* action scours out this
greasy muck—takes it away with all the germs that breed in
it! It keeps your drain clean, clear, always fast-running!

P. S. Remember—Drano also opens clogged drains in a jiffy!

Available in Canada

Drano[®]
removes the muck
that slows drains
and breeds sewer germs



Proved harmless to septic tanks

Tests by the well known Molar Laboratories prove the use of
Drano in normal quantities will not harm septic tanks—that, in
fact, it actually makes tanks work better and cuts down odors.
See final Dept. of Agriculture’s Bulletin #1828, which states
drain solvents are harmless to septic tanks. See 1947-48 *Homeowner’s*

Figure 35. Drano® advertisement, *Better Homes & Gardens*, 1949

²⁴⁹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 231.

²⁵⁰ J. Edgar Hoover, “A Statement On Communism,” p. 153, in Cyndy Hendershot, *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Publishers, 2003), p. 1.

A white, middle class American woman in a polka-dot apron holds a large cleaning swab over her pristine white kitchen sink. Her hair is fashionably coiffed, eyebrows perfectly tweezed, she wears a wedding ring. Her manicured left hand is slightly raised as if she is startled. Her face also shows surprise. And no wonder: the large swab in her right hand is dripping with black goop (Figure 35).

The photograph is from a 1949 advertisement for Drano® in *Better Homes & Gardens*. The ad copy explains: “If you could swab out your sink drain...you’d see this muck, crawling with sewer germs that liquid disinfectants can’t budge!” The reader understands the scene is hypothetical. The copy continues, “In every sink drain this nasty grease collects, making a home for filthy *sewer germs* only inches from the family’s food and dishes!”²⁵¹

The Drano® ad is about mess. Mess, in this case, wears the guise of black muck infiltrating the American Dream kitchen. The housewife is unsuspecting, even ignorant, but the Drano® company is on a mission of enlightenment. The ad is a veritable emblem of midcentury consumerism, class, gender, race, paranoia, hygiene, Protestant values, bacteriology and political threat.²⁵² The housewife’s gesture and dripping swab also happen to resemble Jackson Pollock’s radical new painting technique. By late 1949,

²⁵¹ “If you could swab out your sink drain...”, *Better Homes & Gardens* 28 (December 1949): 94.

²⁵² Each issue is worth lengthy discussion. The target audience of the Drano ad (women) is beyond the scope of my study. The popular press tends to place Pollock in a similar role as women and children. The Drano campaign included another version titled “If you could turn your sink upside down...”, featuring a housewife startled to see her sink floating in front up her, upside down and dripping black muck; *Better Homes & Gardens* (March 1950): 123. Again, the formal similarity to the results of Pollock’s post-1947 paintings is noteworthy.

millions of Americans had seen photographs of Pollock's painting technique.²⁵³ It was reported that the artist shunned paintbrushes in favor of sticks or basting syringes. But the gesture in the Drano® ad is one of cleaning house, not making art. The advertisement contains the mess to the end of the swab and the drain. But in Pollock's case, mess was uncontained.

Descriptions of Pollock's work—"chaotic," "messy" or "disordered"—were laden with a postwar ideology that merged Christian morality with American patriotism.²⁵⁴ This was Henry Luce's "American Century." A pervasive sentiment was that the country's moral imperative was to spread democracy to the world both militarily and culturally. The immediate postwar years saw innumerable speeches at civic clubs, chambers of commerce, and casual chats at grocery stores or gas pumps on "the need to get back to Americanism, returning to the American way, and the domestic dangers of Communism and Socialism."²⁵⁵ As the Cold War gained momentum, it became obvious to the Nation under God that the most heinous form of godlessness was Communism. Communism soon became, figuratively and literally, the ultimate unAmerican activity.

The American conception of social mobility and freedom was deliberately anti-European. Modern art, which originated in Europe and spread to America, was therefore

²⁵³ Photographs of Pollock painting were by Arnold Newman and Martha Holmes (in the Luce publications). Soon Hans Namuth's photographs would reach even wider audiences, but they were not published until 1951.

²⁵⁴ The cleanliness and whiteness of the Drano ad also makes it a stellar example of historical domestic ideology. Historian Michael Rogin noted, "A distinctive American political tradition, fearful of primitivism, disorder and conspiracy developed in response to peoples of color. That tradition draws its energy from threats to the American Way of Life and sanctions violence and exclusionary responses to them." Michael Rogin, "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies," *Representations* 6 (Spring 1984): 1-36.

²⁵⁵ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993), p. 9.

doubly unwelcome to many Americans. It would soon be a challenging era for many in the creative arts. Painter Paul Burlin characterized the mood by exclaiming that every painter who strayed from the “Kiss-mummy” school of painting was accused of being a pervert, communist—or both.²⁵⁶

In Chapter Two I discussed Pollock’s “mess” as disruptive to a status-conscious, consensus age middle class. This chapter examines the specific correlation between modern art and communism that was touted by politicians, writers, ad agencies and plain folks from wartime through its zenith in the early 1950s. I also discuss the potent domestic ideology that allied germs with communism, both of which were deemed filthy, contagious and underhanded. Sometimes it is hard to tell which presented the greater threat: modern art, or communism? In Chapter Four I will revisit the Pollock criticism and hone in on the powerful anticommunist undercurrent that affected the response to both the man and his paintings.

Pursuing Happiness, Modern Art, and Communists

In a 1940 plea for the country to enter the war, Henry Luce argued that the United States must “accept our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence.”²⁵⁷ The following year, he offered another version of the same imperative, invoking America’s classless society status: “Because America alone among the nations of the earth was founded on ideas and ideals which transcend class and caste and racial and

²⁵⁶ Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, p. 295.

²⁵⁷ Henry Luce, “The American Century,” quoted in Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine* (New York: Knopf, 1986), p. 119.

occupational differences, America alone can provide the pattern for the future.”²⁵⁸ Luce founded a publishing empire that included *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune* magazines. He was staunchly anticommunist, god-fearing, and appointed his editorial boards in kind. His philosophy extended to the mission of artistic activity: “There is reason to hope,” he said in 1943, “...that Art may fulfill itself in the re-creation of a more believing society.”²⁵⁹

Henry Luce, who had lived in China as the son of a missionary, insisted that *Life* magazine vividly promote “good taste in the use of the abundance of good things that our economy provides.”²⁶⁰ Luce and his editors favored art by American scene and regionalist painters. Looking back on a century of American taste, *Life* magazine wrote in 1949, “The fact is that the art Americans have *always* preferred is realistic and recognizable.”²⁶¹ In stark contrast, most modern art was considered unintelligible. In the 1950s, after consultations with his friend Nelson Rockefeller (a trustee at the Museum of Modern Art), Luce evidently took an about-face on modern art, convinced it was the last bastion of free artistic expression. According to official *Time-Life* chronicler Robert Elson, Luce was coaxed into agreeing that *Life* should present, six times a year, the finest examples of contemporary art, “whether or not we as editors like it.” He was never, however, persuaded by Abstract Expressionism. Dorothy Seiberling would later say that

²⁵⁸ Quoted in Robert T. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise, Volume Two: 1941-1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 18, from Luce’s “America’s War and America’s Peace,” *Life*, February 16, 1942. Luce’s jingoism did not go unchallenged—for a brief summary of the fallout, see Elson, *The World of Time Inc.*, pp. 18-19.

²⁵⁹ Elson, *The World of Time Inc.*, p. 421.

²⁶⁰ Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine*, p. 165

²⁶¹ *Life*, August 29, 1949, p. 56. Coincidentally, in the same issue *Life* published a selection of readers’ responses to the article on Jackson Pollock, which I discussed in Chapter Two; *Time* 46, “Art: Why Abstract?” (October 1, 1945): 74. The abstract painter discussed is Minnesota-born Hilaire Hiler.

in the late 1950s (although not as early as 1949), “we [employees at *Life*] presented it without any particular attitude and [Luce] gnashed his teeth but let us go our way.”²⁶²

Life's 1948 Round Table on “The Pursuit of Happiness” congeals around the same essential themes as Luce's “American Century” essay. (The next *Life* Round Table, later that year, would introduce Pollock to millions of readers.) Happiness, *Life* reminded its participants, was one of Thomas Jefferson's “unalienable rights” and is thus a political right. In the “Pursuit of Happiness” introduction, moderator and *Life* writer/editor R.W. Davenport explains: “The American democratic heritage itself provides the best common ground on which to base the moral principles required for the intelligent pursuit of happiness.”²⁶³ Davenport was practiced at taking the American pulse and offering it back to the public. He had been a managing editor of *Fortune*, a former Wendell Willkie campaigner, and the writer responsible for redrafting Luce's 1941 editorials, the basis for “The American Century” articles.²⁶⁴

The Round Table members agreed with Davenport: “The whole moral question—not only sacrifice but duty, honor, generosity, courage, fairness, justice, and so forth—is inseparable from the question of happiness.” In fact, to pursue happiness without reference to moral standards was destructive and self-defeating.²⁶⁵ The implication was

²⁶² Robert T. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.*, p. 422.

²⁶³ R.W. Davenport, “The Report of the Round Table,” *Life* (July 12, 1948): 65. Mary Lee Corlett discusses the moral/democratic pairings in “Jackson Pollock: American Culture, the Media and the Myth,” *Rutgers Art Review* VIII (1987): 71-106. Corlett's interesting article stands out for linking the American moral imperative to Pollock's art.

²⁶⁴ Quoted in Wainwright, p. 118. The source for Davenport's contribution is *Life* Managing Editor John Shaw Billings's diary.

²⁶⁵ “Round Table on Happiness,” p. 98.

that achieving happiness meant enforcing the moral imperative of democracy—as well as quashing democracy’s enemies.

The next of *Life*’s ambitious “Round Tables” would show no such solidarity among the invitees. The “Round Table on Modern Art” took on a greater challenge. Although the published version introduced Jackson Pollock’s *Cathedral* (1947) to many Americans, the touchstone for any contemporary discussion of the subject was Pablo Picasso. Picasso’s *Girl Before Mirror* was considered key to the Round Table’s “whole discussion of Modern Art” for three reasons: all participants accepted it as a “great modern classic,” it was not an “*extreme* example of ‘modernism’,” yet was “modern enough to puzzle the layman.” *Life* dedicated a full page, in brilliant color, to the 1932 *Girl Before Mirror*. The Cubist period painting, *Ma Jolie* (1911-12), appears on the facing page, far smaller but also in color.²⁶⁶ Other works discussed and illustrated were Joan Miró’s *Person Throwing a Stone at a Bird* (1926), Henri Matisse’s *Goldfish and Sculpture* (1912), and Georges Rouault’s *The Three Judges* (1928). Pollock’s peers in the “Young American Extremists” category were Willem de Kooning (represented by *Painting, 1948*), William Baziotis (*The Dwarf, 1947*), Adolf Gottlieb (*Vigil, 1948*), and Theodoros Stamos (*Sounds in the Rock, 1946*) (Figures 36 and 37).²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ Every painting was illustrated in color.

²⁶⁷ The Round Table discussion was held in the penthouse of the Museum of Modern Art. For that reason, virtually every work discussed was from the Museum’s own collection. (The exceptions were *Cathedral* and the Rouault painting, which was in Sam Lewisohn’s private collection.) Alfred M. Frankfurter’s critique of the process (an “altogether top heavy balance in favor of the long-tried and acknowledged chefs d’oeuvre”) is excellent, *Art News* 47 (November 1948): 13. *Time*, Luce publications’ news-oriented magazine, reported on *Life*’s Round Table in an Art essay titled “Out of the Fog”: *Time* 52 (October 18, 1948): 46.



Figure 36. Page from *Life*, “A Round Table on Modern Art” showing “Young American Extremists.”

The Table addressed “Surrealism” via Yves Tanguy’s *Slowly toward North* and Salvador Dalí’s *Spain*; Walter Steumpfig’s *Manayunk* was considered a strong example of contemporary representational art, and Morris Graves’s *Little Known Bird of the Inner Eye* was appreciated as “Mysticism.”



Figure 37. Page from *Life*, “A Round Table on Modern Art” discussing “Young American Extremists.”

In the storm of opinions and one-upmanship whirling around the Round Table, the two most significant topics were Picasso’s seminal role and the average American’s disdain

for modern art. Often those two issues were conjoined in the popular press, as when *Newsweek* prefaced a 1946 essay on thirty-three year old abstractionist Ad Reinhardt by explaining that the public “still has its troubles with Picasso.”²⁶⁸ Popular articles of the 1940s on Picasso tend to show respect for his drafting abilities and his status, but are skeptical of his prodigious output and mercurial styles. The artist’s personal life was also scrutinized: putative “art” essays reported on mistresses half his age and illegitimate children.²⁶⁹ In 1955, *Newsweek* explained that Picasso’s only play, *Desire Caught by the Tail*, was banned in the Netherlands for excessive bawdiness (June 13, 1955, p.55). By contrast, the *New York Times Magazine* had praised Picasso in 1944 for maintaining the high moral ground during the war.

In 1947 *Life* published a feature story on the Spanish artist that suggested the magazine had its own “troubles with Picasso.” Under the guise of illuminating Picasso’s oeuvre to its readers, *Life* misrepresented the world’s most famous modern artist. Shortly afterward in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, James Thrall Soby responded to *Life*’s mishandling of Picasso. Soby, former Chairman in Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, moved point-by-point over factual errors that he claimed amounted to *Life*’s “subtle devastation of their subject.” Soby saw *Life*’s efforts as transparent, and vehemently argued against such freewheeling slander that disguised itself as journalism: “Indeed, those who make a business of appealing to existing prejudices, with destructive

²⁶⁸ *Newsweek* (August 12, 1946).

²⁶⁹ *Time* hailed Picasso as the world’s “most famed living artist” on November 27, 1939; in 1940 *Life* explained he could draw “if he chose”; in 1947 *Life* wrote that “even to laymen, [Picasso] is the best known of living painters” and “an extraordinary draftsman.” For art world perspective, see Lincoln Kirstein, “What Will History Say of Picasso?,” *House & Garden* (October 1947): 132-33, 216.

intent, should study carefully the journalistic methods [*Life*] used.”²⁷⁰ (Surely it was no coincidence that *Life*’s long essay on Karl Marx delivered scandalous details of Marx’s private life, discussed below.) With unusual frankness, the Picasso incident pitted the highbrows—Soby and *The Saturday Review of Literature*—against the middlebrows—*Life*.²⁷¹ Soby also exposed *Life*’s disingenuous attempt to appeal to “highbrow readers” by quoting from “suitable authorities.” Both authorities happened to be anti-Picasso.²⁷² Evidently someone at *Life* thought to rectify the matter: at the Round Table on Modern Art the following year, Pablo Picasso was at center stage and James Thrall Soby was on the panel of experts.

One can only guess what Soby thought when *Time* magazine published an even more excoriating portrait of the artist in 1950. *Time*’s is a cover story: inside one meets the old and fat Picasso, with a belly that bristles with what are described as white, goat-like hairs. (A veiled allusion, maybe, to Picasso’s fascination with the ithyphallic satyr.) Picasso, *Time* avowed, has “done as much as anyone to develop the two distinguishing and disputed techniques of modern art: abstraction and distortion.”²⁷³

²⁷⁰ James Thrall Soby, “The Fine Arts: *Life* Magazine Stoops to Conquer,” *The Saturday Review of Literature* (December 6, 1947): 34-35.

²⁷¹ Soby, a writer and collector, was formerly Director of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. (He would later become a Trustee.) Highbrow and highbred, Soby came from a Hartford family of pay telephone manufacturers. See Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, p. 235, and Eugene R. Gaddis, *Magician of the Modern: Chick Austin and the Transformation of the Arts in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), pp. 142-143.

Time’s cover story on Picasso (June 26, 1950, pp. 50-58) uses a similar tactic as the *Life* essay, though *Time* is even more brutal toward Picasso and pointedly mentions his Communist Party membership.

²⁷² Soby observes “the two authorities chosen by *Life* are rather curious.” They are Michael Ayrton and Leo Stein, who were both demonstrably anti-Picasso.

²⁷³ “Captain Picasso’s Voyages,” *Time* (June 26, 1950): 50-58.

Lurking beneath the public's and the press's "troubles with Picasso" was the artist's Communist allegiance—the germs breeding in Picasso's kitchen sink. The popular press frequently pointed to his championing of the Republican cause in Spain and his membership in the Communist party. (*Time's* cover story includes an incongruous paragraph on Picasso's sudden announcement of his Communist Party membership.)²⁷⁴ In 1940, as the Germans descended on France, many people wondered about the Spanish artist's fate.²⁷⁵ In a wartime report announcing that Picasso (along with Matisse and Augustus John) was safe, *Newsweek* called him "the most revolutionary of living artists."²⁷⁶ Years later—during the height of McCarthyism—*Newsweek* would refer to him as "the prize artistic exhibit of the French Communists ever since he joined the party in 1944" and the "French Communists' star attraction for drifting intellectuals."²⁷⁷

In 1946, Hearst newspaper columnist Paul Mallon published a condemnation of modern art that ran in many of the country's Hearst publications. *Time* magazine greeted Mallon's "open letter" as news, publishing a report on it in *Time's* Art column. (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Fortune* frequently generated weekly articles by scanning the daily newspapers. See the cases of "Advancing American Art" and the Boston Institute—both discussed below.) Under the subheading "Paintbrush and Sickle," *Time* explained how Hearst columnist Mallon "took an off-duty peek beneath the crazy-quilt of modern art" and was mortified. *Time* printed a long quotation from Mallon's letter:

²⁷⁴ "Captain Picasso's Voyages," p. 55.

²⁷⁵ Picasso was never granted a visa to travel to the United States.

²⁷⁶ *Newsweek* (September 2, 1940): 52.

²⁷⁷ See July 5, 1954, p. 50 and July 19, 1954, p. 32.

Much modern art is psychologically Communist. Picasso, who led this school, is a Communist. He gave eminence to the imaginative school of art in which the observer or buyer must imagine how well the artist conceived the painting, no matter how poorly he executed it or presented it. This is precisely the same process of the Communist political doctrine which requires the observer to imagine the non-existent beauties of a way of life which reality would disclose as far from sublime. It has blood on its hands.²⁷⁸

Mallon performs a sleight-of-hand that became commonplace in anticommunist rhetoric. He equated the imaginative power of the modern artist to Communist political doctrine. Mallon's logic runs something like this: Picasso is a Communist. Picasso urges his observer to "imagine" something non-existent. Therefore any artist who demands viewer imagination must be a Communist. (The implication is that a socialist utopia is a "non-existent beauty.") Furthermore, Mallon invokes the darker aspect of mess making: like Communism, Picasso has "blood on his hands." It is a short leap from mistrusting modern art to mistrusting the politics of its practitioners; Paul Mallon's rant was typical.²⁷⁹

For modern art's detractors, the link between modern art and communism was simple: distorting reality was an act of subversion. At other moments in American history, such a claim might be meaningless or irrelevant. But the war and its aftermath pulled the country together in an unusually united front against all subversive activity, political or artistic. Variations on this theme are bountiful in both the news and art coverage of the popular press.

²⁷⁸ "Art," *Time* (February 25, 1946): 40.

²⁷⁹ Other notable essays that employ typical anti-modern art rhetoric are: George Biddle, "Modern Art and Muddled Thinking," *The Atlantic Monthly* 180 (December 1947): 58-61; and Albert Sterner, "On Modern Art," *The Art Digest* (January 15, 1947): 22, 31.

What is modern art?

The term “modern art” generally referred to any painting or sculpture since the turn-of-the-century that was not traditionally figurative or representational.

Contemporary popular journals rarely split hairs between modern figurative painting (e.g. Yasuo Kuniyoshi) and modern abstract art (e.g. William Baziotes). Such a broad category allowed a figurative painter like Kuniyoshi to be grouped together with an abstract painter like Robert Motherwell. “Modern art” and “abstraction” were generally interchangeable in the mass-market press.

Geometric and orderly abstraction, exemplified by the paintings of Dutch émigré Piet Mondrian, was justified to the layman as a suitable influence on building design, fabric, or linoleum floor patterns. I refer to this type of abstraction as “clean modern”: it resonated with the desire to experience life with the latest in stylish products and up-to-date consumer items. Although “clean modern” was meaningless to the layman as *art*, at least it seemed to have practical applications for living.

What I call “messy modern”—epitomized by Picasso—drew the greatest ire from viewers. Outside of magazines that dealt exclusively with art or architecture, the popular magazines tend to elide the distinction between clean and messy modern. Americans wanted art to communicate without an interpreter: neither clean nor messy modern art could do that. There are countless references throughout the popular press to modern art’s incomprehensibility, its deliberate obfuscation and its bogusness—the comments quickly become cliché.

Margaret Cresson's article "It's 'Modern'—But Is It Art?" characterizes the situation in lay terms, resorting to quips that were trite even in 1944 (as in the title of the essay). Cresson, the sculptor daughter of Daniel Chester French, published "It's 'Modern'—But Is It Art?" in the *New York Times Magazine*.²⁸⁰ Cresson invents a fictional protagonist: "the average man, beset by all kinds of worries in an anxious world" who seeks a spiritual lift at "a fine, big art show." But he is dismayed that the subject matter "clings pretty nearly to the sordid," and finds the sculptures "vulgar, grotesque." As if on cue, the average man locates a prize-winning sculpture that looks like "the month-old droppings in a cow pasture," and another that "looks as if it could have been made by a 5-year-old with his hands tied behind his back." Before exiting, he supposes, "The critics and the art dealers must know what they're talking about. They've been educated up to it." Although Cresson probably did not have him in mind, Pollock's work was described as childish and with similar scatological comparisons. He would offer an easy target against which to levy the same tired phrases. Had anyone asked him in 1944, Margaret Cresson's "average man" might have expressed antipathy for communists and their anti-American agenda as well.

New York Times art critic Edward Jewell replied to Cresson's essay the following week with "In Defense of Modern Art." Jewell, a conservative critic by today's standards, argued that modernists reflect their age and the viewer must be patient. Indeed there is much bad modern art, but it should not amount to a blanket repudiation of

²⁸⁰ *The New York Times Magazine* was largely highbrow, but actively sought to appeal to a broader group. (See note below).

“modernism.”²⁸¹ Readers’ letters published by the magazine support both views. (*New York Times Magazine* readers tended to be educated beyond “the average man.”)²⁸² Two published letters assert that Cresson’s complaints “contain all the misconceptions about modern art of the average citizen” and that she represents “the usual banal and hackneyed plea for the dull and outmoded in art.” But another writer agrees with Cresson, arguing “growth [in art] must be orderly, must be a sequence and have continuity, and not merely be different.” A fourth reader cites a Gallup survey for Sears, Roebuck & Company in which “hundreds of people—farmers, school teachers, laborers, clerks—from eighteen States” picked the next Sears catalogue cover. Overwhelmingly, they chose a painting by George Inness, “quite photographic in its appearance.” This same reader writes “‘modern art’ must be the product of a kindergartner’s drawing ability, plus mental obfuscation and a dash of laziness.”²⁸³

Art collector Sam Lewisohn voiced a frequently heard plea: art should be like an ethical, God-fearing individual. (Recall that Lewisohn joined *Life*’s Round Table on Modern Art.) He complained that the visitor to Fifty-Seventh Street is confronted with a variety of useless descriptions: “There are too many languages which we are asked to

²⁸¹ For Jewell on Pollock, see Chapters 2 and 4. A review by Jewell prompted Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb to draft the well-known 1943 “Statement” in which they expressed their “wish to reassert the picture plane.” For the 1944 “Defense of Modern Art,” Jewell ignored recent abstract painters like Rothko and Gottlieb, instead illustrating successful modern art with examples by Paul Cézanne, John von Wicht, Reginald Marsh, Charles Burchfield, John Sloan and Jacob Epstein.

²⁸² *The New York Times Magazine*’s circulation was well over 1 million by 1944. The main articles drew on current news items, but the magazine added a crossword puzzle (1942) and a home furnishings section (1943) in an attempt to broaden its readership. See Jane T. Bradford in Alan Nourie and Barbara Nourie, eds., *American Mass-Market Magazines* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 327

²⁸³ Margaret Cresson, “It’s ‘Modern’ — But Is It Art?,” *The New York Times Magazine* (July 23, 1944):18-19, 40. Edward Allen Jewell, “In Defense of Modern Art,” *The New York Times Magazine* (July 30, 1944): 8-19, 32-33. For letters to the editor, see August 6, 1944, p. 31 and August 13, 1944, p. 34.

master,” he writes. The new vocabulary is a “Tower of Babel.”²⁸⁴ Fusing a moral code into his prescription for modern painting, Lewisohn expounds: “Painting should be like a well-balanced individual, with character and substance, not merely form.”²⁸⁵ Such conflation of the artwork with the artist was par for the middlebrow course. It had a deleterious effect in Pollock’s case. Recall *Time*’s 1955 quip that “you cannot tell very much about the champ without a personal introduction.” After the magazine portrayed Pollock as the “bush-bearded” creator of “gaudy drippings,” would *Time*’s readers be interested in meeting “the heavyweight champion of abstract expressionism”?²⁸⁶

T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings’ book-length attack on modern art, *Mona Lisa’s Mustache: A Dissection of Modern Art*, was published in 1947. Modern art is conveyed as a wicked and dangerous cult, a revival of ancient systems used in magic and the occult. Thus it represents the resurgence “of one of the oldest systems for getting power.” Modern art’s “incomprehensibility” is fully intentional: it is a carefully planned plot to gain power by convincing the “average gallery-goer” that all his “rational thought and general education” is worthless. Today’s modern art “authorities”, writes Robsjohn-Gibbings:

²⁸⁴ Francis Henry Taylor, director of the Metropolitan Museum, published a 1945 book on museum shortcomings called *Babel’s Tower*.

²⁸⁵ Sam A. Lewisohn, “Is There Chaos in Art?” *The New York Times Magazine* (March 4, 1945): 47. Lewisohn, a financier, collector and founding trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, inherited his father’s collection. Lewisohn’s own collecting was heavily weighted toward Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. According to Lynes, “[Lewisohn’s] taste in American painters ran to the work of Jack Levine, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Burchfeld, and he progressed into abstraction only as far as Stuart Davis.” When he died in 1951, only three of his paintings went to the Museum of Modern Art; the best work went to the Metropolitan, where he had been elected to the Board of Trustees in 1949; see Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, p. 313 and Aline Saarinen, *The Proud Possessors: The Lives, Times, and Tastes of Some Adventurous American Art Collectors* (New York: Random House, 1958), pp. 227-228.

²⁸⁶ See Chapter Four for a lengthier discussion of *Time*’s “The Champ?”

are responsible for the misleading cult of aesthetics and ‘art appreciation.’ To start with the premise that art is sublime and beyond the understanding of the average man, who must therefore be taught to ‘appreciate’ it, is absolute nonsense. Before the coming of modern art and its spokesmen no one needed a course of ‘art appreciation’ to understand just what he was looking at. You looked and you liked what you saw or you disliked it. But never did you look and then say: “Tell me what I am looking at.”²⁸⁷

Mona Lisa’s Mustache reads like a conspiracy-theorist’s ramblings, exposing the secret society of modern artists and critics and their allegiance to the Dark Powers. But its pseudo-Populist stance and condemnation of difficult language must have resounded with many readers. Alfred A. Knopf printed a second edition in December 1947, a third in 1948.²⁸⁸

Calling the book “provocative and entertaining,” *Newsweek* hailed *Mona Lisa’s Mustache* in an article titled “The Modern Art Racket.” All that any “American who has questioned modern art...need do is read the first chapter and then dip into the last one. He will emerge with all the facts, and then let him try to talk him down!” *Newsweek* explains that Robsjohn-Gibbings believes America has rejected modern art “because it has retained the power to laugh.” In other words, laughter breaks the spell of occult mystification. The veracity of Robsjohn-Gibbings’ claims regarding modern art

²⁸⁷ T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Mona Lisa’s Mustache: A Dissection of Modern Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), pp. 13 and 11, respectively. Robsjohn-Gibbings, a writer and furniture designer, favored sleek (read “clean”) modern design but had no tolerance for messy modern; Also see *Time* on Robsjohn-Gibbings (January 30, 1950).

²⁸⁸ I presumed *Mona Lisa’s Mustache* flew too low for Greenberg’s radar, even in the critic’s early career. I was mistaken: “Very obviously, this book was written to make money. The vulgarity of its learning and thinking, the misinformation it contains, and the violent and banal simple-mindedness with which it mauls its material to fit its thesis—all these disqualify it from serious discussion. But, as sometimes happens with very, very stupid people, its author does have hold of the truth by a hair on its tail...” The “truth” to which Greenberg refers is that there was “something very wrong” with surrealism, futurism and pre-Raphaelitism. Greenberg’s review was published in *The Nation* (January 17, 1948). Reprinted in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays II*, pp. 199-200.

notwithstanding, laughter was indeed one of the weapons used against Pollock in popular journals. Robsjohn-Gibbings's diatribe against the "misleading cult of aesthetics and art appreciation" effectively summarized many objections to Pollock and his interpreters (who, more often than not, did indeed obfuscate).

One of the most thorough invectives against "Modern Art" on the grounds of its inability to communicate with its audience was written by Albert Sterner, a self-described "veteran painter and illustrator." It appeared in a 1947 issue of *Art Digest*. The thoroughly pugilistic essay was Sterner's "last statement," instilling it with epitaphic sobriety. Sterner declares that the painter or sculptor's task has always been to set down "things of his vision" in concrete forms, although there are various methods through which to accomplish this. But whatever method the artists pursues, his performance is motivated by the desire to *communicate*. A main attribute of any work, then, must be *lucidity*.²⁸⁹

An artist, continues Sterner, must be a practiced craftsman who has spent much time acquiring the means to convey his pictorial ideas and expressions lucidly. Sterner explains that "the primeval savage" who created primitive, rough-hewn idols was simply trying to develop sufficient means to "propitiate his gods." These primitive artists worked within the confines of their historical period and ability.

But the current trend by contemporary American artists to imitate these forms and their exaggerated interest in even the most mediocre of these curious primitive carvings

²⁸⁹ Sterner, "On Modern Art," p. 22.

and paintings is deplorable. It is as ridiculous as would be a sudden cult and admiration for all adults who could *walk* or *think* like two-year-old children.

The child's instinctive desire is to walk like the adult...If playwrights wrote or actors spoke their lines in the obscure, unintelligible manner in which most so-called modern artists present their vague and *hopelessly unformed ideas*, audience would not stay for a moment in the theatre. The man, then, who thinks he can paint if he tries and bungles something on canvas should no more be tolerated by the public than the mumbling actor or the artless violin trio.²⁹⁰

Sterner's archconservative view shares much with the average American. Indeed, he seems blood brother to Robsjohn-Gibbins himself, especially when Sterner mentions the "tricksters and charlatans" who create modern art.

Karl Marx's Mess

Karl Marx...made class a dirty word.
Vance Packard, *The Status Seekers*²⁹¹

In Chapter One, "A Classless Society," I discussed the myth and reality of American classlessness. One had to tread carefully when broaching the issue of classlessness. In *Capitalism in America: A Classless Society* (1950), Frederick Martin Stern attempted to smooth over an increasingly touchy subject by explaining that Americans agree with the ideal that Karl Marx "held out to the impoverished and humiliated masses everywhere: *the classless society*. [Americans] call it freedom and equality, but they mean the same thing: equal opportunity and dignity for all."²⁹² Stern's rephrasing of Marxist tenets highlights a fundamental incongruity in discussions of

²⁹⁰ Sterner, "On Modern Art," p. 31. Original emphasis.

²⁹¹ Packard, *The Status Seekers*, p. 4.

²⁹² Emphasis in original, p. 7. Aware that his marriage of capitalism and classlessness might invite mockery, Stern devotes several pages to the history of revolutionary ideology in Russia.

American classlessness: “Classless society” was Marx’s slogan, but it applied to a *communist* society. Marx’s primary two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, were antagonistic. Marx’s classless society referred to a specific historical moment that would arrive only after the class war. The idea of classlessness within the mid-century American capitalist system would have been inconceivable, even ludicrous, to Marx’s nineteenth century eyes.

Sociologist Milton Gordon confirmed that Marx’s shadow was partly to blame for social science’s failure to develop a coherent theory of class. Vance Packard’s pithy remark is a reminder of how long that shadow was cast.²⁹³ If Marx was able to make class a dirty word, then the man himself must be very dirty indeed.

The filthy Marx was described in detail for millions of readers in a 1948 *Life* magazine essay.²⁹⁴ The article, by Hubert Kay, is longer than most *Life* essays. It is a stunning example of anti-communist propaganda geared to appeal to a middle class audience’s sense of pride and cleanliness. “Karl Marx,” the headline declares, was “beset by creditors, carbuncles and a houseful of romping children.” Two other bold-faced subtitles stand out: “Marx lived in dirt and squalor” and was “Insolent and Intolerantly Arrogant.”

The majority of *Life*’s essay portrays personal details about the lout who “despised and shunned the toiling masses whose cause he championed.” Some of the facts author Kay presents are: Marx condemned his wife and children “to lives of

²⁹³ Both the Right and the Left were skeptical of communism by the 1950s, particularly with increasing proof of Stalin’s atrocities.

²⁹⁴ 1948 was the 100th anniversary of *The Communist Manifesto*.

wretched poverty” (three daughters who lived to maturity ended up committing suicide), he was expelled from University for “nocturnal riots and drunkenness,” was “egoistic, neglectful of his parents, possessed of a ‘demon’ and of a heart that seemed less great than his brain,” and he drove his wife to the “verge of nervous collapse.” Marx was “gloomy, bookish, solitary, rude and coarse-tongued.” He never held a “regular job,” having been rejected once for his poor penmanship. All this is related on the first page, accompanied by a photo whose caption explains, “A few years before he died Karl Marx, the prophet of revolution, looked like a bourgeois patriarch.”²⁹⁵

The *Life* reader who continues past page one learns that Marx sponged off Friedrich Engels and even had his friend ghostwrite for him.²⁹⁶ The Marx family resided six years in a London slum. *Life* includes a police officer’s eviction report that reads like an archaeological excavation:

There is not one clean or decent piece of furniture in either room, but everything is broken, tattered and torn, with thick dust on everything and the greatest untidiness everywhere. [On] a large old-fashioned table...are manuscripts, books and newspapers, as well as the children’s toys, odds and ends from his wife’s sewing basket, cups with broken rims, dirty spoons, knives and forks, lamps, an inkpot, tumblers, some Dutch clay pipes, tobacco ashes—all in a pile on the same table.

[...] smoke and tobacco fumes make your eyes water.... Everything is dirty and covered with dust, and sitting down is quite a dangerous business. Here is a chair with only three legs, then another, which happens to be whole, on which the children are playing at cooking.

²⁹⁵ Hubert Kay, “Karl Marx,” *Life* 16 (October 18 1948), p. 63. At seven pages of text with relatively small Bettman Archive photographs, the Marx essay is longer than many *Life* articles. It is only at the end of the article that one finds two short subsections offering thumbnail summaries of Marx on class and capitalism, and the final section addresses “Marx and the Russians.”

²⁹⁶ That is, he lacked common pride and was intellectually and economically dishonest. The reader has already learned that *Capital’s* 2500 pages represent “little first-hand observation on Marx’s part.”

That is the one that is offered to the visitor, but the children's cooking is not removed, and if you sit down, you risk a pair of trousers.²⁹⁷

Such was the life of the man who wrote “the bible of communism on which Russia's policy is based.” The *Life* essay may have offered the most exposure many Americans had to Karl Marx and his ideology. Such intertwining of Communism with filth and grime was standard for American Cold warriors; perhaps the Marx essay was more extreme due to the sensitive subject. Have the Russians, the magazine finally asks in disbelief, truly fallen for this carbuncle-covered charlatan's so-called “ideas”?

Containment and The Terms of the Debate

Not even Karl Marx's loved ones were safe. His fraudulent ideology seeped into his squalid surroundings, infecting his physical body—or maybe it was the other way around. However the contagion spread, Marx should have been contained.

There is a single word that binds anticommunist rhetoric to artistic practice in the late 1940s: containment. It functioned as the defining political metaphor for America's postwar foreign policy strategy. George Kennan, the Princeton-educated diplomat who served several tours in the Soviet Union, introduced the concept in early 1946. Kennan's so-called “Long Telegram” was delivered from Moscow, intended to clarify for a perplexed U.S. administration the significance of Stalin's speech on the eve of the election of the Supreme Soviet. Kennan outlined the dangers of the Soviet Union's domestic and foreign policy, insisting there could be no peaceful co-existence with the

²⁹⁷ Kay, “Karl Marx,” pp. 64 and 67.

“malignant parasite” of communism.²⁹⁸ The United States, he entreated, must embark on a “patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” In Kennan’s vision, containment would limit Soviet expansion by offering aid to threatened countries and restoring the international balance of power. Such restoration demanded quarantining Communism abroad. With the Truman Doctrine of 1947, America formally enacted official containment policy by making unlimited commitment “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”²⁹⁹

The Truman Doctrine’s first manifestation was in immediate military aid to both Greece and Turkey.³⁰⁰ In presenting his case to Congress, the President explained that if Greece were to fall under the control of an armed minority (backed by the Soviet Union), Turkey would be in imminent danger. “Confusion and disorder,” Truman said, “might well spread throughout the entire Middle East.” The sentence is characteristic of containment rhetoric, especially the opposed concepts of “spreading” and “containing.” Many things that “spread” became efficacious anticommunist metaphors: disease, germs, and misinformation, even styles of painting.

Major newspapers and magazines covered the text of Truman’s landmark speech across the nation. His language was appropriately commonplace. As President of the

²⁹⁸ The “Long Telegram” was sent in 1946; in 1947 Kennan published an essay form under the pseudonym “X”: George Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, reprinted in Walter Lippman, *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy* (1947; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

²⁹⁹ Kennan argued (until his death in 2005) he was not responsible for official U.S. policy that had its seed in his original report. His idea of containment was a political strategy, not a military one.

³⁰⁰ At a meeting with congressional leaders, Dean Acheson, Truman’s Undersecretary of State, vied for assistance to Greece and Turkey, explaining “Like apples in a barrel infected by one rotten one, the corruption of Greece would affect Iran and all to the east.” Allan M. Winkler, *The Cold War: A History in Documents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 128.

United States, his goal was to address the public in easily understood terms so as to persuasively argue for military support in Greece and Turkey. “Confusion and disorder” were things most people—especially upwardly striving middlebrow Americans—strove to avoid.

Highbrow, Lowbrow, Germbrow

At the same time, America put fresh vigor into the overdetermined discourse of immunology. Biological metaphors have long appeared in political history: foreign powers are readily described as foreign bodies. Such analogies are especially potent for transferring an abstract, ideological concept directly into the human body. Not everyone understands communist philosophy (especially if their only source was *Life* magazine’s lesson on Marx), but everyone knows how it feels to be sick.

At mid-century, the metaphors were revived to represent the Communist threat to Americans. Public figures including President Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Attorney General J. Howard McGrath, Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson, Secretary of State George C. Marshall and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover all invoked germs or disease.³⁰¹ In assessing the future of America vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in 1946, George Kennan considered the country’s susceptibility: “Much depends on the health and vigor of our

³⁰¹ Secretary of State George C. Marshall described Western Europe as a patient succumbing to disease: “The patient is sinking while the doctors deliberate.” Allan M. Winkler, *The Cold War: A History in Documents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 29. Geoffrey S. Smith, Queen’s College, “Containments, ‘Disease’, and Cold War Culture,” p. 2 and footnotes 12 and 13. At his inaugural address as President of Columbia University, Dwight Eisenhower said “Ignorance of Communism, fascism, or any other police-state philosophy is far more dangerous than ignorance of the most virulent disease,” Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p. 42.

own society. World communism is like a malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue.”³⁰²

The woven rhetoric of disease, germs and Communism was so pervasive as to become commonplace. As a New Jersey housewife remarked on communism in 1953, “It’s like a germ. It can spread.”³⁰³ References to keeping a clean domestic interior had a not-so-subtle correlation to isolationism and the threat of a Fifth Column in the United States. As the Drano® ad indicated, advertisers knew exactly how to play on and exacerbate American paranoia. Listerine’s testaments for its germ-fighting power were published pages away from articles on anticommunist trials.³⁰⁴

Alger Hiss versus Whittaker Chambers

Examining *Time*’s coverage of the Alger Hiss-Whittaker Chambers case and the interspersed advertisements illustrates how effortlessly the germ discourse melded with anti-Communism in the mass-market press. It also shows the more disturbing fact of *Time*’s strongly biased reporting: the magazine felt it was vital that Whittaker Chambers

³⁰² George Kennan, memo to the State Department, “Moscow Embassy Telegram #511,” February 22, 1946, in *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945-1950*, eds. Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p.63. This became known at the “Long Telegram.” Soon after Kennan wrote the about similar dangers under the pseudonym “X” *Foreign Affairs* magazine, called “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.” For an account of Kennan’s relationship to containment in the late 1940s, see Robert P. Newman, “NSC (National Insecurity) 68: Nitze’s Second Hallucination,” in *Critical Reflections on the Cold War: Linking Rhetoric and History*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst and H.W. Brands (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), pp. 57-65.

³⁰³ Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955), p. 162.

³⁰⁴ Other advertisements that exploit the hidden danger of germs and associations with “modern”: Scottissue Towels belong in “modern, sanitary washrooms” and “keep germs from spreading”; *Time* 40 (October 1, 1945); Listerine, “Infectious Dandruff Labels You ‘Objectionable,’” features an overlay image of Petri dish of “pityrosporum ovale” onto a white-collared man (similar to the Listerine ad discussed in this chapter), *Time* 40 (October 29, 1945): 8; Hotpoint Disposall “Instantly Banishes Garbage the Modern Way!”, *Time* 53 (January 17, 1949): 6; “Rubbish heaps and city dumps are hiding places for billions of public enemies. They harbor fast-multiplying bacteria and are the favorite haunts of rats, flies and other carriers of pestilence,” “Disease Fighter” ad for Caterpillar Diesel, *Time* (January 17, 1949).

win the case against Alger Hiss. Hiss was a rising star in the State Department, a former New Deal official who attended the Yalta Conference.³⁰⁵ His name appeared regularly in the press since August 1948, when Chambers appeared before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee and named Hiss as part of a communist ring.³⁰⁶ Chambers, a former Communist Party member and ex-Soviet agent turned apostate, claimed to have known Hiss through Party activity in the 1930s. By 1948 Hiss had become President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. When the Hiss-Chambers case began heating up in late 1948, *Time* covered the breaking news assiduously in its “National Affairs” column. The disclosure of the “pumpkin papers” (Chambers melodramatically produced incriminating evidence from a pumpkin patch on his Maryland farm) was accompanied with four columns and two photographs in *Time*’s December 13th issue. Until December 13, 1948, Whittaker Chambers had been a senior editor at *Time* magazine.³⁰⁷ Henry Luce reluctantly accepted his resignation after the nation’s newspapers reported Chambers’s position at Time, Inc, calling him “the 30,000 a year Senior Editor of *Time*.” A week later, Chambers’ name was removed from *Time*’s masthead. The following week, December 20th, “National Affairs” devoted four illustrated pages to the Hiss-Chambers case

Time magazine was barraged with readers’ letters, the vast majority of which were critical. But readers were not angry that *Time* compromised journalistic ethics by

³⁰⁵ David Halberstam says Hiss was a high level clerk.

³⁰⁶ Chambers first submitted a list of people he knew from his Communist days to Assistant Secretary of State Adolf A. Berle, Jr., in 1939. Hiss’s name was on the list.

³⁰⁷ Chambers is listed among the Senior Editors, near the top of the masthead, in *Time*’s December 13 edition (p. 19). By the December 20, 1948 issue, Chambers’s name was removed.

favoring Chambers; rather, they denounced the magazine for having an ex-Communist on its staff. Thus it was, as Robert Elson confirms in his history of Time, Inc., “very much in *Time*’s interest that Chambers win his case. The directors [of Time-Life, Inc.] authorized employment of counsel on his behalf.”³⁰⁸

Advertising Containment

That same week in *Time* the Army Medical Department Team printed a full-page advertisement headlined: “Germs recognize no pacts of peace.” “Enemies of good health,” the copy states, “don’t know the meaning of *surrender*.”³⁰⁹ On page five of the issue is a full-page ad for General Electric’s Disposall, featuring an attractive housewife in an apron (Figure 38). She scrapes dinner residue off a white plate into the garbage disposal, exclaiming, “No more garbage in this home—ever!” The G.E. Disposall ad focused on what every upwardly striving American knew: one must have an up-to-date, clean kitchen:

You’ve seen the last of messy, odorous, pesty garbage—the moment you install a General Electric Disposall.....[Let it rid] you home forever of unsanitary, germ-breeding garbage. Make yours the most modern, cleanest of kitchens.³¹⁰

“Modern” here is used in its innocuous sense, that of being up-to-date and contemporary.

On the opposite page from the G. E. Disposall is a large advertisement for Listerine. The ad belongs to Listerine’s long-running campaign, variations of which appear in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*. “Catching Cold?” asks the

³⁰⁸ The first “batch” of letters numbered 156 (144 of which were critical), and “the trend continued”; Elson, *Time, Inc.* I: 239.

³⁰⁹ *Time* (December 20, 1948): 105, published by the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force Recruiting Service.

³¹⁰ “No More Garbage in This Home—Ever!” *Time* (December 20, 1948): 5.

ad as a man sneezes into a handkerchief. An inset illustration depicts eight strains of bacteria in Petri dishes. The caption for the bacteria explains:

“SECONDARY INVADERS” These germs, even when a cold is initiated by a virus, contribute to much of its misery when they stage a mass invasion of throat tissues.

The inset with the illustrated bacteria is overlaid onto part of the photo illustration of the suffering victim, making the bacteria seem to invade the handsome white-collar man at a vulnerable moment of mid-sneeze.

As far as advertising is concerned, the message is clear. But what about the visual differences between the man and the bacteria? He is depicted in a representational style that may have originated in a photograph. His realistic appearance is meant to evoke empathy from the reader. In fact, his lean, clean-cut appearance causes him to resemble Alger Hiss more than Whittaker Chambers.³¹¹

³¹¹ The bacteria, on the other hand, look like curvy, dark strands and chains of eccentric circles suspended in a two-dimensional plane. Even though each bacterium looks “realistically” magnified, by their nature they all appear abstract. The “invaders” are abstract. If the bacteria were art, they would be called “biomorphic,” a term that describes a branch of abstract modern art. “Biomorphic” was in use for several years by 1948. The term is readily accepted today, but in 1950 it did not appear in Webster’s dictionary. In 1951, the editor of *Art Digest* argued “biomorphic” was wrongly employed to describe irregularly curvilinear forms such as kidney shapes. If it was intended to evoke biological origins, he asks, would not “a Petty or Varga girl, or a Bouguereau nude...be rightly called biomorphic”? Paul Bird, “The Editor’s View,” *Art Digest* 25 (February 15, 1951): 5.

NO MORE GARBAGE IN THIS HOME—EVER!



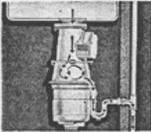
Amazing kitchen appliance handles all food waste—grates it—washes it down the drain

YOU'VE seen the last of messy, odorous, pesty garbage—the moment you install a General Electric Disposall.* This wonder appliance fits snugly under your kitchen sink—handles food waste for you, shreds it, flushes it away.

Just scrape all leavings—pits, peelings, fruit rinds, even chop and fish bones—into the drain opening. Start the Disposall—and forget you ever heard of garbage!

Let this electrical marvel go to work for you—easing your kitchen chores, ridding your home forever of unsanitary, germ-breeding garbage.

Make yours the most modern, cleanest of kitchens. Just see—in these pictures—how simple the Disposall is to operate:



Fits any modern sink with a 3½- to 4-inch drain opening. This is how the Disposall looks installed under your kitchen sink. This is how to make your kitchen modern, clean, sanitary.



This is all you do: 1. Scrape all food waste into drain opening. 2. Lock protruding sink cover with a twist to the left. 3. Now turn on the cold water. This action automatically starts the Disposall.



The Disposall grates all food waste and congealed grease into tiny particles. It flushes them harmlessly away into sewer or septic tank. The Disposall works perfectly with either! You'll never see garbage again—with this wonderful appliance in your home!



This is what users say: A recent survey among Disposall users shows 91% of those questioned highly enthusiastic about this wonder appliance. Typical comments: "Saves me 32 minutes each day!" "No more garbage odors!" "Perfect!"

Ask for a FREE Demonstration

First step is to see your retailer. He'll show you how easily a Disposall can be installed in your kitchen—how it fits most every sink.

Ask him, too, about the perfect labor-saving combination, the All-Electric Sink, that teams up a General Electric Dishwasher with the Disposall! General Electric Co., Bridgeport 2, Connecticut.

For an attractive four-color booklet on the General Electric Sink, send 10¢ to Box 28-16, A. & M. Dept., General Electric Company, Bridgeport 2, Connecticut.



DISPOSALL

DISPOSALL MEANS
GOOD-BY TO GARBAGE,
AUTOMATICALLY!

*General Electric's registered trade mark for its food-waste disposal appliances.

GENERAL  ELECTRIC

Figure 38. General Electric Advertisement, "No More Garbage in This Home—Ever!"
Time, December 20, 1948, page 5.



Catching Cold?

Gargle
LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC
—QUICK!

Germs Reduced as Much as 96.7% Even Fifteen Minutes after Gargle—tests showed

If you can get the jump on the cold in the early stages . . . attack germs on throat surfaces before they invade the body . . . you can often "nip" a cold in the bud or lessen its severity.

That's why you ought to gargle with Listerine Antiseptic at the very first hint of a snuffle, sneeze, or a tightened throat.

Listerine Antiseptic reaches way back on throat surfaces and kills millions of germs, including the "secondary invaders." Just think, clinical tests showed that after this gargle germs were reduced as much as 96.7% fifteen minutes after, and up to 80% one hour after.

In short, Listerine Antiseptic, with quick germ-killing action, is a wonderful aid.

Remember also that in tests over a 12-year period, regular twice-a-day users

P.S. Have you tried the new Listerine Tooth Paste, the Minty 3-way Prescription for your Teeth?

Get after these germs that cause so much of its misery!



Pneumococcus Type III



Pneumococcus Type IV



Streptococcus viridans



Friedlander's bacillus



Streptococcus hemolyticus



Staphylococcus aureus



Micrococcus catenulatus



Staphylococcus aureus

"SECONDARY INVADERS"

These germs, even when a cold is initiated by a virus, contribute to much of its misery when they stage a mass invasion of throat tissues.

of Listerine Antiseptic had fewer colds, and generally milder ones, than non-users; also that sore throats due to colds were fewer.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY
St. Louis, Missouri

Figure 39. Listerine advertisement, "Catching Cold?"
Time, December 20, 1948.

All three advertisements—for Listerine, G.E. Disposall and Army Medical Department—are in the same issue as *Time*'s longest coverage of the Hiss-Chambers trial, creating a symbiosis between advertising and news messages. It is counterintuitive to associate the clean-cut figure of Alger Hiss with “secondary invaders,” “germs [that] recognize no pact of peace,” and “unsanitary, germ-breeding garbage.”

It also raises a paradox, one that is crucial to understanding how the highbrow and elite could be associated with filth and germs, as well as with communism. A photograph on the first page of *Time*'s “National Affairs” column on December 20th depicts Chambers, at left, in casual work clothes on a farm tending to a horse (Figure 40). A lock of hair falls across his forehead; his face and body appear chubby. Symmetrically placed on the right, another photograph shows the lean, dapper Alger Hiss in an office wearing suit and tie. His hair is perfectly in place (surely with the aid of a grooming product), one hand is in his pants pocket and the other holds a pencil, turning a page on a calendar. The photos sum up the press's characterizations of the two men circa December 1948: Chambers as sloppy truth-teller, Hiss as erudite liar.³¹²

³¹² A similar layout was used twice by *Time*'s competitor, *Newsweek*. On December 20, 1948, a head shot of Chambers is countered by a strangely lit head shot of a laughing Hiss, making him look diabolical. Six months later, full-bodied photograph at page left of the pudgy Chambers is countered by a full-bodied shot at page right of the slender Hiss “Hiss Trial: Who Lied and Who's a Spy?” *Newsweek* (June 13, 1949): 15. Originally, Hiss had the upper hand in public opinion. But the tables turned as Chambers' accusations mounted.



Figure 40. *Time*, “National Affairs: Investigations,” December 20, 1948.

As with the Listerine ad, the subtext is that something dangerous and dirty hides beneath the clean exterior. The Listerine man is of the same general appearance as Alger Hiss—even their foreheads are similarly wrinkled from their expressions. The Listerine man risks harboring eight different strains of bacteria; Alger Hiss once harbored a Communist and perhaps even passed documents to the Communist Party.³¹³

³¹³ In 1953, a lawyer in Georgia explained how he recognized a Communist acquaintance: “I suspect it from his conversation and manner. He was well educated and had a high disregard for the mentality of others.”

Once the trials ended, Whittaker Chambers became a nationwide symbol for the repentant soul. His story had appropriate Biblical parallels, which Chambers capitalized on in his autobiography, *Witness*. Yes, he was alcoholic, slovenly and an admitted homosexual. (J. Edgar Hoover called him a “pervert.”)³¹⁴ But he had seen the error of his ways. Chambers was the antithesis of Alger Hiss, the East Coast snob.

A version of the Listerine ad appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in January 1952, the week before that magazine began serializing Whittaker Chambers’s autobiography.³¹⁵

Modern art and Communism

The Hiss-Chambers trial put the lie to appearances and demonstrated Communist guile. In 1953, a Czechoslovakian-born deliveryman lamented to *Better Homes & Gardens* magazine: “America has been wonderful to me, but why don’t we shoot these Communists or anyway shut them up?” The authors of the ambitious article interviewed dozens of people, asking them what they found wrong with America. The Czech man’s sentiment was far from unique: a farmer’s wife and a factory worker said practically the same thing about “shooting” Communists.³¹⁶ By 1953, a national poll found over 80% of respondents felt Communists represented a danger to the country.³¹⁷

Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955), p. 176.

³¹⁴ “Pervert” is in Halberstam, p. 11.

³¹⁵ “Fewer Colds...Sore Throats for Listerine users,” *Saturday Evening Post*, January 1952, p. 1.

³¹⁶ Herbert and Dixie Yahraes, “I love American, but—,” *Better Homes & Gardens* 30 (June 1952), p. 157.

³¹⁷ Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955), p.157. From 1945 to 1953, the percentage of grammar-school educated Americans wanting to deny Communists the right to speak on the radio increased from 42% to 78%; for college-educated Americans, the increase was from 31% to 71%. “Proceedings of the Tenth Annual

During the war and for the decade after, modern art and communism were frequently linked. Perhaps never again would these two movements share so many features. Both the Soviet Union and the Third Reich used modern art's unpopularity with the average, "good" citizen to advantage, officially banning art considered progressive or dangerous. Eliding distinctions between Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany, Western observers were quick to group both countries' repressive art programs under the umbrella term of "totalitarianism."

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that *Time* casually grouped all "abstractionists" together as "left-wingers" of art in 1946. The magazine did allow, "not all the left-wingers thought alike." Karl Knaths, Lyonel Feininger and Lee Gatch were left-wingers, but on the "extreme left" were Robert Motherwell and I. Rice Pereira, artists whose work bears little formal resemblance to one another.

By 1952, Museum of Modern Art director Alfred H. Barr felt it necessary to publish a historically founded defense, "Is Modern Art Communistic?" in the *New York Times Magazine*. Barr, who traveled to the Soviet Union in the 1920s, reminded his readers that a promising Russian school of modern art was officially censored in the Soviet Union and replaced by Ilya Repin's State-approved work.³¹⁸ Barr's argument had

Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research", *Public Opinion Quarterly* 19 (Winter 1955-56): 436, 437.

³¹⁸ Alfred H. Barr, "Is Modern Art Communistic?," *New York Times Magazine* (December 14, 1952). Repin is the painter to whom Greenberg refers in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), mistakenly claiming Repin painted "battle scenes."

The art world did address issues of freedom in the Soviet Union: *Art News's* editor Alfred M. Frankfurter reported that the Russian *Voks* magazine claimed the Hermitage still owned Raphael's Alba Madonna (when it had been sold post-Revolution for a record price). The responses to Frankfurter's column indicate the animosity inspired by the subject. See Gladys and Junius Scales' letter, which states unequivocally "We dislike ART News" and "We find its policy to be snobbish, complacent and generally

little impact countrywide. One of the great historical ironies of twentieth century American art is that our democracy's majority chose traditional realism over modern art in the same period that a communist and a fascist regime both outlawed and destroyed advanced forms of modern art in favor of propagandistic realism.³¹⁹

encouraging toward obscurantist tendencies in art." (*Art News*, May 1951): 6. See also Richard Bowman's reply to the Scales (*Art News*, Summer 1951): 6.

³¹⁹ As any scholar of Abstract Expressionism knows, it was a heady era in which American art ultimately "triumphed." By the later 1950s (that is, post-McCarthy), the U.S. government mounted a major exhibition of abstract painting that toured abroad. To offer overt support any earlier would have clashed with the Dies Committee and the later, notorious House Unamerican Activities Committee. In August 1949, Congressman George Dondero announced that modern art—"abstractionism" included—was "shackled to communism." But other government officials recognized that abstract painting could be touted overseas as proof of American freedom and democracy. The money trail indicates some covert activity within U.S. leadership—though not enough for me to accept arguments that carelessly claim the CIA helped Abstract Expressionism succeed.

Groundbreaking work by Eva Cockcroft, Max Kozloff, Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, and Serge Guilbaut investigated U.S. policies, the international reception of Abstract Expressionist art, and liberal ideologies. (Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock's excellent study of Greenberg in the 1930s was first published in 1981 in *Art History*. In 1996 they published it in a collection, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: University Press and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). As testament to the force of Guilbaut's argument, virtually every author dealing with this material responds (frequently unfavorably) to his book.

In early 1990s historians examined the Abstract Expressionist cultural milieu more closely. Michael Leja placed the work into what he called the 'modern man' discourse, focusing on the art as representations of selfhood and the unconscious. Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993). Stephen Polcari looked at the art as responses to twentieth century spiritual crises; Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

More recently, documents made available through the Freedom of Information Act gave researchers access to previously classified FBI documents. Three studies were published in relatively quick succession: *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* is Frances Stonor Saunders' examination of the seemingly incongruous links between the Left and the Right; Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, (New York: The New Press, 2000). Saunders' work, first published in the U.K. by *Granta* in 1999, is extensively researched and helpful for disentangling the CIA's attempts at cultural influence. Her discussion of the artwork itself, however, is scant. David Craven's *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period* argues that Abstract Expressionism operated from a position implicitly critical of much of its contemporary culture. His examination of the response by Latin American painters is a reminder that artists allow art—not governmental intervention—to speak to them; David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Nancy Jachec argues that the U.S. government promoted avant-garde art precisely for its radical qualities, which it thought would appeal to followers of European philosophy. Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Jachec's book,

The *real* Communist press in American—magazines like the *New Masses* and *Masses and Mainstream*—expressed disappointment and even disgust with Abstract Expressionist painters. Andrew Hemingway has pointed out how the pseudonymous critic, “William Thor Bürger,” thought artists like de Kooning and Pollock represented a “decadent bourgeois mode of thought.” Their success was based on a “closely knit monopoly of taste” evident at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of Art.³²⁰ Communist art reviewer Joseph Solman, who showed a sophisticated knowledge of post-Cubist art, thought Pollock’s technique represented “an abortive expressionism since it never passes through the crucible of an idea or experience.” He noted that works of Pollock, Hofmann and Rothko “reveal inversely the dire impact of social forces.”³²¹ As for the fate of art that sought to be revolutionary, *Art News* editor Thomas Hess noted the irony that non-objective painting (such as Theo van Doesburg’s), which claimed to offer direct communication with the masses, “popularly has been considered the most hermetic and snobbish of all.”³²²

published by the same press one year later, makes no reference to Craven. The proximity of these books highlights the continued British interest in (and in correctives of) mid-century American cultural politics.

³²⁰ Andrew Hemingway’s excellent study is *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926-1956* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), see esp. Part III.

³²¹ Quoted in Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 217.

³²² Thomas B. Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), p.53. The average man, Hess claims, loves Salvador Dali, but Dali would despise him. The same average man would hate Theo van Doesburg’s paintings, despite that artist’s great pains “to make his work a functioning part of society.” But I question whether the average man truly “loves” Dali, or whether Hess’s “average man” is a member of the bourgeois elite, and not the masses (the proletariat)? I suspect the “average man” was put off by Dali’s fantastical imagery and would have cringed at his psychosexual narcissism.

Advancing American Art

Two institutional crises around modern art reveal how profound the communist problem became for art. The first regards the State Department's traveling exhibition, "Advancing American Art". The exhibition included 117 objects for which the State Department paid fifty thousand dollars. Included were works by Yasuo Kuniyoshi, William Baziotes, Stuart Davis, Arthur Dove, Philip Evergood, Adolf Gottlieb, William Gropper, Philip Guston, George L. K. Morris, Robert Motherwell, Georgia O'Keeffe, Max Weber and Karl Zerbe.³²³ Once the exhibition gathered sufficient publicity in late 1947, a firestorm erupted. The Hearst newspapers published various attacks on "Advancing American Art," that included poor quality, black and white reproductions of selected paintings. The *New York Journal American*, one of the thirty-six Hearst publications, wrote in November 1946 that the State Department's collection "concentrates with biased frenzy on what is incomprehensible, ugly or absurd."³²⁴ Nationally distributed *Look* magazine gave the exhibition enormous publicity (including seven weak reproductions) when it published "Your Money Bought These Paintings."³²⁵

Remarking on the paintings in the exhibition, Truman's Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson wrote, "When I looked at some of the pictures in *Look* I thought of Justice

³²³ When William Baziotes' *Cyclops* (1948) won the \$1000 Pepsi-Cola annual prize, *Life* featured it in an essay titled "Freak Painting Prizes." [*Life* (June 28, 1948): 103]. *Newsweek* reported on the *Art Digest's* attack on the contest winners, quoting *Art Digest's* Peyton Boswell describing *Cyclops* as "an *enceinte* donut." ["Critics with Hammers," *Newsweek* (February 2, 1948): 73-74]. Peyton Boswell published *Modern American Painting* (1939), which used eighty-nine color reproductions of paintings that had first appeared in *Life* magazine (see Elson, *The World of Time, Inc.*, p. 420), yet another reminder of how small and interconnected the art writing community was.

³²⁴ "Debunking State Department's Art," *New York Journal American* (November 26, 1946): 17.

³²⁵ *Look* (February 18, 1947).

Holmes' remark at the burlesque show, 'Thank God I am a man of low tastes.'³²⁶
(Acheson, at least, demonstrated wit.) Countless responses and letters to congressmen followed, prompting Harry Truman's oft-quoted quip. In regard to Kuniyoshi's *Circus Girl Resting*, the President said "the artist must have stood off from the canvas and thrown paint at it...if that's art, I'm a Hottentot."³²⁷

Soon after, *Newsweek* published a page from the Republican National Committee Newsletter, also with small reproductions of seven paintings. (Yasuo Kuniyoshi's *Circus Girl Resting*, Karl Zerbe's *Clown and Ass* and Nahum Tschacbasov's *Mother and Child* were frequent illustration choices.) The Republican Newsletter stated, "The exhibits were supposed to reflect American 'art and culture,' as determined by a Democratic Administration supported by the Democrat Congress of that time. Fellow-traveler 'artists' with State Department connections thus were able to sell their 'art' and gain prominence.... We hope you taxpayers like it—you bought it!" For their part, *Newsweek* pointed out:

The 80th Congress already had expressed its distaste for the paintings, despite the fact that some of the nation's most famous artists were represented. Mr. Truman, who has made no secret of his dislike for all modern art, obviously was embarrassed by them, as was Secretary of State George C. Marshall. Assistant Secretary William Benton had publicly regretted spending \$49,000 for them.³²⁸

On the House of Representatives floor, Illinois Congressman Fred Busbey alerted Congress that the exhibition contained work by Communists. "Without exception,"

³²⁶ Acheson quoted in *Advancing American Art*, p. 17.

³²⁷ Truman quoted in *Advancing American Art*, p. 20.

³²⁸ "It's Striking, but Is It Art or Extravagance?" *Newsweek* (August 25, 1947).

Busbey declared, “the paintings in the State Department’s group that portray a person make him or her unnatural [...] That is what the Communists and other extremists want to portray. They want to tell the foreigners that the people are despondent, broken down or of hideous shape—thoroughly dissatisfied with their lot and eager for change.”³²⁹ The public backlash was so severe that the exhibition was withdrawn from its overseas venues and eventually sold off at bargain prices as “war surplus property.”³³⁰

“Revolt in Boston”:

Institute of Modern Art becomes Institute of Contemporary Art

The 1948 renaming of Boston’s Institute of Modern Art was a second debacle that crystallized opinions on modern art. Thirty-five years to the day after the famous New York Armory Show (resulting in a squall of negative publicity about modern art), the Institute of Modern Art issued a press release stating that it would hereafter be known as the Institute of Contemporary Art. The reasons cited by the Institute’s director, James S. Plaut, and president Nelson W. Aldrich, included the following:

- Modern art failed to speak clearly... There emerged a general cult of bewilderment.
- Once the gap between artist and public was widened sufficiently, it became an attractive playground for double talk, opportunism, and chicanery at the public expense.
- ‘Modern Art’... came to signify for millions something unintelligible, even meaningless.³³¹

³²⁹ Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, p. 295.

³³⁰ An impressive catalogue detailing the fallout of the exhibition is *Advancing American Art: Politics and Aesthetics in the State Department Exhibition, 1946-1948*, essays by Margaret Lynne Ausfeld and Virginia M. Mecklenburg, Montgomery, Alabama: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1984. Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University) was able to purchase the largest number of works of art when the State Department de-accessioned them after 1948.

³³¹ The quotations from the new Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston come from “Modern Into Contemporary,” *Newsweek* (March 1, 1948): 73, although many other news report also reprinted the complete release or large excerpts sections of the Boston statement.

“The cult of bewilderment,” Plaut and Aldrich continued, “rested on the hazardous foundations of obscurity and negation, and utilized a private, often secret, language which required the aid of an interpreter.”³³² (Yet again it seems that Robsjohn-Gibbings touched a vital nerve. The Boston statement is markedly similar to the argument in *Mona Lisa’s Mustache*.) The Institute’s decision was carefully followed by the art press and widely reported in the general press, including the *New York World-Telegram*, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek* and *Life*.³³³ *Life* gave the issue substantial attention with a six-page spread supporting the new name. *Life*’s editors noted that some people believe modern artists “have diverted modern art into a silly and secretive faddism.” But the magazine judiciously presented the “countermanifesto” written by the Museum of Modern Art, which stated “We detest the policy of the totalitarian state.... We would be seriously remiss in our duty...were we not willing to stand against the intimidation of progressive artists through pressure of invective and ridicule.” *Life*’s own response was unequivocal: “Neither the Boston Institute, however, nor anyone else wanted anything like a totalitarian state. It was proposing, in fact, that artists break away from the totalitarian formulas of diehard abstractionists and assert themselves as individuals.”³³⁴ Then the magazine illustrated highlights of the newly named Boston Institute of Contemporary Art’s inaugural exhibition, claiming the works were “assembled...to show the main trends in U.S. art of this century which they believe are chiefly rooted in native

³³² Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, p. 292.

³³³ The full text of the Institute of Contemporary Art’s statement was reprinted in *College Art Journal*, “News Reports” 7 (Spring 1948): 230; “Boston Tea Party,” *American Artist* 12 (April 1948): 55, and Peyton Boswell, “Boston Single-Talk,” *Art Digest* (March 1, 1948): 7, 35.

³³⁴ “Revolt in Boston: Shootin’ Resumes in the Art World,” *Life* (February 21, 1949).

traditions that are romantic or realistic.” The following month, *Life*’s article drew a sharply worded letter of rebuke signed by American gallery and museum directors who protested the magazine’s “deliberate misrepresentation of the aim and character” of the Institute of Contemporary Art’s inaugural exhibition.³³⁵ Instead, they claimed, *Life* “represents the exhibition as an attempt to discredit ‘modern’ tendencies, to decry ‘foreign influences’ and to ‘glorify native traditions.’” In response to the rebuke, *Life* published a letter from the horse’s mouth: James Plaut, Director of the Boston Institute. Plaut’s brief letter states that *Life* magazine is “obviously entitled to its own editorial interpretation. . . . We have no reason to believe that *Life* resorted to deliberate misrepresentation in reporting on our exhibition.” *Life* relentlessly drummed out its point. Along with Plaut’s letter, the editors reiterated that they “totally reject the charge [of deliberate misrepresentation].”³³⁶

American Artist “saluted” Boston’s Trustees in an editorial praising the “wholly laudable and clearly expressed purpose” of the Boston Institute that “has led the revolt against the spurious in modern art.” In the editorial statement, sub headed “Boston Tea Party,” *American Artist* congratulates the Bostonians for their “courage to break the hypnotic spell.” Peyton Boswell claimed, “The post-war reappraisal of modernism, first

³³⁵ Five major museums lent the paintings for the Institute’s exhibition, “Milestones of American Painting in Our Century.” See Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, p. 292.

³³⁶ *Life*, Letters to the Editor: “Revolt in Boston” (April 25, 1949). I believe Plaut’s letter was solicited by *Life* because of its contains an identical phrase (“deliberate misrepresentation”) as the museum directors’ protest letter published in the magazine. *Life* used that as ammo in its response. Plaut’s Institute for Contemporary Art received invaluable press coverage and exposure due to *Life*’s coverage.

voiced last fall by critics wearied beyond endurance by the sloppy technique of publicized amateurs, has *spread* from the city-room to the museum.”³³⁷

In May of 1948 Jackson Pollock was among the protestors at a meeting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He was involved, at least tangentially, in the Museum’s so-called “manifesto” against the Boston Institute’s press release.³³⁸ Although he is not mentioned by any discussants of the Boston crisis, it is plausible that Time, Inc. and other press corps members were aware of Pollock’s involvement.

Nowhere in the Boston Institute’s press release is “communism” mentioned. It need not have been. *Newsweek* noted that *The New York Times* “took a cheers-with-reservations stand” on the issue. Aline Louchheim, the *Times* art reporter, remarked on the timing of the Institute’s press release with the Armory Show anniversary. She wondered, would the Boston Institute “recognize artists who are as far ahead of their time and as ‘unintelligible’ today as Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso were in 1913?” Emily Genauer, then writing for the *New York World-Telegram*, reported the “first round in the battle...against unintelligibility in art is won.” *Newsweek* covered Genauer’s own reporting over successive weeks. But “in this victory,” *Newsweek* quoted Genauer, “there is a danger.” No one should enjoin the artist “from doing anything.... ‘That’s what I like about America,’ she continued, drawing a parallel to the Soviet Union’s

³³⁷ “Boston Tea Party,” *American Artist* 12 (April 1948): 55; Boswell, “Boston Single-Talk,” *Art Digest* (March 1, 1948): 7, 35.

³³⁸ *JPCR* IV, p. 242.

criticism of its most prominent musicians. ‘An artist can be as unintelligible as he pleases.’”³³⁹

The Boston Institute’s name change—as well as *Newsweek*’s and *Life*’s reports on it—underscores the volatile properties of adjectives such as “unintelligible” and “obscure,” not to mention the incendiary “modern.” Genauer recognized the “danger” of putting limitations on artists, as the Soviet Union had already done. How accurate she was. The same climate would soon result in the blacklisting of countless artists, musicians, and writers in what William Hauptman has called “one of this country’s most shameful endeavors to deny artists their basic freedom of expression.”³⁴⁰

Enter George Dondero

Michigan Congressman George Dondero leveled the most notorious public accusations against modern art. On August 16, 1949, Dondero presented “Modern Art Shackled to Communism” to the House of Representatives. The speech’s content was neither revelatory nor groundbreaking; responses to the State Department’s “Advancing American Art” exhibition and the Boston Institute’s name change cover much of the same turf. Like Joseph McCarthy, who would emerge in the public eye a few months later, Dondero restated popular concerns that had existed for years. Filled with fury and oratorical alliteration, Dondero offered no conclusive evidence of “shackles.” The fact that modern art originated in Europe—birthplace of Karl Marx and permanent home to Pablo Picasso—was sufficient to damn it.

³³⁹ “Modern Into Contemporary,” *Newsweek* (March 1, 1948): 73.

³⁴⁰ William Hauptman, “The Suppression of Art in the McCarthy Decade,” *Artforum* 12 (October 1973): 48.

Dondero, trained as a lawyer, had neither a background in nor an apparent knowledge of art. As he explained it, his interest in the subject “was aroused by groups of artists and by individuals who are fearful, or profess to be fearful, of the politically subversive quality of modern painting.”³⁴¹ His speech began by addressing the seeming incongruity of modern versus Social Realist styles. Left-wingers, he asserted, glibly disavow the connection between modern art and communism because “art in Russia today is realistic and objective.” However, communism uses art as a “weapon of destruction” against any government or system that is not communist. Dondero’s “roll call of infamy” includes every “ism”: communism and all artistic “isms” were all foreign-born, therefore destructive of American democracy. He iterated how each “*ism* aims to destroy.” *Cubism*, for example, “aims to destroy by designed disorder.” “*Abstractionism* aims to destroy by the creation of brainstorm,” and so forth.

We are now face to face with the intolerable situation, where public schools, colleges, and universities, art and technical schools, invaded by a horde of foreign art manglers, are selling to our young men and women a subversive doctrine of “isms,” Communist-inspired and Communist-connected, which have one common, boasted goal—the destruction that awaits if this Marxist trail is not abandoned.³⁴²

Matthew Josephson’s 1953 *Nation* article summarized Congressman Dondero’s activities with appropriate terminology. Writes Josephson, “The pages of the *Congressional Record* are spread with the names of hundreds of our leading artists and art critics who

³⁴¹ Genauer, “Still Life with Red Herring,” p. 91.

³⁴² Congressman George A. Dondero, “Modern Art Shackled to Communism,” August 16, 1949. Originally published in *Congressional Record*, First Session, 81st Congress; excerpts reprinted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 496-497.

[Dondero] charges are ‘enemies within,’ breeding ‘dissatisfaction’ or spreading ‘sinister ideas,’ and in his opinion ‘opposed to our government.’”³⁴³

As I have noted, writers on Pollock invariably mention *Life* magazine’s 1949 essay that asked, “Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?” But historians who report on the *Life* essay do not mention—and may be unaware—that it appeared on newsstands two weeks before Congressman George Dondero’s “Modern Art Shackled to Communism” speech. It is possible that Dondero saw *Life*’s Pollock essay, which he knew would attract a sizable audience. If so, it would have been the last straw for Dondero. Two weeks later, he dropped his own bomb on modern art and made minor history.

Soon after, art reporter Emily Genauer (then still at the *New York World-Telegram*) interviewed Congressman Dondero. (Genauer had written a short review of Pollock’s second Betty Parsons show in February 1949.)³⁴⁴ At her request, Dondero summed up his argument against modern art as follows:

Modern art is Communistic because it is distorted and ugly, because it does not glorify our beautiful country, our cheerful and smiling people, and our material progress. Art which does not glorify our beautiful country in plain, simple terms that everyone can understand breeds dissatisfaction. It is therefore opposed to our government, and those who create and promote it are our enemies.³⁴⁵

³⁴³ Matthew Josephson, “The Vandals are Here: Art Is Not for Burning,” *The Nation* 177 (September 26, 1953): 244.

³⁴⁴ Emily Genauer, “This Week in Art,” *New York World-Telegram* (February 7, 1949): 19. This was the 3-line review in which she called the work “a mop of tangled hair” (see Chapter Two). She would later regret the attention devoted to this line.

³⁴⁵ I first came across these quotations in William Hauptman’s “Suppression of Art in the McCarthy Decade,” pp. 48-52. The original source is Genauer, “Still Life with Red Herring,” *Harper’s* (September 1949): 89.

In this later statement, Dondero uses the rhetorical strategy of phrasing his argument in the same lay terms—plain and simple—he demands of art, artists, and critics. (This is similar to Truman’s speaking style.) Art and language should *both* be clearly stated. Dondero’s assertions echo and rile his audience. With the persistent fear of a Fifth Column operating in the United States, art and talk needed to be as straightforward as possible. If they were not, both should be viewed with extreme suspicion.

Newsweek magazine labeled Emily Genauer the “outspoken critic” of the *New York World-Telegram*, hinting that her own reporting was improper. On another occasion, *Newsweek* called her “a lady who can be caustic and opinionated when the need arises.”³⁴⁶ The *New York World-Telegram* was owned by the Scripps-Howard chain, a politically conservative group. Genauer, a graduate of the Columbia school of journalism, had worked for the *World-Telegram* since 1931. In the summer of 1949, Congressman Dondero accused the New York art reviewers of being “Marxist writers functioning in the art journals and on the pages of the Metropolitan press as art critics.” Dondero demanded that their employers “start cleaning house,” urging newspapers to control art critics “who glorify vulgar, perverted modern art.” Shortly thereafter, the *New York World-Telegram* fired Genauer.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁶ The implication is that Genauer was “uppity.” Her gender raises a crucial question: was she dismissed from the *New York World-Telegram* in part for being a dangerous, “outspoken” female given to “caustic and opinionated” pronouncements? In the anticommunist context, did her sex make her a greater security risk, more vulnerable to being duped by the Reds?

³⁴⁷ For “start cleaning house,” see Genauer, pp. 90-91. For “vulgar, perverted modern art,” see Matthew Josephson, “The Vandals are Here: Art Is Not for Burning,” *The Nation* 177 (September 26, 1953): 244. I am grateful for Piri Halasz’s 1982 Columbia University dissertation, with its detailed discussion of New York art critics in the 1940s. Piri Halasz, *Directions, Concerns and Critical Perceptions of Paintings Exhibited in New York, 1940-1949: Abraham Rattner and His Contemporaries* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI, 1982). For Halasz on Genauer, see p. 56.

How The Free World Paints: “The Paintings of Winston Churchill”

The January 1946 *Life* cover story featured a photograph of Britain’s prime minister at his easel. Inside were eight pages of color reproductions of his amateur paintings. Churchill’s now legendary “Iron Curtain” speech would be delivered in Missouri two months later—a speech generally cited as marking the beginning of the Cold War.³⁴⁸ By 1950, when *Time* named him “Man of the Half Century,” he was known as the skilled Allied leader, and would soon be known for his foresight regarding Soviet treachery and threat.³⁴⁹

Life’s Churchill article, “The Paintings of Winston Churchill: *LIFE* presents a great statesman’s avocation,” and the readers’ responses show a striking contrast to their treatment of Pollock. Contrast the Churchill title to the later, “Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?” *Life* established a position on Churchill’s greatness opposite to their position on Pollock’s. *Life*’s celebrates Churchill’s style, finding the paintings to be the pictorial equivalent of his personality:

After her dismissal from the *New York World-Telegram*, Genauer joined the *New York Herald Tribune* in Fall 1949. “Outspoken” as she was, she sought revenge in the September 1949 issue of *Harper’s*, “Still Life with Red Herring” (volume 199, pp. 88-91). Genauer was also criticized by the Museum of Modern Art after publishing her essay, “The Fur-Lined Museum.” MOMA was quoted in *Art News* as saying the critic was “backed up by a chain of newspapers which is playing up to the Chauvinists”; in Robsjohn-Gibbins, *Mona Lisa’s Mustache*, pp. 252-53.

³⁴⁸ “Nobody knows what Soviet Russia and its Communist international organization intends to do in the immediate future....From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.” Winston Churchill, March 5, 1946, Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri.

³⁴⁹ Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech, delivered two months after the *Life* essay on his paintings, was originally received with hostility by liberals, Leftists and the Soviet Union.

Technically Churchill's painting is not equal to his statesmanship, but it is pervaded by the same spirit of dogged realism. Like Eleanor Roosevelt's prose, it is earnest, straightforward and innocent of professional polish. Though he is tickled pink when people like his work, he discusses it shyly.³⁵⁰

Neither Churchill nor *Life* makes a pretense of his mastery. He is a "forthright colorist" who "eschews subtlety," much like his oratorical skills. Most of the reproductions depict recognizable landscapes from all over the world, with distinct horizon lines, balanced composition and competently rendered architecture.

Both humility and Christianity are invoked in the essay's brief four paragraphs. No subject makes Churchill "feel more humble than painting." "When I get to Heaven," he says, "I mean to spend a considerable portion of my first million years in painting, and so get to the bottom of the subject."³⁵¹

Three weeks later, the magazine published three readers' letters, all laudatory. For one reader "these quiet, fervent scenes of tranquility and charm" reveal Churchill's "innate frankness, blunt realism [and] his depth of character." Another reader notes the "article was great," proving Churchill to be "the most picturesque, erudite, lucid 'character' in the world today."³⁵²

³⁵⁰ Again, the remark on Eleanor Roosevelt's prose reminds us the chauvinism implicit in *Life*'s statement. Churchill's painting takes on feminine qualities, and, like a woman, he is "tickled pink" when people like it.

³⁵¹ "The Paintings of Winston Churchill," *Life* (January 7, 1946): 44-52. "Humility" is a virtue desired in all artists. Note *Time*'s 1952 article on "Public Favorites," which reproduces a full-page Renoir, "the most popular portrait at the Cleveland Museum of Art." *Time* quotes Renoir as saying, "I am still at the blotting stage—and I am forty!" "Humility," writes *Time*, "made Renoir painstaking and thus created pure enjoyment for others." "Public Favorites," *Time* 59 (March 31, 1952): 75.

Churchill's slim volume, *Painting as a Pastime*, was written as part of his 1932 book, *Amid These Storms*, but later published separately in the U.S. in hardcover in 1950.

³⁵² "Letters to the Editors," *Life* (January 28, 1946): 7. The third writer simply expresses her "appreciation," and asks for his mailing address.

Within this fray of Christian morality, domestic ideology, modernism and anti-communism, Jackson Pollock came to the attention of a broader public. In Chapter Two, “Pollock’s Mess,” I argued that his popular reception was conditioned by middle class, American Dream values. Mass-market publications looked to the experts to elucidate Pollock, but were unsatisfied with their garbled defenses. The following chapter, “Pollock’s Mess, Revisited: Are You Now or Have You Ever Been a Member of the Drip-Method Party?,” takes a magnifying glass to Pollock’s reception, this time taking into account the anticommunist fervor that struck the country.

Chapter Four:
Pollock's Mess, Revisited:
Are You Now or Have You Ever Been a Member of the Drip Method Party?



Figure 41. Jackson Pollock, *Number 23*, 1949, oil and enamel paint on paper, mounted on fiberboard. 2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The painting is spare. It looks nothing like Cathedral of 1947. Number 23, 1949 is small, just over a foot wide and two feet tall, on paper mounted on fiberboard (Figure 40).³⁵³ Compared to other works by Jackson Pollock of the period, Number 23, 1949 is restrained. Absent is the silver aluminum paint prevalent in those years. Absent, too, are the networks of lines covering the surface of many of his other paintings. Instead, the artist lays down thin, curving whips of black enamel, followed by a pencil-thin yellow skein. A few black drops dot the white paper. The straight black whip with rounded tail (at lower left) is a motif that Pollock revisited periodically since he developed it in late 1946 or 1947.³⁵⁴

The focus of Number 23, 1949 is a vertical abstract form. The form derives from a central pour of green paint that runs down the middle of the paper, thickening just below center and pooling slightly with orange, black, and a bit of yellow. Much of the white paper is left bare, becoming a bright ground behind the poured shape on top. Some of the skeins and whips run off the paper's edge, presumably onto the floor of Pollock's studio.

Due to its small size and the light application of paint, Number 23, 1949 could be called a minor Pollock. But it is also a distillation of the artist at his best. He paints comfortably, restricting himself to a few choice syllables from a painterly vocabulary he had been structuring for years.³⁵⁵

There are many ways to describe how paint is applied in Jackson Pollock's *Number 23, 1949*. It looks dribbled, poured, dripped, thrown, tossed, spattered, etc. It is even a little messy, although each color retains crisp, distinct outlines. But the paint in *Number 23, 1949* is definitely not *smear*d. When *Time* published a small color reproduction of the work in 1951, they referred to it as "hand-dribbled." That was probably intended as a slight, but is technically accurate. What was incorrect was that *Time* also cited the painting as an example of "smear-technique abstractions."³⁵⁶

³⁵³ *Number 23, 1949* is mounted on fiberboard, a support Pollock used for many works since 1948, including the "cut outs" (1948), *Out of the Web* (1949) and *Tiger* (Number 3, 1949).

³⁵⁴ The motif appears in *Cathedral* but is largely obscured; it is also in major paintings such as *Reflection of the Big Dipper* (1947), *Number 1A, 1948*, and *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30, 1950*.

³⁵⁵ This description is my own.

³⁵⁶ "Art: Rich Tastes," *Time* (August 27, 1951): 78.

Pollock Uncontained

Time magazine's erroneous reference to "smear-technique abstractions" is a case of migrating anticommunist discourse. To "smear" is to cover, daub, or soil with something greasy, sticky or dirty.³⁵⁷ A smear is also a kind of spreading, as when one smears wet paint. A smear is uncontained.

Pollock's paintings open themselves up to anticommunist rhetoric for an obvious reason: they seem uncontained. Observations on the paintings' disorder, confusion, or lack of control shared a vocabulary with a wide-reaching containment discourse. Concerns about anticommunism and containment broaden the scope of our understanding of Pollock's "mess." Fittingly, containment rhetoric spread fluidly from descriptions of Pollock's paintings to his persona, and back.

Containment rhetoric belongs to the immense category of security metaphors.³⁵⁸ Cold War historians have observed that different meanings of "containment"—one stemming from a threat external to the social body and the other originating from inside the host body—can be found within George Kennan's original use of the container as a metaphor.³⁵⁹ When it comes to paintings that emerged from an artist's unconscious or from open cans of house paint, containment is almost too rich a metaphor. Many of Pollock's critics—wittingly or unwittingly—used containment discourse in their discussions. In this chapter, I consider containment *rhetoric* to be the deliberate or

³⁵⁷ *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 2nd Edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.)

³⁵⁸ On "security metaphors," see Paul Chilton, *Security Metaphors: Cold War Discourse from Containment to Common House* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996), especially chapter 2.

³⁵⁹ Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1989), pp. 45-47. Also see Chilton's thorough analysis of the schema in George Kennan's "Long Telegram" (*Security Metaphors: Cold War Discourse*, chapter 4).

pointed use of containment analogies. Containment *discourse* includes rhetoric, but it also encompasses broader and everyday uses. Unlike rhetoric, discourse is not necessarily consciously employed.³⁶⁰

Containment discourse revolves around such a multivalent metaphor—the container—that it has numerous subcategories. One of the most common subcategories is bacteriological, often taking the form of immunological discourse. Bacteriological discourse was readymade for the containment era. Its finest ambassadors were germs. Likewise, the multiple meanings of “domestic” and “foreign” were exploited through containment rhetoric and discourse. “Foreign body” could refer to another country, one of its members or to a bacteriological threat. A foreign threat, for example, had to be contained. “Domestic” could mean inside the United States’s boundaries, the private home or the tasks of the homemaker. The germophobic discourse of the Drano advertisement discussed in the previous chapter is typical for partaking simultaneously in bacteriological, foreign (invader) and domestic discourses. Other advertisements, such as those for hair cremes or douches, speak directly to personal hygiene without alluding to a larger domestic realm.³⁶¹ But because the very private nature of their subject is made public, the ads take part in a broader containment discourse. All of these cases play on the variable interpretations of the metaphors employed. Advertisements tend to show the most crystallized form of containment rhetoric, but mass-market press political reports,

³⁶⁰ I use rhetoric to mean written or verbal speech that is intended to communicate persuasively. I use discourse in the broader sense of communications that involve both linguistic and non-linguistic practices. Metaphor here is used in its broad sense: a word or phrase that is meant as a comparison, not literally.

³⁶¹ Because advertisements are deliberately constructed to be persuasive via words and images, they consciously employ rhetoric and belong to a broader containment discourse. This is precisely what makes them such an intriguing form of communication.

reader responses and the Pollock literature are riddled with both containment discourse and rhetoric. When discussions of Pollock appear near anticommunist articles or containment era advertisements, the reader may be able to make connections (even unconsciously) between these seemingly disparate images and/or concepts.

Rotten Rebel from Russia

Unlike Pablo Picasso, Pollock never publicly espoused communist beliefs as an adult. His art was overtly non-political. Indeed, the contemporary critics never accuse him outright of Red sympathies. But if the press had dug a little deeper, it would have found an artist who was a communist sympathizer in his youth. His father, Roy Pollock, supported leftist causes and favored the Russian Revolution. Jackson was expelled from Manual Arts High School for distributing broadsides with a fellow student that asked for “peaceful change” (in lieu of a “revolution”), “regarding the oppressive and tyrannical methods in vogue [sic] with the present faculty.” Another broadside condemned the school for allegedly favoring “athletic ability” over scholarship. The seventeen-year-old Jackson wrote to his brothers Charles and Frank, “If I get back in school I will have to be very careful about my actions. The whole outfit think I am a rotten rebel from Russia.... I find it useless to try and fight an army with a spit ball.”³⁶² Once in New York, Pollock worked for the Easel Division of the Federal Arts Project branch of the Works Progress Administration. The WPA, a Depression-era New Deal creation, was rife with left-

³⁶² Letter from Jackson Pollock to his brothers Charles and Frank, October 22, 1929, Jackson Pollock Papers, 1912-1975, Archives of American Art, Reel 3046. Part of this letter is reproduced in O’Connor and Thaw, *JPCR* IV, pp. 206-207.

leaning artists and some WPA-funded paintings displayed the failures of capitalism and the values of socialism.

Pollock was present when Diego Rivera worked on his controversial Rockefeller Center mural that featured a portrait of Vladimir Lenin, although it was the socially active Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros who had a profound artistic influence on the American artist. In 1944, Pollock married Lee Krasner, a politically active, left-leaning and very vocal New York artist. Had anyone wanted to condemn Pollock for his political views, she or he might have built a case more substantial than those against other officially blacklisted artists. The popular press, however, needed only the damning evidence of his abstract mode of painting and his affiliation with New York City intellectuals.

Smear-technique Abstractions

Time magazine's reference to *Number 23, 1949* as a "smear-technique abstraction" appeared in "Rich Tastes." The subject of the article is the aesthetic preferences of private modern art collectors. The magazine explains that Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III "can afford to experiment, since she keeps her modern art purchases in a guest house."³⁶³ Along with distinguished sculptures by such European moderns as Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, Jacques Lipchitz and Marino Marini, Mrs. Rockefeller "buys the smear-technique abstractions of such *avant-garde* Manhattanites as

³⁶³ *Time* did not mention that the "guest house" was an East 52nd Street Manhattan brownstone, remodeled by the architect Philip Johnson. (See Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, p. 382.)

[William] Baziotes, [Robert] Motherwell, [Mark] Rothko and [Bradley Walker] Tomlin. Her hand-dribbled Jackson Pollock (*see cut*) is appropriately small.”³⁶⁴

As discussed above, “smear-technique abstraction” does not accurately describe any of the work featured in “Rich Tastes.” The facing page features four modern paintings, including “Mrs. Rockefeller’s Pollack” [sic]. The “Pollack” title is not offered, nor are titles for the other paintings belonging to affluent collectors.³⁶⁵ But the unnamed illustrations are of Henri Rousseau’s *Tropical Forest with Monkeys* (1910), Amadeo Modigliani’s *Seated Nude with Necklace* (1917) and Piet Mondrian’s *Composition* (circa 1929). On the following page are paintings by Georges Seurat and Paul Klee. Pollock is the only “avant-garde Manhattanite”—indeed the only American—whose work is illustrated in the article. The unidentified *Number 23, 1949* is therefore the only pictured representation of “smear-technique abstractions” in the entire magazine.³⁶⁶

“Smear-technique” had specific, non-aesthetic connotations in 1951 America.³⁶⁷ The term describes the rhetorical practice of vilifying someone by sullyng or dirtyng them through reckless accusations. But at midcentury, it connoted one person slandering another with communism as a subtext.

³⁶⁴ “Art: Rich Tastes,” *Time* (August 27 1951): 78. Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III (Blanchette Hooker) was daughter-in-law to a founding member of the Museum of Modern Art and set up the Junior Council of MoMA in 1949.

³⁶⁵ *Number 23, 1949* was one of three Pollock paintings at the American Pavilion of the 25th Venice Biennale (1950), along with *Number 1* (1948) and *Number 12* (1949).

³⁶⁶ *Time*’s art editor in 1949 was probably Alexander Eliot. In 1957, Time Inc. published Eliot’s *Three Hundred Years of American Painting* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1957). Pollock’s *Number 23, 1949* (which is called “No. 23 in the book) and *Scnt* (1955) are reproduced in color. Both had been published in Time-Life magazines. Pollock is characterized as the “most talked-about American artist,” stormy, soured by success, troubled, “vacillating between gentleness and violence.”

³⁶⁷ To smear is to cover, apply, daub or soil with something greasy, sticky or dirty. More than likely, *Time*’s art writer relaxed his observational skills in order to group all “avant-garde Manhattanites” together—and, obviously, to make a pun.

In fact, *Time* magazine published an article specifically about the slanderous “smear technique” in the same August 1951 issue that included Pollock’s *Number 23, 1949*.³⁶⁸ The second article is called “‘McCarthyism’ v. ‘Trumanism’” in the “National Affairs” section. *Time*’s readers would have understood the shorthand references to current events that hold less significance for readers today. Eighteen months after Joseph McCarthy emerged as the nation’s foremost Red-hunter, President Truman warned in a speech that “Americanism” was under attack by those “who are loudly proclaiming they are its chief defenders.”³⁶⁹ Without naming him, the President clearly meant Senator McCarthy. Truman’s speech is not in itself noteworthy. But it gave *Time*’s editors the chance to criticize the President. They pointed out that the American public held a deep-seated belief that Communists were infiltrating the U.S. government. *Time* referred to the conviction a year earlier of Alger Hiss on perjury charges. (Hiss was ultimately convicted for perjury after being accused by Whittaker Chambers of having Communist ties.) Dean Acheson, Truman’s Undersecretary, infamously defended Hiss during the trials. Truman and Acheson both, writes *Time*, considered the entire Alger Hiss trial “nonsense.” Neither Truman nor Acheson “to this day... has ever expressed a sense of

³⁶⁸ In *Time*, “smear-technique abstractions” is written with a hyphen; Truman’s “smear technique” is not. *Time* (August 27 1951): 78.

³⁶⁹ In February 1950, the Wisconsin Senator gave a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia at which he claimed to have a list of Communist Party members who were working in the government.. The precise number of Communists McCarthy had on his “list” was deliberately vague. See Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1983), chapter 3, and Ellen Shrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1994), pp. 63, 210. The Wheeling speech is reprinted in Shrecker, pp. 211-215. Shrecker offers arguments for what caused McCarthyism to flourish. One possibility is that it “was the mid-twentieth-century manifestation of a continuing backlash against the modern, secular world” (p. 10). The interpretation seems especially valid vis à vis McCarthyism’s and George Dondero’s violent clashes with modern art.

rage over Reds in Washington comparable to the indignation that Truman last week poured on Joe McCarthy.”

When the public read the evidence in the Hiss case and other revelations made around that time, it did not think that all the accusations about Communism were nonsense. It expected some housecleaning—or at least an official admission that the house had become a bit dirty. Truman stubbornly continued to resist such suggestions.

The house, a classic anticommunist metaphor, engages both domestic and hygienic realms. The “Trumanism” of the article’s title is *Time*’s invention to refer to those who blindly claim there is no communist influence on the government. “It is the real father of ‘McCarthyism,’” says *Time*, and McCarthyism will be around until Truman eliminates from U.S. foreign policy the tendency to appease communist regimes.³⁷⁰ When Truman criticized McCarthy, *Time* continues, he “left no doubt that he thought ‘*the smear technique*’ could be worked both ways.” In *Time*’s view, Truman was as guilty of using the “smear technique” as McCarthy.³⁷¹

Flipping through *Time*

Recent political and military developments in Europe, the Soviet Union, China and Korea had heightened American anxiety and fears. The United States was largely united against communism and fascism in the name of democracy. Although the historically specific context of *Time* magazine is fainter today, the partisan mood conveys readily. Domestic and foreign events and characters, major and minor, were reported in

³⁷⁰ *Time* was accused of bias in readers’ responses to the story. One said *Time*’s claim that Truman needed to “eliminate...the tendency to appease Communism” made the item “not news but an editorial that approximates McCarthyism—and Trumanism, if you will.” Another said that calling “Trumanism” the cause and “McCarthyism” the effect is “pure whitewash.” *Time*, “Letters,” (September 17, 1951): 10.

³⁷¹ Emphasis added. It would be three years before McCarthy was publicly discredited. *Time* in 1951 seems to have played the same role for Joe McCarthy as Dean Acheson had for Alger Hiss.

the morning and evening editions of American newspapers, on television, and discussed at backyard barbeques and in beauty parlors. When a *Time* reader flipped through the week's magazine, she or he might have read the "National Affairs" column first, then casually flipped through to the "Art" section. A reader might have smiled at the dual use of "smear-technique." Even if it did not register consciously, the connection is still there: the left-wingers have been smearing again. Curiously, *Time's* editors managed to take a phrase generally used against Senator McCarthy and invert its meaning.

The "smear-technique" articles both expose anti-democratic behavior. *Time's* Art editors noted in "Rich Tastes" that private art collectors "are not restricted by trustee tastes or by public demands, [so] are under no compulsion to build representative, 'balanced' collections." Such eccentricity makes private art collectors un-democratic—even frivolous—buying "what they like, when they like, for their own pleasures." The subtext suggests hedonistic abandon, the opposite of moral rectitude. (Recall that Mrs. Rockefeller "can afford to experiment" since her modern purchases are confined to the guest house.)

By contrast, Truman's administration is wholly accountable to "public demands." As used by *Time* to describe Truman, the "smear technique" was meant to divert attention from a major national security issue: the presence of communists in American government. When the same term is applied to Pollock's work and that of other "avant-garde Manhattanites," it retains the association with covert operations. The President's allegedly unethical political behavior is aligned with Jackson Pollock's improper painted behavior. And since the magazine's editors believed Truman secretly harbored

communists, the rhetorical implication is that the surfaces of Pollock's paintings are also a subterfuge. American readers were already primed to suspect any modern painter was either a communist, fellow-traveler or at the very least a dupe.

A smear culture

Smear's biological meaning links it to the germophobia rampant in the containment era. In the field of bacteriology, a culture grown in a Petri dish by spreading an infected substance into a growth-encouraging environment (such as agar gel) is called a "smear culture."³⁷² In the late 1940s, Listerine launched a major advertising campaign featuring illustrations of smear cultures in Petri dishes labeled as types of Pneumococcus, Streptococcus Viridans, Bacillus Influenzae, Staphylococcus Viridans, et cetera. The company's ads explain these germs can cause misery "when they invade the body through throat membranes" and that you should "attack these germs before they attack you" (Figures 42 and 43).³⁷³

Listerine exploited fears of invisible attackers while appealing to an audience who respected technical-scientific evidence.³⁷⁴ The ads merge containment and scientific rhetoric, partaking in what I have called technician talk. If the reader was unfamiliar with bacterial strains, Listerine's advertisement educated that reader. When Dr. D. A. Berberian wrote to *Time* magazine in February 1949 to point out that Pollock's

³⁷² Webster's *New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, Unabridged, Second Edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).

³⁷³ I discuss the Listerine advertisement that appeared in *Time*'s issue on Chambers and Hiss in Chapter 3.

³⁷⁴ Listerine's invisible attackers ads appeared in *Time* and *Life* as well as magazines read mainly by women, e.g. *Better Homes & Gardens* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. The gendered focus of certain ads—and of containment rhetoric as a whole—are relevant to domestic ideologies.

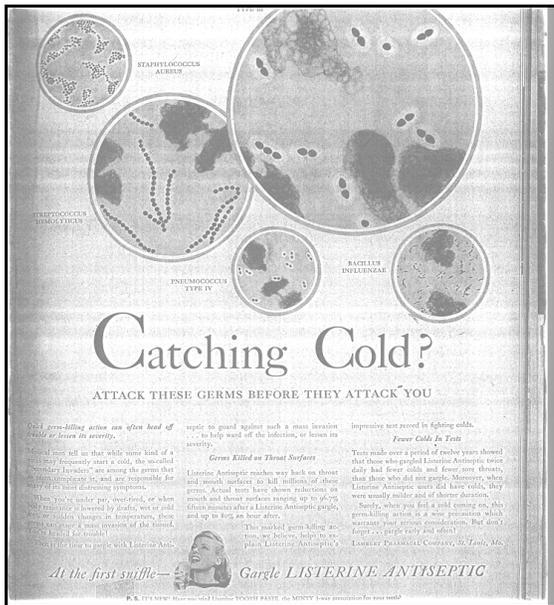


Figure 42. Listerine advertisement, *Life*, February 1949.

Figure 43. Listerine advertisement, *Better Homes & Gardens*, March 1950, page 3.

Number Eleven resembled bovine spermatozoa, he participated in and furthered the biological mode of discourse. Dr. Berberian satirically reasoned that any biologist would know Pollock must have seen “these animalcules under the microscope or in a picture at one time. That past experience in the subconscious mind of the artist has forced him to splurge them on canvas at a moment of ‘high tension’.”³⁷⁵ The dirty pun was encouraged by a germophobic discourse that sanctioned microscopic investigations.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁵ *Time* 53 (February 28, 1949): 6, discussed in Chapter Two. Splurging, in this case meaning literal dissemination, is related to spreading.

³⁷⁶ Dr. Berberian was not the only observant doctor to have a letter published in *Time*. When President Truman was featured on the magazine’s cover in 1950, Dr. E.C. McMullen wrote to the editors, “Your cover picture of the President shows DIPHtheria BUGS on his tie. He should be quarantined immediately...” Dr. McMullen took the recommendations of containment culture literally. “Letters,” *Time* 53 (June 12, 1950): 6.

Guilt by Association

Readers were barraged with these multilayered discourses on a daily basis. The migration of terms from one realm to another was so common that it may have seemed normal. Containment rhetoric functioned like a united front across the magazine's pages, as a notorious essay in *Time* in late 1950 demonstrates.³⁷⁷ The essay, "Chaos, Damn It!," is one of *Time*'s most vitriolic essays, from its opening assertion that Pollock's art "stump[s] experts as well as laymen" to its misleading excerpt of critic Bruno Alfieri's interpretation of the artist.

I will return to the "Chaos, Damn It!" essay at the end of the chapter, but here it is worth considering the placement of the image of Pollock. The article reproduces Martha Holmes's 1949 *Life* magazine photograph of the artist in paint-spattered shoes, crouched at the edge of a large canvas, dripping paint from his brush and dangling a cigarette from his mouth. The rest of *Time*'s page is filled with a large ad for the Apex Dish•A•Matic automatic dishwasher (Figure 44). The advertisement's text touts the Dish•A•Matic's "pasteurizing," "hygienic" heater, literalizing the "container" metaphor. At top right, a housewife proudly displays the pristine result: a haloed white dinner plate. The ad reasserts the bonafide middle class American Dream of a germ-free kitchen. On the single page, the combination of distinct text-and-image pairs work together, exposing the artist's uncontained, unhygienic process.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁷ "Chaos, Damn It!," *Time* 56 (November 20, 1950): 70-71.

³⁷⁸ I juxtapose the Dish•A•Matic with Pollock's image advisedly. Similar image-text pairings appear elsewhere in the mass-market magazines. As historians considering reception, we need to consider how readers may have been affected contiguous matter. *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), the result of McLuhan's

on earth to say about the artist. One ad-
 congealed U.S. critic has gone so far as
 to call him the "most powerful painter in
 America." Another, more cautious, re-
 ported that Pollock "has carried the in-
 tentional quality of picture-making to one
 extreme" (meaning, presumably, his
 lack). The Museum of Modern Art's em-
 phatic Alfred Barr, who picked Pollock,
 among others, to represent the U.S. in
 Venice's big Biennale exhibition last sum-
 mer, described his art simply as "an en-
 ergetic adventure for the eyes."

Pollock followed his canvases to Italy,
 exhibited them in private galleries in Ven-
 ice and Milan. Italian critics tended to
 drop off his shows. Only one, brash young
 (23) critic Bruno Alinari of Venice, took
 the bull by the horns.

"It is easy," Alinari confidently began,
 "to describe a [Pollock]. Think of a can-
 vas surface on which the following ingre-
 dients have been poured: the contents of

APOLLOCK AT WORK
At one extreme, lollypopish.

several tubes of paint of the best quality;
 sand, glass, various powders, pastels,
 sawdust, charcoal . . . It is important to
 state immediately that these "colors" have
 not been distributed according to a logical
 plan (whether naturalistic, abstract or
 otherwise). This is essential. Jackson Pol-
 lock's paintings represent absolutely noth-
 ing: no facts, no ideas, no geometrical
 forms. Do not, therefore, be deceived by
 such suggestive titles as "Eyes in Heat" or
 "Circumcision" . . . It is easy to detect the
 following things in all of his paintings:

- "Chaos.
- "Absolute lack of harmony.
- "Complete lack of structural orga-
 nization.
- "Total absence of technique, however
 rudimentary.
- "Once again, chaos.
- "But these are superficial impressions,
 first impressions . . . Each one of his pic-
 tures is part of himself. But what kind of
 man is he? What is his inner world worth?
 Is it worth knowing, or is it totally unde-
 cipherable? Damn it, if I must judge a
 painting by the artist it is no longer the
 painting that I am interested in . . ."

TIME, NOVEMBER 22, 1950

**Out-washes,
 out-dries
 them all!**

**Apex
 DISH-A-MATIC**

The Automatic
 Dishwasher with
**THE FIRST-
 THE ORIGINAL**

Built-in Electric
 Hot Water Tank

DISH-A-MATIC
 Super-heats and keeps its
 water at pasteurizing 180° for
 hygienic washing and rinsing!
(—and it's the ideal Christmas gift!)

Far and away the finest automatic
 dishwasher you can own! Your
 DISH-A-MATIC automatically
 washes, rinses, dries all the dishes,
 glassware, silverware—even pots
 and pans—in complete service for
 6! Operates so quietly you can
 hardly hear it.

Take your choice of 3 models—beas-
 tical sink unit (silenciously), com-
 pact cabinet model, or drop-in unit
 for installation in present kitchen
 cabinets. New anti-flooding Apert
 WASTE-A-MATIC Food Waste
 Disposer gets rid of food waste
 electrically! Available with sink
 unit. Or any standard sink drain.
 Write for descriptive literature now!

THE APEX ELECTRICAL MFG. CO.
 DEPT. T-4 • CLEVELAND 12, OHIO

THE PEAK OF QUALITY FOR 27 YEARS

Apex

WARRANTY
 MADE-IN-USA
 AUTOMATIC
 DISH
 WASHING
 DISPOSER

71

Figure 44. Page 71 from *Time* magazine, November 20, 1950.

examination of the powerful influence of printed media throughout the 1940s, was one of the earliest investigations of what he deemed "a complex situation" (p. v).

detail).³⁷⁹ The Angostura® cartoon shows a conference table of Washington lawmakers in a Capitol Hill meeting room. The Capitol building is visible outside the window; the American flag flies atop the rotunda. A balding lawmaker slams his fist on the table, shouting, “Of course he was subversive! He was ruining morale by making Old Fashioneds without enough Angostura®!”³⁸⁰

The ad’s humor derives from the government’s intensified focus on subversive and unAmerican activities, soon to reach its apogee with McCarthy. The 1939 Hatch Act limited subversive activities by prohibiting Federal employees from membership in groups advocating the overthrow of “our constitutional form of government in United States.”³⁸¹ In June 1940, wartime anxiety led Congress to enable the Secretaries of the War and Navy to summarily remove any suspicious employees. Congressional and executive legislation against subversive activity in branches of the government progressed with the war.³⁸² As relations between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated, the federal government continued on its path to punish subversive activities.

A reader of the November 20, 1950, issue of *Time* would likely have noticed the Angostura® cartoon for its rendering of Washington insiders. With so much of the popular press preoccupied with ferreting out subversives and encouraging Americans to detect suspicious behavior, readers may have unconsciously connected subversiveness to

³⁷⁹ Bitters, a bittersweet spirit derived from herbs and plants, remains in well-stocked bars today. It was indispensable in the postwar years when Rob Roys, Old Fashioneds and Manhattans were more popular. In 1953, *Time* subtitled an “Art” article on acerbic cartoons, “A Dash of Bitters,” *Time*, “Art” (April 6, 1953): 80.

³⁸⁰ With its Capitol Hill setting, the Angostura ad plays on 1950 patriotism. Ironically, Angostura was invented by a German in Venezuela. In 1950 it was produced in the United Kingdom.

³⁸¹ The Hatch Act was enacted August 2, 1939.

³⁸² Contemporary political science and economic journals kept up pace with the rapid changes. See Marver H. Bernstein, “The Loyalty of Federal Employees,” *Western Political Quarterly* 2 (June 1949): 254-264.

Jackson Pollock (both the man and his paintings). It might have occurred on a subliminal level, given the proximity of the text and images in *Time*, as a reader glanced from “Chaos, Damn It!” to the advertisement and back again.

Communism’s Abstraction

By 1949, *Time* was offering its readers training in ways to identify and decipher communist speech. Just as *Life* magazine sought out experts on specialized subjects, *Time* went to a magazine read by state department officials and academic political scientists: *Foreign Affairs*.³⁸³ In that magazine, author “Historicus” detailed Stalin’s essential beliefs and his Marxist conviction that revolution was natural and imminent. *Time* magazine then whittled *Historicus*’s original forty pages down to two. (No illustrations appear in *Time*’s essay.) *Time* underscored the exigency of its mission: “What [Stalin] believes and is planning to do are immensely urgent questions for everybody in every country.” *Time* warned its readers that Stalin’s language is “jargon-ridden,” so the magazine helped its readers “decode” the “tortured Marxist prose.”³⁸⁴ *Time*’s digested version indicates the challenge of translating information from a specialist’s journal to a mass-market magazine.³⁸⁵ Despite the relative clarity of *Time*’s synopsis, their digest of Stalin’s revolutionary ideology is nonetheless dense—especially when compared to other offerings in the magazine.

³⁸³ *Foreign Affairs*, published quarterly, had a modest circulation of 46,000, Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana: 1964), p.440. Its influence should not be underestimated: the 1947 *Foreign Affairs* essay “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” attributed to ‘X,’ aka George Kennan, proposed the idea of Soviet containment that was soon transformed into official U.S. policy.

³⁸⁴ “The Care & Feeding of Revolutions,” *Time* (December 27, 1948): 20-21. Just as George Kennan was soon identified as “X,” *Time* identified George A. Morgan of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow as “Historicus.”

³⁸⁵ The average reader was neither simplistic nor uneducated. Rather, her or his world was increasingly complicated, necessitating explication or digestion by “experts.”

A 1950 *U.S. News & World Report* interview with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was also aimed at increasing general American awareness of communist duplicity.³⁸⁶ Carried on the gusts of Korean War patriotism, Hoover's "How Communists Operate" epitomizes conservative hyperbole. *U.S. News & World Report* asked the FBI director if he distinguishes between communists as agents of a foreign country and those called "philosophical Communists." There is no difference, replied Hoover:

The "philosophical Communist" who advocates Marxism-Leninism might just as well be working as an agent of a foreign power because he is aiding its cause. He is, in fact, however, being "played for a sucker" by the Communists, who consider him a "dupe," a person not to be trusted but only to be used and then discarded.

A critical strategy of Hoover's attack was to expose the amoral, atheistic elements of communism. Of those Americans who were disillusioned enough in the 1930s to fall for communism, most had "renounced their allegiance." Furthermore, "the great masses of Americans never fell for the schemes of the Communist swindlers." If they tasted of its "godless conspiracy," "they found the taste bitter and repugnant." But a communist will lie, cheat and resort "to any tactics which will gain his end."

The concept of morality and fair play, as practiced in our democracy, is alien and repugnant to him. Moreover, the Communists employ a purposive double-talk, roundabout style, known as "Aesopian language," in their literature and speeches, designed to deceive and evade, to clothe their true thoughts. This technique, utilized by Lenin, is the very epitome of deceit.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁶ "How Communists Operate: An Interview with J. Edgar Hoover," *U.S. News & World Report* (August 11, 1950): 30-33. President Truman had recently called for organizations and individuals to report information to the FBI "relating to espionage, sabotage and subversive activities"; the published Hoover interview helps Americans figure out how to do so. In September, however, Truman would veto the strongest of Cold War anticommunist measures, the McCarran Bill. His veto was easily overturned.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Hoover urges Americans to vigilantly search for any use of “double talk” as a communist “conceal[s] his real purposes.”

The Hoover and Stalin essays indicate that a person’s habits of speech could give away his or her communist allegiance; they primed readers to suspect anyone who obfuscates, uses double-talk or a roundabout style. There is also the suggestion in both essays that intelligence—or, more accurately, conspicuous intellectual activity—is suspicious. Responses from the populace confirm the link: an Iowa housewife once explained how she determined her “smart” neighbor was a Communist: “I just don’t trust her. She seems to be living behind a false front. I think she is smart enough so she could, as it were, lead two lives.”³⁸⁸

The New York Communist Club

The basic unit of the Communist party, Hoover explained, is “the club.” Clubs meet in secret and can be as small as three members, but they function to recruit and indoctrinate new members. Hoover’s exposé singles out New York City as the location for communist national headquarters. In the previous chapter I discussed how effective Congressman Dondero was at facilitating the firing of New York art reporter Emily Genauer. Despite Hoover’s and Dondero’s overzealousness, there was plenty of evidence to be found in New York.

Partisan Review, launched by William Phillips and Philip Rahv in 1934, began as a John Reed Club-Communist Party quarterly. In 1937, disillusioned by Stalin’s activities and especially the Moscow “show” trials that appeared predetermined to

³⁸⁸ Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955), p. 157.

condemn Stalin's critics, Phillips and Rahv relaunched *Partisan Review* as a pro-Marxist but virulently anti-Stalinist showcase of "literary modernism." The distinctions between the anti-Stalinist left and those who remained committed to the communist vision might have been lost on an outsider—or maybe it did not matter what brand of "leftist" one was. If Hoover, McCarthy or Dondero—and, by extension editors and even ordinary citizens—were hunting leftists, New York was full of them.

In the late 1930s Clement Greenberg was closely allied with a circle of radical thinkers that included Phillips, Rahv, Harold Rosenberg, Lionel Abel and Dwight MacDonald (the official Trotskyist of the group). Greenberg's second published essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," derives from Marxist theory and is palpably elitist on art. In Greenberg's third published essay, "Toward a Newer Laocoon"—a companion piece to "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"—he states unequivocally that the superiority of abstract art is historically justified.³⁸⁹

"Avant-Garde and Kitsch" works from an implicit assumption that kitsch ("ersatz culture") is a manifestation of what Marx called false consciousness. Kitsch includes popular art, commercial art, illustrations, advertisements, and comics, among other forms. It is the result of the "universal literacy" achieved after the Industrial Revolution.

Although Greenberg does not directly address the American Dream or the classless

³⁸⁹ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* (Fall 1939): 34-49; Greenberg, "Toward a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review*, July/August 1940. Greenberg makes it clear that even though abstract art's superiority was shaped through an historical evolution in all the arts, it does not reflect his personal choice. As he writes in "Towards a Newer Laocoon," "To argue from any other basis [than the historical justification] would require more space than is at my disposal, and would involve an entrance into the politics of taste—to use Venturi's phrase—from which there is no exit—on paper." "Towards a Newer Laocoon," reprinted in O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays I*, p. 37.

society ideal in 1939 (he focuses mainly on European origins and manifestations), virtually every characteristic of kitsch describes and condemns middlebrow American culture. Ten years later, when Greenberg contributed to “The State of American Writing” (*Partisan Review*), he had turned more completely to American phenomena and fiercely attacked middlebrow culture’s deleterious effects.

It must be obvious to anyone that the volume and social weight of middlebrow culture, borne along as it has been by the great recent increase of the American middle class, have multiplied at least tenfold in the past three decades. This culture presents a more serious threat to the genuine article than the old-time pulp, dime-novel, Tin Pan Alley, *Schund* variety ever has or will. Unlike the latter, which has its social limits clearly marked out for it, middlebrow culture attacks distinctions as such and insinuates itself everywhere, devaluing the precious, infecting the healthy, corrupting the honest, and stultifying the wise. Insidiousness is of its essence, and in recent years its avenues of preparation have become infinitely more difficult to detect and block. In this matter it is necessary for each of us to suspect, and correct, himself. For we are all of us becoming guilty in one way or another.³⁹⁰

I quoted more briefly from “The State of American Writing” in Chapter One to demonstrate how Russell Lynes determined that Greenberg was the ultimate “militant highbrow.” In the longer excerpt above, one feels the undiminished force of Greenberg’s ire.³⁹¹

His prose reads like containment-era rhetoric—with a difference. Greenberg’s infectious, insidious attacker is middlebrow culture itself. One could rearrange a few lines, substitute ‘communism’ for ‘middlebrow culture,’ and Greenberg would sound like

³⁹⁰ Greenberg, “The State of American Writing, 1948–A Symposium,” *Partisan Review* (August 1948), in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays* II, pp. 257-258. The references to Tin Pan alley, etc., are a direct allusion to the opening lines of Greenberg’s own “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” in 1939. By 1948, the threat was far worse.

³⁹¹ Clement Greenberg in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 1939, section I; reprinted in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays* I, p. 9.

J. Edgar Hoover. It is worth noting that in the midst of postwar anticommunist zeal, Greenberg deliberately focuses on a cultural (and not an overtly political) threat.

Partisan Review and Clement Greenberg provide a tangible link between communist theories and Jackson Pollock's strongest advocate. But almost everything about the New York art world could be construed as a breeding ground for communists, if one was so inclined to seek them, including the Museum of Modern Art, smaller galleries of abstract art, and art coverage in New York newspapers and art magazines.

Yet regarding the artists who painted in abstract style, the reality was somewhat different. If the late 1940s and early 1950s were characterized by a powerful political authoritarianism typified by Joseph McCarthy, the advanced New York art world was decidedly apolitical. Most of the major Abstract Expressionist artists were either non-political or anarchists. But it is crucial to note that some of the art did carry social implications, as Robert Motherwell noted in 1950. At the 1950 College Art Association conference, Robert Motherwell's "anti-characterization" described a School of New York whose very impracticality made it socially liberating:

It is easier to say some of the things the School of New York is not. Its painting is not interested in giving information, propaganda, description, or anything that might be called (to use words loosely) of practical use.... It is evident that such a position is of little interest to a rote social critic, whether Marxist, existentialist, or Catholic. But I think that the School of New York, like a great deal of modern art that is called "art for art's sake," has social implications. These might be summarized under the general notion of protest.... in many respects a negative position, to be sure....³⁹²

³⁹² Robert Motherwell, *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, ed. Stephanie Terenzio (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 77-78.

Perhaps Abstract Expressionist painting offered the best visual solution for the politically restrictive—indeed repressive—climate. Russian Socialist Realism, American Realism and Greenberg’s kitsch all appealed, in various ways, to an audience as a collective unit. These types of art employed familiar visual cues in a conscious attempt to appeal to a mass audience: a group. By contrast, many abstract painters intended their work to be liberating on an *individual* basis, in keeping with existential ideas. This was part of the lasting strength of abstract painting at midcentury.

Containment Rhetoric in Pollock’s Notices

Between his own association with leftists and the extraordinarily broad criteria as those presented by Red-hunters, Pollock never stood a chance. First, an ordinary description of Pollock’s art can appear as double-talk, even if sometimes it is only because non-objective paintings call for abstract language. Second, much of Pollock’s reviews share the language of containment-era rhetoric because of his particular style. Reviews from 1943 through 1947 (prior to the classic drip style) predate the official containment era but use similar rhetoric. I attribute this to Pollock’s own sensitivity to the wartime climate and the influence of other artists (American and European) contending with the War’s impact in one way or another. *Chicago Daily Tribune* writer Eleanor Jewett, for example, called Pollock’s 1943 work “effusive.” She felt that Pollock’s “trumpet has gone wild and he is sounding in all directions at once, like a weather vane in a high wind whirling in mad circles.”³⁹³ Pollock was already making

³⁹³ Eleanor Jewett, “Contrast Sharp in Art Club’s 2 New Exhibits,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, (March 6, 1945): 13.

work that critics felt was uncontrolled; by the time official containment rhetoric developed, his work became even more “effusive.”

Eleanor Jewett’s contrast of Pollock with Irene Rice Pereira, whose paintings she found “orderly,” reads differently in light of domestic and foreign affairs. Likewise does Howard Devree’s 1945 observation that “one of two of [Pollock’s] paintings might as well be called ‘explosion in a shingle mill,’ with their pother of paint and flying forms.”³⁹⁴ After Maude Riley described the mural-sized *There Were Seven in Eight* (1945) as a “chaotic tangle,” she defended her own critical impasse: “Further than this I cannot go in comments for I really don’t get what it’s all about.”³⁹⁵ Pollock’s disorder was contagious: it spread to the public, to other painters who tried to work in his style, and as Riley reveals, to reviewers who attempted to interpret it.

In June 1945, Maude Riley invoked assistance from her readers in her column on Howard Putzel’s “A Problem for Critics” exhibition, which featured Pollock.³⁹⁶ Putzel’s “problem for critics” was to decide whether or not the included artists constituted a new movement. Riley finds the paintings “of an order so disturbing” that descriptive terms have lagged behind. She wonders what the works have in common “other than being ‘hard’ to comprehend?” In determining whether or not these artists could be grouped together under “an *ism* all their own,” Riley enjoins her readers:

[T]o this reviewer, nothing offers as a term that binds this group together. There is insufficient evidence... that they constitute a movement. But I

³⁹⁴ Howard Devree, “Among the New Exhibitions,” *New York Times* (March 25, 1945): 8X.

³⁹⁵ Maude Riley, “Jackson Pollock,” *Art Digest* 19 (April 1, 1945): 59.

³⁹⁶ Howard Putzel’s show was in June 1945 at 67 Gallery and included works by Mark Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Hans Hofmann, Andre Masson, Richard Pousette-Dart, Charles Seliger, Rufino Tamayo, Adolph Gottlieb, Matta and Pollock.

won't say that a new ism is not about to be born. The name will come from the public—we hope from our readers.... Reader, don't leave that ism dangling! Here's your chance, if ever there was one, to call modern painting that name you've had in mind for it.³⁹⁷

Riley's quasi-jocular 1945 plea is a reminder of the public's confusion regarding the "isms" of modern art, something Congressman Dondero would later exploit in 1949.

Maude Riley's style as a reviewer, asking the public for mailed-in suggestions, could not be more antithetical to that of Clement Greenberg. As evident from "The State of American Writing," Greenberg is a self-guided critic, unmoved by public opinion. Yet in his 1947 review of Pollock's fourth Art of This Century exhibition, he also employs the voice of uncertainty—albeit for different reasons than Maude Riley. Greenberg writes, "Pollock points a way beyond the easel, beyond the mobile, framed picture, to the mural perhaps—or perhaps not." Greenberg cannot forecast Pollock's painted future, just as Riley could not label the school that Putzel's group constituted. The final line of Greenberg's review is the telling, "I cannot tell."

But Greenberg's admittance of "I cannot tell" has a different quality from Maude Riley's "I really don't get what it's all about." Greenberg knows Pollock is advancing paint beyond the easel, but muses about the precise direction. Yet to a contemporary reader not familiar with Greenberg (and operating without benefit of knowing that he had a critically vested interest in the eradication of traditional easel painting), Greenberg and Riley both *appear* to express indecision about Pollock's art.

³⁹⁷ Maude Riley, "Insufficient Evidence," *Art Digest* (June 1, 1945): 12.

In 1948, Greenberg wonders if Pollock overuses metallic aluminum paint, noting that only two paintings (*Enchanted Forest* and *Gothic*) in the Betty Parsons exhibition are free of it:

The aluminum can also be felt as an unwarranted dissimulation of the artist's weakness as a colorist. But perhaps this impression will fade as one grows more accustomed to Pollock's new vein.... It is indeed a mark of Pollock's powerful originality that he should present problems in judgment that must await the digestion of each new phase of his development before they can be solved.³⁹⁸

Here Pollock's strongest defender wonders if the artist dissimulates. "Dissimulation," a term not usually found in art writing, was commonly used to describe communist speech.

Greenberg's review appeared in *The Nation*, a liberal political weekly published in New York City. In 1945, the magazine held a benevolent attitude toward Soviet Russia.³⁹⁹ Despite its small circulation, *The Nation* was influential and respected. Writers, editors and publishers of both middle and highbrow magazines frequently read each other's work, as indicated by Russell Lynes, Cyril Connolly, William Phillips and Greenberg himself. In "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow," Lynes defended "the conscientious publisher" who "searches out writers of promise; he pores over the 'little' magazines (or pays other people to); he leafs through hundreds of pages of manuscripts... He must take the measure of popular taste and cater to it at the same time that he tries to create a taste for new talent."⁴⁰⁰ It is likely that Greenberg's reports in *The Nation* and *Partisan Review* were perused by mass-market publishers or their employees. Whether

³⁹⁸ Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation* 166 (January 24, 1948): 108.

³⁹⁹ According to Peterson, *The Nation's* own editors lamented its stance on the Soviet Union; Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, p. 421.

⁴⁰⁰ Lynes, "Highbrow," *Harper's*, pp. 25-26.

or not Pollock's "dissimulation" and Greenberg's open-ended observations seemed suspicious, it was all there in black and white.

Greenberg's writings would have frustrated an average reader who expects the art expert to illuminate the artwork. His esoteric language often seems calculatedly unclear, as when he inverts language. He used negative qualifiers to praise Pollock in 1943, writing that the artist gets "something positive from the muddiness of color" and that his work is the equivalent of American chiaroscuro, even if in a "negative, helpless way." He addressed Pollock's "ugliness" head-on in a 1945 review of the second solo exhibition at Art of This Century: "There has been a certain amount of self-deception in the School of Paris since the exit of Cubism. In Pollock there is absolutely none, and he is not afraid to look ugly—all profoundly original art looks ugly at first."

"Ugliness" becomes a positive attribute. Cubism was for Greenberg the last great movement in modern art; he awaits the successive movement, which Pollock may inaugurate. By referring to the paintings as ugly, Greenberg strikes preemptively by making ugliness praiseworthy. But such inversions are literally double-talk.

Similarly, Greenberg insists Pollock must avoid being "pretty." In the 1948 *Nation* review quoted previously, Greenberg finds the aluminum paint causes the pictures to run "startlingly close to prettiness, in the two last [*Shooting Star* and *Magic Mountain*] producing an oily over-ripeness that begins to be disturbing." "Pretty" paintings are not usually considered "disturbing."⁴⁰¹ But Greenberg fits Pollock into a trajectory of

⁴⁰¹ With a different connotation from Greenberg's, Maude Riley twice called Howard Putzel's 1945 abstract exhibition "disturbing."

modernism that, as a rule, defies norms. Art based on a negation of established mores will likewise summon radical divisions in the reception.

In another significant inversion, Greenberg valorizes Pollock's "bad taste" in his review of the artist's 1946 exhibition at Art of This Century. Beginning his discussion around a Jacques Lipchitz sculpture, the critic explains that an openness to approaching what is currently considered bad taste is indispensable to great art: the willingness to lose increases one's chances of winning. In the same manner as Lipchitz (and one of the earliest modern artists, Gustave Courbet), Pollock could also be *accused of bad taste*. But that would be wrong: "For what is thought to be Pollock's bad taste is in reality simply his willingness to be ugly in terms of contemporary taste. In the course of time this ugliness will become a new standard of beauty." Greenberg anticipates the negative critiques of Pollock, seeing and raising them. He continues, "Besides, Pollock submits to a *habit of discipline* derived from cubism; and even as he goes away from cubism he carries with him the unity of style with which it endowed him when in the beginning he put himself under its influence."⁴⁰² Losing becomes winning, bad taste becomes good, ugliness becomes beauty. And what others see as Pollock's lack of discipline is, for Greenberg, "a habit of discipline." The process of transforming negative qualities into positive ones is vital to advanced art.

Greenberg notwithstanding, Pollock's veiled pictorial language was a chronic frustration for many writers and readers. Describing the artist's second Betty Parsons show bluntly, *Art Digest's* writer thought it was Pollock's display from the

⁴⁰² Greenberg, *The Nation* (April 13, 1946), in O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays II*, pp. 74-75.

“Hieroglyphics School.”⁴⁰³ In Chapter Two I attribute this annoyance to the brow wrangling between the average viewers and those who they considered élite snobs. Difficulty, in language and imagery, was a trademark of the “cognoscenti,” as *Time* magazine facetiously labeled the highbrows.

In the context of anticommunism, veiled language is a potent weapon of subversion. As is evident in the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art press release, modern art allows for “doubletalk, opportunism and chicanery.”⁴⁰⁴ Joseph Stalin himself consciously employed “abstract theory” because a mercurial theory “is ever ready to engage in flexible tactics,” explained *Time*.⁴⁰⁵ That is, abstract theory cannot be pinned down. Read in the context Hoover’s “How Communists Operate” or Historicus’s Stalin essay, highbrow justifications of Pollock mimic the communist’s linguistic habits.

Greenberg praises Pollock’s lack of containment, seeing it as a sign of advanced painting and originality. Alfred Frankenstein of the *San Francisco Chronicle* was among the first to adamantly praise Pollock in print. In 1945, he recognizes that Pollock is uncontained. Frankenstein sees the “flare and spatter and fury of his paintings” but believes the painting “holds together” and the canvases are “organize[d].”⁴⁰⁶ Frankenstein recognizes the aesthetic danger of disorganization but defends Pollock against the charge. Manny Farber seems to defend Pollock’s compositions against accusations of being uncontained. He describes *Mural* (1945) as “violent in expression,

⁴⁰³ M[argaret] L[owengrund], “Pollock Hieroglyphics,” *Art Digest* 23 (February 1, 1949): 20.

⁴⁰⁴ See Chapter Three on the Boston Institute debacle.

⁴⁰⁵ “The Care & Feeding of Revolutions,” pp. 20-21.

⁴⁰⁶ Alfred Frankenstein, “Some Young Americans Prophecy on a Prophecy,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, (August 12, 1945): 8.

endlessly fascinating in detail, without superficiality, so well ordered that it composes the wall in a quiet, contained, buoyant way.”⁴⁰⁷

Pollock’s January 1948 Betty Parsons exhibition marked the first public display of his all-over dripped and poured method. Robert Coates describes *Lucifer, Reflection of the Big Dipper* and *Cathedral* (all 1947) as “unorganized explosions.”⁴⁰⁸ Like Frankenstein, Coates sees “danger” in Pollock’s style, especially as it may sever the already tenuous threads of communication between artist and spectator. A year later, the second Betty Parsons exhibition elicited Sam Hunter’s remark that the work “reflects an advanced stage of disintegration” of modern painting.⁴⁰⁹ Most likely, art savvy reviewers did not share the paranoia about modern art nor worry about Pollock’s politics (given their more informed knowledge), but their aesthetic conclusions were available for the public and the mass-market press to interpret. To many viewers and readers, aesthetic disorganization was perceived as subversive.

Germ, dirtiness, and disorganization were weapons of subversion. When acts of subversion were made public, it meant a private matter had spread out to contaminate the community. Anticommunist ideologies rooted in the domestic or private sphere tend to invert public and private. The ironic effect of these ideologies is that the political matter of subversion becomes so personalized as to negate its own political origins.⁴¹⁰ The private matter of personal hygiene, for example, was transformed into a public matter

⁴⁰⁷ Manny Farber, “Jackson Pollock,” *The New Republic* 112 (June 25, 1945): 871-872.

⁴⁰⁸ Robert Coates, “The Art Galleries: Edward Hopper and Jackson Pollock,” *New Yorker* 23 (January 17, 1948): 57.

⁴⁰⁹ Sam Hunter, “Among the New Shows,” *New York Times* (January 30, 1949): sec. 2, X9.

⁴¹⁰ See Michael Rogin, “Kiss Me Deadly,” *Representations* 6 (Spring 1984): 1-36, for a discussion of subversion and domestic ideology in regard to *film noir* of the 1950s.

because it was national security issue. But scrutiny of hygienic practices became an end in itself, as if it never belonged to a larger phenomenon. The hygienic discourse thrived in part because people, particularly “non-intellectual” middlebrows, find it easier to relate to personal matters than political ones. A threat within one’s own home is more compelling to a homemaker or family man than any far away threat.

It is more effective to convey a generalized threat of communism through simple domestic metaphors, such as Listerine’s variation on its “Secondary Invaders” ad (Figure 43), or General Electric’s “No More Garbage” campaigns for the Disposall (Figure 38). (Both of these advertisements appeared in the weeks around *Time*’s January 1949 Historicus digest.)⁴¹¹ This is not to say the advertisements and the publisher plotted to work together. Rather, the interplay of advertisements, articles and letters to the editors reflected a dynamic anticommunist ideology that pervaded the popular press.

The politicized underpinnings of hygiene-related advertisements become invisible because of the ideology’s omnipresence. The political is essentially depoliticized to the point of seeming as if it were natural. It seems natural, for example, that G.E.’s Disposall should “end the pesty nuisance of garbage” (February 7, 1950) and rid your home “forever of unsanitary, germ-breeding garbage” (December 20, 1949), that germs “stage a mass invasion of throat tissues” (Listerine), that “greasy goo” covers your scalp with “dirt-catching scum,” that mechanics “have a right to expect the sanitation and comfort of

⁴¹¹ The first two ads appeared in the December 20, 1949 issue, the third in the February 7, 1950 issue.

clean dry hands” (Onliwon Towels), and that your kitchen dishcloth may be “a ‘carrier’ for germs” (Figure 46).⁴¹²



Figure 46. Clorox advertisement, *Better Homes & Gardens*, December 1949, page 159.

And it seems natural, again looking at the G.E. Disposall campaign, that “You’ve seen the last of messy, odorous, pesty garbage—the moment you install a General Electric Disposall.”⁴¹³ (See Figure 38, Chapter Three.)

Like the Drano swab advertisement of Chapter Three, the General Electric ad features a woman washing “messy, odorous” garbage down the drain in a gesture that

⁴¹² General Electric Disposall advertisement, *Time* (February 7, 1949): 34; General Electric Disposall advertisement, *Time* (December 20, 1948): 5; Onliwon Towels advertisement, *Time* (February 7, 1949): 60.

⁴¹³ General Electric Disposall advertisement, *Time* (December 20, 1948): 5.

visually recalls Pollock's painting method. I am not arguing that the advertisement directly alludes to Pollock. Rather, in a kind of gestural homology, the motion of the housewife is aligned with descriptions and images of Pollock painting, making it hard to see images of Pollock's art or of him painting without thinking of the cleaning gesture.⁴¹⁴ As evidenced by the advertisements, containment discourse tends to politicize the personal. Likewise, the discursive interchange between private and public flows freely in the Pollock reception. But highbrow discussions of Pollock do not castigate the painter for spreading himself into his work. (Or, as Dr. Berberian contended, for spreading his private "splurge" onto the canvas.) On the contrary, highbrows acknowledge Pollock's personal presence on the canvas as part of his innovative method. For example, Stuart Preston gives a full sense of the uncontained and deeply radical Pollock in his review of the artist's 1955 Sidney Janis Gallery exhibition, a survey of Pollock's work since 1937. Note the connotation of the overdetermined word "revolutionary":

In these revolutionary paintings are demonstrated his progressive abandonment of forethought: the way he leaves things to chance, the ruthless steps he has taken to shatter the conventions of art and introduce... raw and naked, the elemental and largely subconscious promptings of his creative nature.⁴¹⁵

There is no use, continues Preston, "looking for 'beauty'" or for which socially relevant message is being communicated: "We must instead wait for psychology to dig deeper

⁴¹⁴ In "Resemblance and Desire," Ann Reynolds addresses the leveling effect of size and black and white tone in magazines or exhibitions catalogues that exaggerate visual relationships between art works. Juxtapositions similar to Reynolds's "visual homologies" occur repeatedly in the Pollock popular reception, such as in the case of Dr. Berberian's reference to bovine sperm. See Ann Reynolds, "Resemblance and Desire," *Center 9* (Center for American Architecture and Design, The University of Texas at Austin, 1995): 90-107.

⁴¹⁵ Stuart Preston, "Museum of Modern Art Acquisitions-Americans and Europeans," *New York Times* (December 14, 1955): 14X.

into the creative act. Until then, we can only respond to the gruff, turgid, sporadically vital reelings and writhings of Pollock's inner-directed art."⁴¹⁶

Preston's review resonates with contemporary sociological discourse in a fashionable way. He borrowed from David Riesman's instantly popular 1950 characterization of the *inner-directed* (from a bygone era, taking cues from an inner ideal or hero images) versus *other-directed* (peer group followers, not leaders) personality type.⁴¹⁷ Pollock's inner-directed art results from unconscious promptings for which psychology has yet to account.

Preston is allied with highbrow critical thinking in his restraint from conferring full judgment, awaiting posterity to solve the aesthetic and psychological riddle. In this regard he is like Greenberg, who expressed willingness to hold off until Pollock or art itself developed further, considering it a mark of "Pollock's powerful originality."⁴¹⁸ Robert Goodnough, too, refers to Pollock's inner-guided process, explaining the artist "depends on the intensity of the moment of starting to paint to determine the release of his emotions and the direction the picture will take." Goodnough maintains that a Pollock painting "reveals his personal way of bringing this image into existence."⁴¹⁹ The author tries to assist his reader in comprehending the incomprehensible: Pollock's urge to

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950); Reprint (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1955), pp. 29-32

⁴¹⁸ Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation* 166 (January 24, 1948): 108.

⁴¹⁹ Robert Goodnough, "Pollock Paints a Picture," *Art News* 50 (May 1951): 60.

paint and the resulting paintings may be “forever unknowable.” Although “we can experience the unknowable, [we cannot] understand it intellectually.”⁴²⁰

Not all *Art News* readers accepted Goodnough’s thesis on Pollock. One of them, Amy Gutman of Chicago, complained to the Editor: “Sir: It’s pretty difficult to understand how flinging paint on a surface is ‘penetrating nature to the core’; etc. Your pictures of J. Pollock’s efforts and results are hard to take. If that’s art, I don’t want any part of it.”⁴²¹

Stuart Preston, Clement Greenberg and Robert Goodnough were all art-world insiders. (Goodnough was himself an abstract painter.)⁴²² For them, Pollock’s insertion of self instills his paintings with power. His full abandonment to a subjective state could ultimately allow the viewer to access an as yet unknowable realm. Unfortunately, that unknowable terrain could easily be construed as a communist utopia. Recall that Hearst publications columnist Paul Mallon insisted that modern art is “psychologically Communistic.” Picasso gave rise to “the imaginative school of art in which the observer or buyer must imagine how well the artist conceived the painting, no matter how poorly

⁴²⁰ Ibid. Goodnough’s astute observations are, for today’s reader, undermined by recent indications that he was not actually present when Pollock “painted a picture” (*Autumn Rhythm*, 1950). Goodnough’s quasi-philosophical article is nevertheless thoughtful. See Pepe Karmel, “Pollock at Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth,” in Kirk Varnedoe, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), pp. 86-137. The hypothesis that Goodnough wrote from Namuth’s photos is also cited in the accompanying MoMA publication, *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), p. 74.

⁴²¹ “Letters,” *Art News* (November 1951): 6.

⁴²² I compared Robert Goodnough’s “Pollock Paints a Picture” to Elaine de Kooning’s “Wyeth Paints a Picture” in “The Puzzle of Reception: Andrew Wyeth and Jackson Pollock circa 1950,” College Art Association, February 2005, Atlanta, Georgia.

he executed it or presented it.” In the same manner, communist doctrine expects “the observer to imagine the non-existent beauties of a way of life.”⁴²³

The middlebrow press was intolerant of Pollock’s subjectivity, to the point of ridicule. Dorothy Seiberling’s 1949 *Life* magazine essay ostensibly offered two sides to the Pollock argument. A critic hails him as the greatest living painter, she wrote, but others “condemn his pictures as degenerate and find them as unpalatable as yesterday’s macaroni.” “Degenerate” speaks for itself, and I will revisit the macaroni metaphor at the end of this chapter. *Life*’s 1949 description of Pollock at work summons an image of an artist whose process is random, disordered, and unlike that of any traditional painter:

[Pollock] surrounds himself with quart cans of aluminum paint and many hues of ordinary household enamel. Then, starting anywhere on the canvas, he goes to work. Sometimes he dribbles the paint on with a brush. Sometimes he scrawls it on with a stick, scoops it with a trowel or even pours it on straight out of the can.

One of the accompanying photographs by Martha Holmes shows the artist on his studio floor (Figure 47). His hair is untidy, he scowls and his hands, pants and shoes are covered with stray paint. The caption reads, “Pollock drools enamel paint on canvas.” Not only is Pollock’s process uncontained, the man himself is unkempt and uncouth.

⁴²³ “Art,” *Time* (February 25, 1946): 40.

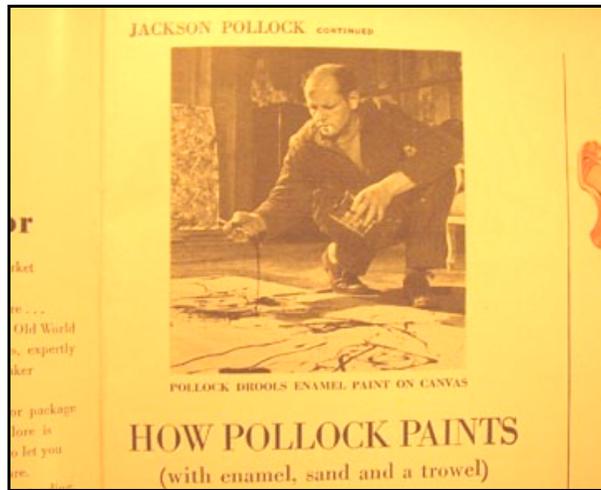


Figure 47. Detail of “How Pollock Paints,” *Life*, August 8, 1949, page 45.

Time magazine quoted from the Stuart Preston review (among others) in 1955 to show how the critics’ prose rivaled Pollock’s “own gaudy drippings,” proving “you can’t tell very much about the champ without a personal introduction.”⁴²⁴ The *Time* article (called “The Champ”) features a 1955 Hans Namuth portrait of Pollock (Figure 48). His balding pate exaggerates deep wrinkles across his forehead. He wears a shaggy beard and dangles a cigarette from his mouth. The caption identifies the photograph: “Painter Pollock: What gravity hath wrought.”

⁴²⁴ “The Champ,” *Time* 66 (December 19, 1955): 65.

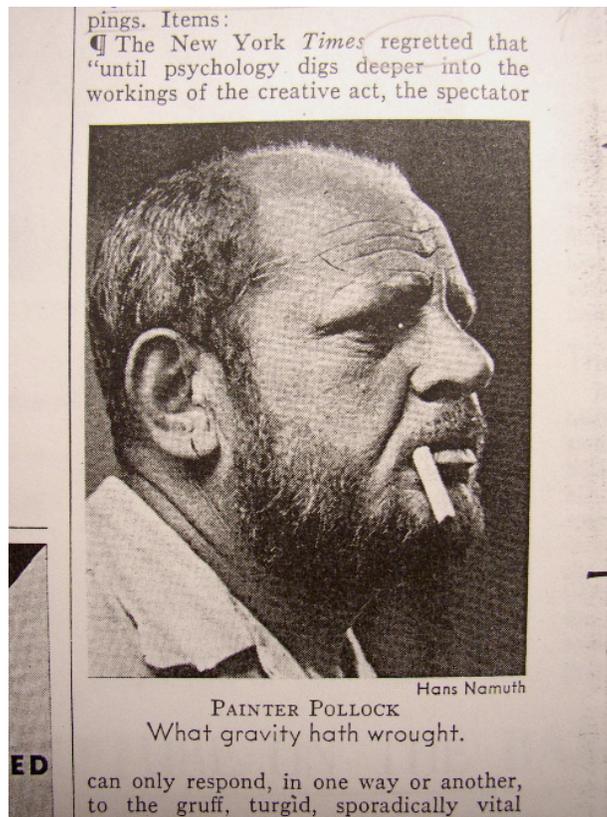


Figure 48. "The Champ," *Time*, December 19, 1955, page 65, detail.

Ever since the 1949 *Life* article, and to a lesser degree, Robert Goodnough's 1951 *Art News* essay with Hans Namuth's documentary-style photographs, Pollock was known to put much of his physical self into his work.⁴²⁵ Thus one understandably finds numerous bodily metaphors in the criticism. For those who view Pollock favorably, bodily metaphors indicate how his paintings lead past the eye toward existential or phenomenological concepts. But for detractors, they indicate that the artist cannot even

⁴²⁵ Although Goodnough's "Pollock Paints a Picture" (May 1951) had enormous and lasting influence on highbrow Pollock criticism, *Art News* had a relatively small audience.

contain the painting process via his eye or hand. This was seen as undisciplined (as elaborated in Chapter Two), and uncontained.

By late 1950, after the widely disseminated *Life* essay and Pollock's participation in the Venice Biennale—where he was one of four artists representing the United States—*Time* magazine's incredulity grew. The magazine launched its most caustic attack in the "Chaos, Damn It!" essay, which I discussed above regarding the image of Pollock and the Apex Dish•A•Matic. Here I would like to address the image from another point of view and to fully address *Time*'s text. The "Chaos, Damn It!" article begins with this statement:

Jackson Pollock's abstractions (TIME, Dec. 1, 1947 *et seq*) stump experts as well as laymen. Laymen wonder what to look for in the labyrinths.... experts wonder what on earth to say about the artist. One advance-guard U.S. critic has gone so far as to call him the "most powerful painter in America." Another, more cautious, reported that Pollock "has carried the irrational quality of picture-making to one extremity" (meaning, presumably his foot).⁴²⁶

By now it should be patently obvious that Greenberg assigned Pollock "most powerful painter in America" status. As for the "more cautious" critic, *Time* revisited a quotation from Sam Hunter's 1949 review (discussed in Chapter Two). Here, however, the magazine adds the parenthetical remark, "meaning, presumably, his foot." "Chaos, Damn It!" reproduces Martha Holmes's *Life* photograph of "Pollock at work" (see Figure 48). Here is a detail of Holmes's photograph as it appeared in *Time* (Figure 49):

⁴²⁶ "Chaos, Damn It!," pp. 70-71.



Figure 49. “Pollock at Work,” *Time* magazine, November 20, 1950, page 71, detail

In the photograph, Pollock’s shoes are visible on the floor at the edge of the canvas. The foot pun is a reminder that *Time*’s editors are carefully considering placement of image and text, and perhaps expecting that their readers will “read” both.

Aside from its overt sarcasm, the “foot” quip reveals the pragmatic explanation that *Time* has been seeking for Pollock’s work. If Sam Hunter’s remark about carrying “the irrational quality of picture-making to one extremity” seemed bogus or evasive, *Time* restores simple logic to it with the foot rejoinder. The metaphorical “extremity” of Hunter’s “picture-making” now becomes the literal, bodily “extremity” of Pollock’s foot. *Time* pretends that the most obvious (and most visually obvious) explanation is “the

best”—especially if it unmask both the artist and critic and undermines the critical double-talk surrounding the artist’s work.

While *Time* is the only publication to refer to Pollock’s foot, many discussions of the artist’s process during the drip-style period refer to the gestures of his hand, arm, or entire body. But these bodily references are generally connected to a controlled process within the artist’s head.⁴²⁷ Some critics find that his work emanates from the unconscious, also located in one’s head. The artist’s total physical engagement with the drip-style paintings of 1947 to about 1952 secured the fusion of the art with the artist’s body.

Control of the arm or hand by the mind is standard practice for painters. All artists must make the hand obey an idea, even if the idea emerges from the unconscious (as in Surrealist automatism). The positive Pollock criticism argues for at least a marginal connection to traditional painters’ ways. Pollock’s work may *appear* to defy the standard hand-mind relationship, but certain critics take pains to emphasize that the relationship is still there, only modified. In contrast, when *Time* literalizes “extremity” to Pollock’s foot, they substitute a part of the body that has never been associated with painting. *Time* also omits any reference to Pollock’s head, the control center of the act of

⁴²⁷ For example, contemporaneous with the *Time* magazine article, Amy Robinson’s *Art News* review (December 1949) explains that Pollock’s paint is “handled with a *sweeping movement of the arm*,” and that “it is apparent that there is a definite pattern and feeling in each canvas.” In March 1950, Parker Tyler writes, “Pollock retires to a locus of remote control, placing *the tool in the hand* as much apart as possible from the surface to be painted....And yet the design *is* conscious, the seemingly uncomposable, composed.” Parker Tyler, “Jackson Pollock: The Infinite Labyrinth,” *Magazine of Art* 43, (March 1950): 92.

painting. Standards, once again, have been inverted. But on this occasion, it is *Time* magazine that flips things around, to facetious effect.

Time's "Chaos, Damn It!" continues, playing further on the man-body-art connection. Just as the magazine had excerpted from critic Sam Hunter in 1949, here it borrows a long statement from Italian critic Bruno Alfieri. After citing Greenberg, Hunter and Alfred Barr (the curator of the Venice Biennale), *Time* finishes its essay as follows:

Only one, brash young (23) Critic Bruno Alfieri of Venice, took the bull by the horns. "It is easy," Alfieri confidently began, "to describe a [Pollock]. Think of a canvas surface on which the following ingredients have been poured: the contents of several tubes of paint of the best quality; sand, glass, various powders, pastels, gouache, charcoal [...] Jackson Pollock's paintings represent absolutely nothing: no facts, no ideas, no geometrical forms....It is easy to detect the following things in all his paintings:

Chaos.
Absolute lack of harmony.
Complete lack of structural organization.
Total absence of technique, however rudimentary.
Once again, chaos.

But these are superficial impressions, first impressions... Each one of his pictures is part of himself. But what kind of man is he? What is his inner world worth? Is it worth knowing, or is it totally undistinguished? Damn it, if I must judge a painting by the artist it is no longer the painting that I am interested in...."
[end of article]⁴²⁸

Bruno Alfieri's original essay is complex and deeply subjective. It shows a critic struggling with the strangely radical qualities of Pollock's process and work. Each time

⁴²⁸ "Chaos, Damn It!," pp. 70-71. Bruno Alfieri's "Short Statement on the Painting of Jackson Pollock" was first published in *L'Arte Moderna* and reprinted in the catalogue for Peggy Guggenheim's selection of Pollock's paintings that were exhibited in Venice in 1950.

Alfieri reaches a frustrated conclusion in his essay, he counters with its opposite. In the end, Alfieri's view is largely favorable: he concludes that Pollock's work is historically important. Yet in *Time's* edited reporting, virtually every positive remark has been excised.

For example, Alfieri recognizes that Pollock's art must be considered in relation to Pollock as a man. *Time's* article repeats Alfieri's exasperated remark, "Damn it, if I must judge a painting by the artist it is no longer the painting that I am interested in...."

But in the original essay, Alfieri pursues his line of inquiry:

On the other hand, however, Pollock never meant to insert formal values in his pastiches. What then? Nevertheless, there are some formal values in his picture.... What do they say? If they are pieces of Pollock, *they will show Pollock to me—pieces of Pollock. That is, I start from the picture, and discover the man: suddenly, without reasoning, instantaneously, more instantaneously than with any other modern painter.*⁴²⁹

By the end, Alfieri *does* find "the man" through the work. This conclusion renders his "Damn it" a temporary condition, not a permanent dismissal. Once again *Time* bowdlerized a highbrow review, deleting the seesawing quality of the original statement.⁴³⁰ Some might say that *Time* was practicing "smear-technique" journalism.

⁴²⁹ Emphasis added, Bruno Alfieri, "Short Statement on the Painting of Jackson Pollock," *L'Arte Moderna* (Venice), June 8, 1950.

⁴³⁰ Recently, Alfieri wrote about his involvement with Peggy Guggenheim's Venice exhibition and *Time* magazine: "The exhibition over, and with it the anticipated and inevitable argument with Peggy... I was interviewed by a bemused correspondent of *Time*. Not even the Americans had understood anything about Pollock, and perhaps not even they were particularly fond of that strange ambassadress of US culture that Peggy Guggenheim to all intents and purposes was. Unfortunately, this was the time of the real ambassadress Clara Booth Luce and the Cold War. The exhibition had a curious aftermath. On November 20 of the year the New York weekly *Time* published a short article entitled 'Chaos, Damn It!' that quoted in a mocking tone (an episode we would be happy to forget today) my text from the catalogue-brochure. Jackson blew his top and sent them the following telegram...." Bruno Alfieri, "The Pollock Exhibition," in

Through *Time*'s repackaging of Pollock's reviews and its calculated presentation of his images, the magazine in fact contains him.

Pollock, less of a wordsmith than many of his peers, was disinclined to write statements defending or explaining his painting (with a few exceptions, and he did sign his name to letters written by his peers). Despite this, the *Time* essay provoked him to fire off a telegram that was published in the magazine three weeks later. The letter is published with all uppercase letters, in keeping with the format of telegrams:

SIR:

NO CHAOS DAMN IT. DAMNED BUSY PAINTING AS YOU CAN SEE BY MY SHOW COMING UP NOV. 28. I'VE NEVER BEEN TO EUROPE. THINK YOU LEFT OUT MOST EXCITING PART OF MR. ALFIERI'S PIECE.

EAST HAMPTON, N.Y.

JACKSON POLLOCK⁴³¹

The editor's response is published below Pollock's letter:

The most exciting part of Critic Alfieri's remarks, at least for Artist Pollock, may well have been the obvious conclusion that he "sits at the extreme apex of the most advanced and unprejudiced avant-garde of modern art."—ED.⁴³²

Time's editors published two other letters in addition to Pollock's telegram. Both letters are printed above Pollock's in the column, followed by the Editor's response to Pollock.

Pollock's America: The 'Irascibles' and the New York School/Jackson Pollock in Venice (Milan: Skira Editore, 2002), p. 18.

⁴³¹ The sentence "I've never been to Europe" corrects *Time* for having claimed Pollock "followed his canvases to Italy." "Letters," *Time* 56 (December 11, 1950). According to Francis O'Connor, Pollock biographer Jeffrey Potter claimed Lee Krasner edited Jackson's "public statements—the telegram to Altieri [sic], for instance, went through many drafts as he listened, and Pollock mumbled 'fuck.'" O'Connor erroneously claims that Pollock's telegram was written "to" Altieri (he means Alfieri), but it was written to *Time* magazine. See his "Pollock Watch Commentary No.1N," part of his web log: <http://members.aol.com/FVOC/archive.html>.

⁴³² Significantly, Alfieri also carried this idea further than *Time* conveyed: "Compared to Pollock, Picasso...becomes a quiet conformist, a painter of the past."

This placement holds Pollock's block-printed telegram between unfavorable responses, underscoring his minority voice. The first reader's (Irene Katz of Brooklyn) letter states that although every other country at the Venice Biennial was represented with "pleasing" material, the U.S. had a "skimpy showing, most of which was by this man Jackson Pollock." The author's "European friends" had the impression that "this is the type of work that finds popular approval in the U.S."

The second *Time* reader (Charles O'Reilly of Notre Dame, Indiana) is equally galled, pointing out that Alfred Barr's selections for the U.S. pavilion must have convinced most Europeans "that artistic quality and taste were at a low ebb in the U.S." If Barr's poor choices did not make the point, continues the author, "Then, at least, he deserves an E for effort." Notably, both readers are concerned that Pollock represents "America."⁴³³ It was December 1950. The United States was still in period of dramatic prosperity. McCarthyism was on the rise. Six months earlier President Truman ordered United States forces to assist South Korea against the Communist North Korean and Chinese invasion. At least two of *Time's* readers publicly objected to Pollock's low "artistic quality and taste."

The Bigger Picture

But what do Pollock's supporters, like Robert Goodnough or Parker Tyler, mean by "unknowable" and "incomprehensible"? Surely these terms were not codewords for

⁴³³ Angela Miller created the useful term "synecdochic nationalism" to characterize how nineteenth century American landscape painters made the specificity of local landscape represent a larger nationalistic program; Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 17. In "Letters" to *Time* magazine, readers express fear that Pollock's art (and sometimes the man himself) would synecdochically represent the United States.

anti-American activities. Writers for middlebrow and highbrow venues grappled with Pollock's paintings largely on a formal level. They sought to explain the method, appearance, composition or application of paint. The construction of a given painting hinted—but only hinted—at larger ontological questions. Not every Jackson Pollock painting opens onto the metaphysical realm, but the serious critic who sincerely attempted to address the art's significance began to move in that direction.⁴³⁴

Time, *Newsweek*, and *Life*'s critics may have dealt with Pollock seriously, but they rarely seem sincere. The class war—the social class war and the concomitant fear of communism—tended to get the better of them. Their job was to educate a public with pre-existing tastes based on conventionalized mores. It was a public made of individuals whose taste, in sociologist Robert Lynd's description, "leans toward the tried and safe.... The quality of his life is measured in terms of tangible success, achievement, 'something to show for it,' 'ability to produce the goods.'"⁴³⁵ Or as economist J. K. Galbraith phrased it, "What is measurable is better." This public purchased newspapers,

⁴³⁴ For supporters, being uncontained held the promise of obliterating boundaries between internal (subjective) and external (objective) realms. More recently, the phenomenological ramifications of being uncontained were addressed by Claude Cernuschi in terms that would have been relevant at midcentury as well: "Every line on a Pollock canvas is a physical gesture, a trace of a particular movement in space—a trace of Pollock's own body. In using the personal mark's of one's own movements to indicate the greater rhythms and dynamic forces of nature, one could conjecture that Pollock, like [Clyfford] Still and [Arshile] Gorky, is also suggesting a dissolution of the internal and the external, of what lies within and without corporeal constraints. If one accepts this reading, i.e., *that Pollock's works can be seen as a kind of anticontainment*, it would not be difficult to see statements by him and his wife as reinforcing this hypothesis."

Cernuschi continues: "Thus, if categories and constraints are conceived of in terms of containers, the dissolution of categories is conceived—predictable—in terms of the breaking of containers." Claude Cernuschi, *'Not an illustration but the equivalent': a cognitive approach to abstract expressionism* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), pp. 124-125.

⁴³⁵ Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, p. 420.

periodicals and the products advertised in them. The mass-market press was, by economic necessity perhaps, other-directed.

Poet and critic Parker Tyler, chef of the first macaroni metaphor, later made an about face on Pollock. By 1950 Tyler was asking serious and sincere questions:

[A] definite meaning is not always implicit. Or if we say that art always “means something,” Pollock gives us a series of abstract images...which by their nature can never be read for an original and indisputable meaning, but must exist absolutely, in the paradox that any system of meaning successfully applied to them would at the same time not apply, for it would fail to exhaust their inherent meaning.⁴³⁶

These are discomfiting thoughts phrased in difficult language. No “how-to” manual, statistical analysis or consumer item can offer certitude about “meaning.” And in descriptions of Pollock where uncertainty left a gap between writer and reader, what if communism seeped in to fill the gap? What if it was already present, thus accounting for the writer’s obfuscation and double-talk?

When Pollock died in August 1956, *Life* magazine published a one-page obituary. It centers on a large photograph whose caption explains was taken ten days before the painter’s death (Figure 50).⁴³⁷

⁴³⁶ Tyler, “The Infinite Labyrinth,” p. 92.

⁴³⁷ “Art: Rebel Artist’s Tragic Ending,” *Life* 41 (August 27, 1956): 58.



Figure 50. Jackson Pollock’s obituary and Chef Boy-Ar-Dee® advertisement, *Life* magazine, August 27, 1956, pages 58-59.

Pollock looks awful. Even in black and white, his W. C. Fields nose betrays his affliction. Above the photograph is a reduced-scale version of Pollock standing in front of *Summertime*—the same photograph featured in the 1949 Seiberling essay. Also pictured is an unidentified painting, the thickly worked *Untitled* [Scent], ca. 1953-1955. The caption below it reads “Late Canvas Shows Painstaking Brushwork.” The brief text of the obituary includes the sentence, “Works like this threw some critics into rhapsodies but reminded others of half-baked macaroni.” The magazine could leave it at that, with the painted “macaroni”-like canvases visible above and below the text of the artist’s

obituary. But, as it happens, on the facing page is a full-page color advertisement for Chef Boy-Ar-Dee® Spaghetti Dinner with red sauce. A photograph of a plate of spaghetti dominates the page, with intertwined sauce-covered noodles curving about, looping up and around the fork. It was the final serving in *Life*'s eight years of reporting on the "greatest living painter in the United States."

*

In 1951, *Art News* editor Thomas Hess recognized the various roles Pollock played to different audiences. Hess cited the 1950 *Time* "Chaos, Damn It!" article as an example: "When conservatives or Marxists wish to point to some real or fancied evil, they almost invariably hit at Pollock. The Soviet art critic and the one writing for *Time* magazine, both covering the 1950 Biennale exposition in Venice... were hunting, respectively, for some particularly horrifying evidence of bourgeois decadence, and for some un-American scrawling. Both found what they sought in Pollock.... Thus true fame has come to him from his detractors and his best publicity has been of the wrong kind."⁴³⁸

Hess got it right, for the most part, about Pollock's best publicity having been of the wrong kind. Maybe his perceptive insight regarding true fame came from Hess's own experience with being wrong. In another context years later, Pollock told Selden Rodman that Hess was "scared of being wrong." My own investigations into subversive activities indicate that Jackson Pollock was more wrong to the American public than we have realized. It was not just his art, but the way he looked and painted, the critical

⁴³⁸ Thomas Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), p. 154. I have not found the review by the "Soviet art critic" to whom Hess refers.

apparatus that supported him, and the vociferously waged battle for cultural dominance at midcentury. Wrongness resonated. Had Pollock succumbed to the right, it would have been a sad compromise. To judge by recent critical writing in response to his 1998 Museum of Modern Art retrospective, the depth of his wrongness is still being plumbed.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁹ See Peter Plagens, "Jack the Dripper Returns," *Newsweek* (December 28, 1998): 78-80; Michael Kimmelman, "How Even Pollock's Failures Enhance His Triumphs," *New York Times*, October 30, 1998: B29, 32; Adam Gopnik, "Poured Over: Jackson Pollock and the Studied Art of Spontaneity," *New Yorker* (October 19, 1998): 76-81; David Gelernter, "Picturing Jackson Pollock," *Weekly Standard* (November 23, 1998): 37-39; David Sylvester, "The Grin Without the Cat," *London Review of Books* 21 (April 1, 1999): 3, 6, 8-9.

Conclusion:

So What?

In March 2006 the *New York Times* published an article about the children's art program at the newly redesigned Museum of Modern Art. The article spotlights family-friendly educational activities at the Museum (made possible through a corporate sponsor); an inset box lists children's art programs at other New York museums. The article is part parent's guide, so they—and, presumably, their nannies—can learn where to introduce children to art at a young age. Ben Street, a freelance educator at the Museum of Modern Art, explained the Museum's approach: "We encourage [the children] to be as imaginative as they can in their observations. If they are convinced a Jackson Pollock is spaghetti, then it is spaghetti."⁴⁴⁰

With all due respect to Mr. Street, to call a Pollock painting "spaghetti" is not especially imaginative. In fact, the motif has a sixty-year history in the critical and popular response. The *New York Times* article is a reminder that this view is still held; I would hazard to guess that other people—not just children—are convinced that a "Jackson Pollock is spaghetti."

Do viewers need to be taught how to look at a Pollock painting? That is, do they need to be "educated up to it," as Margaret Cresson's fictional museum-goer remarked of modern art critics in 1944?⁴⁴¹ Presumably the children who look at *One: Number 31*,

⁴⁴⁰ Karen Jones, "For This Crowd, a Pollock is Spaghetti and That's That," *New York Times* (March 29, 2006), p. 22.

⁴⁴¹ Margaret Cresson, "It's 'Modern' —But Is It Art?," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 23, 1944, p. 19.

1950 (1950) in the Museum of Modern Art's expansive atrium eventually will learn what makes the painting significant and valid.

In the foregoing pages I have tried to show that Pollock's paintings ran counter to the prevailing values of consensus era, middle class America. They opposed these values in a number of ways that I categorize as Pollock's ostensible "mess." One aspect of mess, then, relates to being out of stride with the average American. But mess also can be read in Pollock's day as unAmerican and communist-inspired. I have emphasized the centrality of critical and popular concerns with various aspects of Pollock's mess. The pervasiveness of those concerns is the result of a profoundly uneasy period in American cultural history.

Pollock developed his painting style during a period when Americans were preoccupied with their own social status, largely spurred on by the United States's economic dominance during and after World War II. That dominance helped encourage the society to be more optimistic about its ability to improve its taste, especially if more Americans were rising into the middle classes and felt the need to elevate their cultural acuity as well. In popular parlance, there was a particular concern with one's own and other people's tastes. Russell Lynes's article, "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow," and its pictorialized version in *Life* are tangible manifestations of the taste obsession that permeated postwar cultural debates. But concerns were voiced throughout the popular and elite press. "How good is your taste?" asked *House & Garden* magazine in 1946.⁴⁴² "Do Americans Have Good Taste?" wondered the *New York Times Magazine* in 1954.⁴⁴³ Sometimes articles included a gentle poke at modern art, as when *Good Housekeeping* asked "Can You Tell Which Are Valuable?" The article reproduced six paintings by "famous artists... considered masterpieces."⁴⁴⁴ One "picture" was included in the article as a red herring. It is biomorphic and quasi-abstract, featuring a five-legged creature with

⁴⁴² Gerard, "How Good is Your Taste?", *House & Garden* 90 (October 1946): 130.

⁴⁴³ Leslie Cheek, Jr., "Do Americans Have Good Taste?," *New York Times Magazine* (June 6, 1954): 19.

⁴⁴⁴ "Can You Tell Which are Valuable?," *Good Housekeeping* (June 1942): 40-41, 163.

The masterpieces are by Cézanne, Picasso, Vermeer, Renoir, van Gogh and Corot.

many eyeballs, two heads and two tongues. The answer page to the “masterpieces” quiz indicates it was made by an eleven-year old child.

These are precisely the issues I have tried to bring to the fore through an examination of the response to Pollock’s art. His paintings pushed more buttons, partly due to their apparent lack of sophistication. Meanwhile Americans were uneasy with modernism and increasingly fearful of communists.

Pollock’s paintings were far more troubling to average Americans than his current canonical status suggests. Much of the vast body of critical literature on Pollock over the past five decades focuses on his formal innovations, his position within advanced art or how his art relates to Clement Greenberg’s modernism. By examining primary source material, I have argued that the contemporary reactions to Pollock’s work were motivated more by class issues and cultural battles than “art” *per se*. My goal has also been to restore vigor to a frequently overlooked cultural debate, making Pollock’s eventual “triumph” seem all the more divisive and surprising.

I have provided no answer for how Pollock (or the New York School) rose to such prominence in the face of popular disapproval and the highbrows’ inability to persuade the general public of his cultural value. The theory that the United States government exploited Abstract Expressionism as democratic propaganda, thus helping to secure the art’s position worldwide, does not suffice for me.⁴⁴⁵ The theory presumes that the United States was successful in linking the work to a democratic “freedom of expression” ideology that, in turn, gave the artwork cachet. It is possible that a variety of factors helped to make Pollock successful (mostly after his death), and that America’s international prominence aided his exposure. But in the end, the paintings have been lionized in the art world because they are good. Pollock’s paintings are indeed powerful; that is a view I fully share with Greenberg. The “best” of his paintings—the classic drip style canvases—are visually and philosophically potent. Many are quite beautiful. They

⁴⁴⁵ I referred to these arguments in Chapter 3. See, for example, Guilbaut’s *How New York Stole the Idea of the Modern Art* (1983), David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique* (1999), and Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (2000).

can be approached from a variety of visual, historical or metaphysical perspectives, as the considerable literature on Pollock attests. They have held up well over the years.

I have tried to keep my intrusions to a minimum (with the conspicuous exception of my descriptions of *Cathedral* and *Number 23, 1949*). But my study has not been about proving whether or why Pollock's art is worthy of study.⁴⁴⁶ Instead, I concentrated on what people wrote about the art and the man, and what kinds of factors influence people's opinions—and tastes.

There are other artists whose reception should be revisited (or visited at all).⁴⁴⁷ Norman Rockwell, who made up one half of my original dissertation project, indeed makes an intriguing contrast to Pollock. My own teaching experience at the beginning of the twenty-first century suggests anecdotally that a surprising number of college students are unfamiliar with Rockwell, who died in 1978. The major Rockwell exhibition organized jointly by the High Museum in Atlanta and the Norman Rockwell Museum in Massachusetts garnered significant attention around 1999-2002. The catalogue is rich with essays by well-known, "serious" writers.⁴⁴⁸ The tide seemed to turn dramatically, especially when the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum decided in the late stages to exhibit the show. But the excitement has subsided.

Rockwell's audience was predominantly middlebrow and lowbrow. *The Saturday Evening Post*, for which he painted three hundred twenty-two covers between 1916 and 1963, was a relatively conservative weekly magazine featuring current events articles and serialized fiction. But the *Post* was active in the taste wars. In March 1952 the *Post* published an editorial about opinion polls, advising its readers to not to be "cast down" if

⁴⁴⁶ The validity of Pollock as a subject is not in question.

⁴⁴⁷ In addition to Rockwell, Andrew Wyeth's status, especially from the 1940s through the 1960s, is intriguing. Wyeth is a painter who seemed "wrong" when judged by highbrow standards, although Greenberg later may have (apocryphally) confessed to a preference for Wyeth in the 1970s. Much rich material on Wyeth waits to be investigated further. See my College Art Association (2005) and Philadelphia Museum (2006) papers on Wyeth's reception around 1950. Additionally, David Cateforis' work (presented at those same venues) considers how Wyeth's art was "Uncool" in the detached climate of the 1960s and 1970s.

⁴⁴⁸ Judy L. Larson and Maureen Hart Hennessey, *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999). Among the essayists are Wanda Corn, Dave Hickey, Neil Harris and Robert Rosenblum.

they find themselves in the minority in the pollsters' reports. The magazine cites a 1945 Elmo Roper poll as an example. Back then, Roper asked what should be the attitude of the United States toward Russia. The greatest number of respondents answered that the United States should "maintain friendly relations, but not make too many concessions." Yet when Roper broke down the statistics according to income and education, he found "that the poor were the most pessimistic about Russia's future attitude." From the vantage point of 1952, the *Post* concluded:

In other words, to predict accurately in 1945 that Russia would act about as Russia has acted, you had to be as dumb and poorly informed as an ox. In spite of all that modern education can do, an all-wise Providence has "hid these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them unto babes."⁴⁴⁹

The *Post* editorial continues, raising the question of "which way a goon like Stalin is going to jump" in spring of 1952.

Today, of course, with even the State Department raging and ranting at the menacing Muscovites, the [poll] figures would probably blow the top off your laugh-meter, although the intelligentsia is fighting a brisk rear-guard action against the facts. It's just an uninformed guess, but it looks to us as if education on subjects pertaining to international relations has consisted too much of "programs to promote good will" and too little of courses in the history of men and nations—as is, instead of as ought to be.⁴⁵⁰

The title of the Editorial is "Stalin Could Not Fool Everybody—Only Highbrows!"

There is much to be explored in *The Saturday Evening Post*, its audience and its favorite illustrator. When the *Post* put on a 1962 cover Rockwell's painting of a grey-suited beholder considering a Jackson Pollock-like painting, it signified a jump in Pollock's notoriety and indicated Rockwell's serious and perceptive wit.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁹ Editorials, *The Saturday Evening Post* (March 29, 1952): 10. The Biblical text is from Matthew 11:25.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ The painting is now called "The Connoisseur," 1962, but was originally nicknamed "Abstract and Concrete." Wanda Corn published a thoughtful essay on this painting [see *Rockwell: Pictures for the American People*, 1999] and has continued to interpret it in lectures [e.g. Wanda Corn, "Ways of Seeing: The Art of Norman Rockwell," unpublished lecture, Allbritton Art Institute, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, March 26, 2006.]

Comparing Pollock's reception to non-highbrow artists such as Rockwell could flesh out the work I have done here. It has become clear to me that Pollock's reception was influenced by a number of extra-aesthetic, culturally determined responses, and that if those are not examined we are left with a fragmented understanding of his contribution.

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