

# the warhol: resources & lessons

## Artists Past & Present: Jackson Pollock

Jackson Pollock was born in Cody, Wyoming, on January 28, 1912, the youngest of five sons in a working class family. He had a combative demeanor from an early age and was kicked out of his Los Angeles high school twice. Shortly thereafter, in 1930, he moved to New York City, where he studied under Thomas Hart Benton at the Art Students League for three years. In 1936 he took a job at Mexican muralist David Siqueiros's Union Square Experimental Workshop, which proved crucial in formulating his later Abstract Expressionist drip paintings. While studying under Siqueiros, he experimented with unorthodox materials like house paints, and he practiced groundbreaking application techniques, including the spraying, splattering, and dripping of paint. Later, in 1941, Pollock saw demonstrations of Indian Sand Painting at the Museum of Natural History, which encouraged his gestural pouring technique.



Number 4, 1950

In his most famous works, Pollock laid canvases on the floor and—using his brushes like sticks—hovered just above the surface, dripping and pouring paint, eliminating all recognizable imagery. This technique, called an “action painting,” earned him the nickname “Jack the Dripper.” Works like *Number 4* from 1950 exemplify the style; each gesture of the artist’s hand is evident in the intricate web of paint. Pollock believed that the “action” of painting tapped into his subconscious mind, and his technique became part of an automatic process: called automatism. He was primarily interested in representing the dramatic unfolding of his subconscious on the painting’s surface; his process was similar to the flurry of notes created by a jazz musician’s improvisation or, today, the flow of a freestyle rapper. At the peak of his fame, Pollock was considered by many to be the greatest living painter, an opinion *Time* magazine shared in 1951. Legendary paintings like *Blue Poles: Number 11, 1952*; *Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950*; and *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30, 1950* were all created during this period of intense creativity. Sadly, Pollock struggled with alcoholism throughout his life and was killed in a drunk driving accident on August 11, 1956, a crash that also injured his lover Ruth Kligman and killed her friend Edith Metzger.

*“My opinion is ... the modern painter cannot express his age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio in the old forms of the Renaissance ... the modern artist is living in a mechanical age ... working and expressing an inner world—in other words, expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces.”*

*“On the floor I am more at ease, I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around in it, work from the four sides and be literally ‘in’ the painting.”*

--Jackson Pollock, 1947

*“The method of painting is the natural growth out of a need. I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.... I can control the flow of paint: there is no accident, just as there is no beginning and no end.”*

-- Jackson Pollock in Films by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg 1951

### Sources:

Marika Herskovic, ed. *American Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s: An Illustrated Survey With Artists' Statements, Artwork, and Biographies*, (New York: New York School Press, 2003).

Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture; Critical Essays*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

### Comprehension Questions:

1. Look at No.4 and try to retrace Jackson Pollock’s painting gestures by moving your arm in the air.
2. What was Jackson Pollock trying to reveal in his paintings?
3. What do you think Jackson Pollock meant when he said “the painting has a life of its own ...”?
4. Why do you think Jackson Pollock experimented with new materials and techniques in his art?  
What other professions use experimentation in their work?

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Jackson Pollock  
*Number 4, 1950*  
Oil, enamel, and aluminum paint on canvas  
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh  
Gift of Frank R. S. Kaplan, 1954