The Pollock Who Blazed an Artistic Trail for His Brother

By MICHAEL BRENSON
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PARIS — "I see it as the work of a fellow artist. He was another person trying to carry on. I believe in the carrying-on. I believe we have responsibilities as artists to deal with the culture handed down to us and to find a way to hand it down to our progeny."

The speaker is Charles Pollock. The "fellow artist" is his youngest brother, Jackson, whose work is on display until May 10 at the Pompidou Center, some 30 minutes by foot from the Paris district in which Charles Pollock and his family have been living since 1971.

At first glance, Mr. Pollock in Paris seems like a fish out of water. He has a full Irish face — "You look like an Irish revolutionary," Willem de Kooning told him — and that Middle Western accent and direct, unassuming manner that makes many Americans in this relentlessly self-conscious city seem like hillbillies.

'Where I Have to Be'

On top of this, convinced that he has no gift for languages and refusing to do anything badly, he has never learned French. The possibility of having to confront someone in French fills him with something approaching panic.

Yet he is at home here. He likes "the streets, the cafes, the character of the city." His work has evolved here. "I think I'm doing better work than in New York," he said. He has no desire to be elsewhere. "For the moment, I feel I'm where I have to be."

It is a long way from Denver, where he was born in 1902, to Paris in the last quarter of this century. There were a lot of stops along the way in a journey that would already be chronicled if another rider had not ridden out of the same depot a few years later, gone a lot faster, made a lot more noise and opened up new territory before crashing to a halt in 1956.

Rootless Frontier Parents

Charles was the first and Jackson the last of five sons of Stella May and Leroy Pollock. Their father was a craftsman, a jack-of-all trades, who took work where he could get it and dragged his family across the American frontier in search of a better life. No one has been able to explain satisfactorily how rootless frontier parents could produce five sons of such seriousness and distinction, four of whom were involved in the visual arts. Charles can only talk about their sense of quality and craft:

"My father was a craftsman of the soil. He did not know how to make a living, but he knew how to make things grow, and he loved it. My mother despised what she called 'shoddy.' She was a terrific craftswoman, and she communicated a sense of quality to us — quality in people, quality in workmanship."

The oldest and youngest sons, born 10 years apart, could not have been more different. Charles is reflective, patient and consistent. He weighs each question. When the words emerge, they come out slowly but fluidly, and sometimes with that embracing simplicity that is one of the definitions of eloquence.

Acceleration of Time

There is doubt in him, but no anger or resentment. He talks easily about his brother, emphasizing his commitment — "He was a furiously hard worker" — and knowledge. "He was well-enough read, and he certainly knew art." "I'm pleased Jack is being recognized for what he was was."

Jackson, who was born in Cody, Wyo., in 1912, was a force. He could be violent, excessive, unpredictable. He did not feel comfortable with words. In interviews, he was articulate but curt. There was a furious energy pent up inside him that he tried to channel into and exploit in his work. In most of his paintings, there is an extraordinary acceleration of time, as if he had to squeeze every drop of life into every line and color in every painting.

With Charles, time hardly seems to exist. He seems to be one of those rare people who did not rant and rave about the passage of time but trusted and gave himself to it. In return, time has treated him well.

Silent and Waiting

It is not so much that he does not suggest his age but that he does not suggest any age. His moderately sized, vertical, nonfigurative paintings, which belong to a Constructive tradition that includes Rothko and a number of the color-field painters, do not impose themselves. They do not have the indelible personal stamp of his brother's work, which would go on moving and breathing whether or not anyone was in front of them. Charles's works depend more on an outside presence. They will not initiate the dialogue. If someone wants to speak with them, they will respond and reveal themselves. If not, they will remain silent and wait.

Charles was the one who blazed the artistic trail. In 1926, he left Los Angeles and went to New York to study at the Art Students League. During a summer visit in 1930, Charles and another brother, Frank, then a student at Columbia, persuaded Jackson to leave Los Angeles, where he was periodically getting thrown out of school, and join them in New York. Jackson enrolled in classes with Charles's teacher, Thomas Hart Benton, and lived for a while with Charles and his first wife in the East Eighth Street apartment that would eventually become his.

When Charles moved to Washington in 1935 to work for resettlement communities of miners and textile workers, close contact between the brothers ended. The decision was one of the most fateful he made. The chance to do posters that politicians did not like, and which he came to believe could at best not have the social and political impact of photographs, led him away from New York just before the artists who would change the course of American art began to come together.

'Easy to Get Swept Away'

"It was hopelessly idealistic," he says. Then he pauses to be sure he has formulated clearly what he wants to say next. "It's awfully easy to get swept away with enthusiasms here and there. It takes a lot of living to remain focused on the things you can do something about."

The next stop was Michigan. The strong need, particularly during the Depression, to reconcile his Populist background and his commitment to art, led him to work for a while with the United Automobile Workers. "In the end," however, "there was no place for me there."

He was doing social-realist work at the time. During his four years as supervisor of mural painting and graphic art for the Works Progress Administration in Detroit, he was commissioned to do a mural for Michigan State University. That led to a job offer in 1942 from the art department.

His affiliation with the university lasted 25 years. He gave up social realism almost immediately. "What are you going to teach those kids? It didn't seem possible to teach social-realist painting."

'Completely Isolated'

For the most part, he taught lettering and calligraphy, an interest he traces back to the discovery of foolscap sheets of Palmer penmanship exercises on the floor of an abandoned schoolhouse in Cody when he was 7 or 8 years old. Lettering would become essential to his painting; the geometry, the layout approach to the canvas, he compositional experimentation *with colored cutouts all evolve from it.*

Although he had painted and exhibited while at the university, he had remained throughout the Michigan years "completely isolated." His words suggest that when he retired from the university and returned to New York in 1967, he was hoping in part to find the community and possibility that he had missed out on.

"The free and wonderful association of artists" he identified with the New York art world seemed to him, however, to be absent, and the city had changed:

"New York wasn't the city I knew as a student at the league. I remember the excitement when I arrived in New York for the first time and walked by the Flatiron Building and Madison Square Garden. Now — Fifth Avenue, Madison Avenue, Greenwich Village — architecturally it isn't the same any more."

'Relatively Young Painter'

When his wife, Sylvia, was offered a publishing job in Paris in 1971, they left the United States. Away from the pressures and ghosts of a New York art world that almost demands an ability to impose and sell oneself that Mr. Pollock does not have, his work has grown. There is more willingness here to look beyond the references suggested by the works to the works themselves.

Since 1977, Mr. Pollock has had major shows in England, France and Belgium. He continues to orchestrate *round and straight, soft-edged and* hard-edged figure and ground into compositions with a strange and sometimes haunting resonance. He is sure enough of what he is doing to say after 60 years of painting:

"I think I am a relatively young painter. Things are beginning to come together."

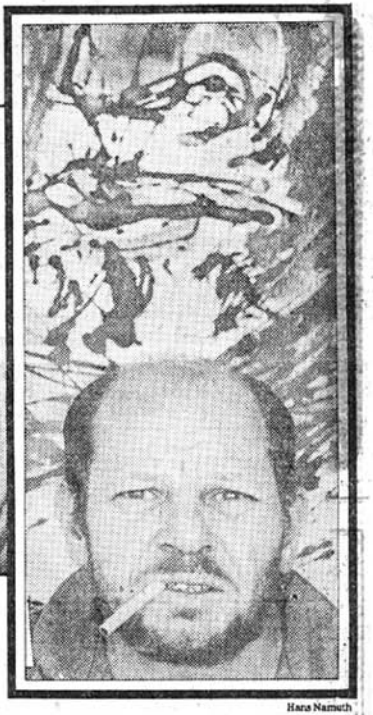
Large European Community

There is no question but that he has found in Paris something of what he was hoping to find in New York. He talks about his first trip through Europe — his brother never went abroad — during his 1963 sabbatical with unabashed enthusiasm; Chartres and the Acropolis "overwhelmed" him. When asked if he had been to Arezzo and Sansepolcro to see the Piero della Francescas, he smiled and said his 15-year-old daughter Francesca was in part named after him.

The community he has found in Europe is very large indeed. "I'm a painter in the Western world. I'm interested in any contribution American painters can make to the history of art."

That sense of service, of responsibility to something beyond himself, which has been such a mixed blessing in his life, has been channeled into an artistic creed that suggests his conviction and sense of possibility.

"You have to believe," he said, "that painting is something tremendously worth doing. Essentially, one feels the need to create great art because it's been done, because it's necessary to be done again. It's a historical necessity more than personal salvation."



Hans Namuth

Charles Pollock, above, and his late brother, Jackson. *How did rootless frontier parents produce sons of such distinction?*