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Jackson Pollock



Synopsis

How did Jackson Pollock become a cult figure for the Beat Generation? And what caused his reputation to continue to soar? This compelling and original Abrams classic, now back in print, locates the artist in the continuum of his times, recreating the social and cultural milieu of New York in the 1940s and 1950s. With extensive knowledge of Pollock's habits (much of it gained through interviews), his reading, his conversation, and the exhibitions he visited, the author retraces many of the far-flung sources of Pollock's work. A wealth of comparative photographs that illustrate paintings by artists Pollock admired further explains the work of this complex, tragic, and immeasurably influential figure. Pollock's big, bold canvases are reproduced in five colors to convey the brilliance of his network of tones, his aluminum paint, and his sparkling collage materials. Six gatefolds show his vast horizontal works without distortion and a chronology provides a summary of the major events of Pollock's life.

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Customer Reviews

Before Varnedoe and Karmel's Pollock monograph, which accompanied the MOMA / Tate retrospective a few years ago, this was the best available text-and-plates book about Pollock. In terms of its text, this book is still relevant and insightful. Like Elizabeth Frank, Landau does a lot of truly eye-opening comparison work throughout her book. She'll reprint a work by Picasso, say, or a Native American artifact, or a Pollock sketch, and then analyze the influence it exerted on one of Pollock's key canvases. And unlike the Varnedoe/Karmel book, this volume reprints these several

kinds of works in close proximity, often on the same or a facing page, a useful feature. Landau's remarks about Pollock's sources, outcomes, growth and directions are always at least provocative and often really instructive, particularly in her coverage of the late black paintings. Indeed, Landau's analysis is regularly listed and praised in other authors' bibliographies. The drawbacks of the book are its numerous poor reproductions, and plates after all make the primary reason for buying an artist monograph. Many of the plates are excellent and crisp--"Lucifer," "Pasiphae," "Autumn Rhythm," the colorful, playful works following Pollock's marriage. But too many of the plates and fold-outs are muddy, and Pollock's use of silver or aluminum paint is simply beyond this book's ability--as with the gaudy and over-exposed looking gatefold that opens the book. "Blue Poles" and "Stenographic Figure" are among the book's other poor reprints. Until I saw the Varnedoe/Karmel reprint of "One: Number 31, 1950," and then again in "person" at the MOMA, I just flatly didn't understand how Pollock had approached it. It looks "ok" in Landau, but with a lessened resolution that just slightly confuses the webbing throughout. Still, I value the book and particularly its text. As for the reproduction quality, I did buy a second copy to cannibalize it; I've posted many laminated pages throughout my classroom. But I got that copy at remaindered prices. At full cost, this is a 3 1/2 or 4 star book. At bargain prices, the book rates 4 or 4 1/2 stars. Varnedoe/Karmel is just visually superior.

This intelligent and lavishly illustrated volume, which first appeared in a 1989 hardcover edition, covers Pollock's entire career, his early influences, and the progression of the themes, techniques, and accomplishments of his life as an artist. Ellen Landau's text is enlightening, but the best part of this book is, inevitably, the illustrations themselves, which are an unparalleled feast for the eyes. For those who want to experience and understand Pollock's art (rather than dwell on his personal problems) this is an excellent choice.

I strongly disagree with another reviewer who said the quality of the art reproductions in Landau's biography varied. As someone who has bought a lot of art books, I thought the color plates exceptionally vivid and a more than adequate basis for studying Pollock's work in light of Ellen Landau's insightful commentary. Every major work is presented as a full-page (or double page) image. They are simply labeled by the painting's title (and an alternate if a painting acquired one in the art world other than the one Pollock gave it himself) and the date; the usual caption clutter (medium, size, present owner) are provided in an appendix. The narrative, divided into twelve chapters, is basically chronological. (Chapters are compact and can be read thoughtfully and

leisurely in an hour or two.) Landau includes sufficient biographical information to help the reader appreciate the paintings. She doesn't ignore or minimize Pollock's alcoholism and character defects, neither does she dwell on them. The "evidence" and details concerning these matters are mostly confined to her extensive endnotes, along with expanded versions of key critics' comments on Pollock's work. Landau is cognizant of the influence of Thomas Hart Benton and gives it due attention (Readers who want to know more about the psychodynamics of the relationship between these two iconic American artists will want to read Henry Adams's *Tom and Jack: The Intertwined Lives of Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock*; see my review of that title). Readers with a lot of time on their hands who want a "womb to tomb" (to quote a favorite Pollock catch phrase) account of the artist's life are directed to *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*. Whatever biography you choose to read, you'll want Landau's book near at hand for the beautiful, detailed reproductions of Pollock's best-known paintings. The book's Selected Bibliography, unfortunately, includes only the works Landau consulted but did not cite in her notes. In other words, the reader will have to scour the notes to find other key works. (The bibliography in Adams's book is more recent, comprehensive, and reader-friendly).

I am an art history student and appreciate books with works of art that are well photographed and presented in the text in a fluid way. *Jackson Pollock* fits the bill. The text is easy to read while using art language. Landau describes Pollock's story with passion and clarity.

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