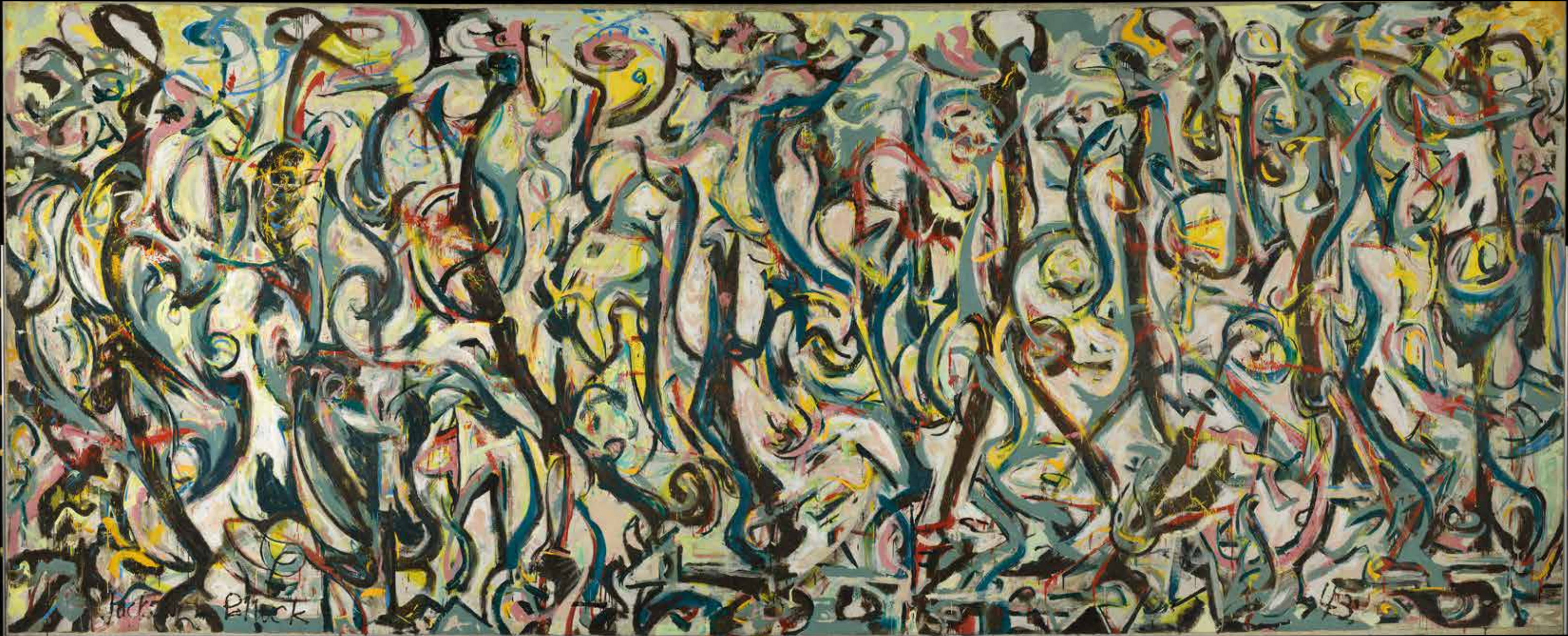


The Getty



JACKSON POLLOCK'S *MURAL* THE TRANSITIONAL MOMENT



Mural, 1943, Jackson Pollock. Oil on canvas. University of Iowa Museum of Art, Gift of Peggy Guggenheim, 1959.6. Reproduced with permission from The University of Iowa

"IT LOOKS PRETTY BIG, BUT EXCITING AS ALL HELL."

JACKSON POLLOCK, JULY 1943

The creation of Jackson Pollock's first large-scale painting, *Mural*, has been recounted in dozens of books and dramatized in an Oscar-winning film. In the many and sometimes contradictory versions of the story, facts blur into myth: the artist painted the entire eight-by-twenty-foot canvas in one frenzied, alcohol-fueled night; the massive painting didn't fit into its intended space and had to be cut down; the composition is based on Pollock's signature; the composition is based on a stampede of horses. Yet never in dispute was that *Mural's* completion was a transitional moment: not only for Pollock's artistic trajectory but also for the Abstract Expressionists who would follow his radical conception of art with "no limits, just edges." An acknowledged milestone in American art, Jackson Pollock's *Mural*, and an exploration of its creation, early history and conservation, will be on view at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center this spring (March 11–June 1).

Pollock was relatively unknown in 1943 when he received his first major commission, from the collector Peggy Guggenheim. In addition to ordering a mural for the entrance hall of her rented Manhattan townhouse, Guggenheim offered Pollock a solo show at her Art of This Century gallery and a monthly stipend of \$150. Pollock wrote to his brother Charles: "I have a year's contract . . . and a large painting to do for Peggy Guggenheim's house, 8' 11-1/2" x 19' 9" with no strings as to what or how I paint it. . . . I've had to tear out the partition between the front and middle room to get the damned thing up. I have it stretched now. It looks pretty big, but exciting as all hell."

The great scale of *Mural* allowed Pollock to take his practice beyond the confines of smaller canvases and toward the experimental application of paint that would later become his hallmark. The expanse of the painting invited large gestures such as throwing or spattering paint in addition to brushing and dabbing. A multitude of colors weave across the canvas, and the controlled brush strokes combined with "accidental" thrown paint produce a kinetic energy.

It would have been difficult to view the entire painting at once in Guggenheim's hallway, which was only 13-1/2 feet wide. Visitors walking toward the elevator might have felt accompanied by the figures dancing beside them. The work was later transported to New York's Museum of Modern Art for an exhibition, and after Peggy Guggenheim moved to Europe, it was loaned to Yale University before being donated to the University of Iowa, where it has remained since 1951.

In 1967, conservators at the Museum of Modern Art (where it was on loan) became concerned about the condition of the painting. In 1973, a conservator treated the painting



Peggy Guggenheim and Jackson Pollock in front of Pollock's *Mural* (1943) in the first-floor entrance hall of Guggenheim's residence, 155 East Sixty-first Street, New York, ca. 1946. Other work shown: unidentified David Hare sculpture (partially visible, foreground). Photo: George Karger, courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives, New York

to stabilize it. But by 2009 it was evident that further conservation intervention was needed. The varnish applied in 1973 had dulled the surface, and a sag in the canvas needed to be addressed. Pamela White, then interim director of the University of Iowa Museum of Art, later joined by Sean O'Harrow, who became director in 2010, asked the Getty to consider analyzing and treating the painting. It came to Los Angeles in July 2012, joining works by Giotto, Rembrandt, and Van Gogh in the Museum's paintings conservation studio.

Experts from three Getty programs joined in the investigation and treatment of *Mural*. The Getty Conservation Institute's (GCI) Modern Paints project—now part of the broader Modern and Contemporary Art Research Initiative—has over the past ten years improved analytical methods for identifying paint types and understanding how they perform. The J. Paul Getty Museum's Paintings Conservation Department has a long-established program of bringing important paintings from around the world for conservation, study, and display at the Museum for a short time following the completion of the conservation treatment. And the Getty Research Institute holds one of the world's most important archives for the study of modern and contemporary art. The papers of Clement Greenberg, an art critic known for championing American Abstract Expressionist painters, and Harold Rosenberg, the art critic who developed the concept of "action painting" to



Conservators work on *Mural* (detail), 1943, Jackson Pollock. Oil on canvas. University of Iowa Museum of Art, Gift of Peggy Guggenheim, 1959.6. Reproduced with permission from The University of Iowa

describe the work of New York School painters such as Pollock, have been used extensively in the study of *Mural*. In addition, a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation enabled Getty staff to consult with other specialists near and far. Art historical research, conventional methods of treatment and analysis, and some of the latest developments in technical imaging were used to study, preserve, and present *Mural* in the best possible manner.

"The conservation and study of *Mural* was challenging—its great size meant that even the simplest procedure needed more thought than usual. A team of conservators, preparators, and conservation scientists have been working on this for almost two years," explained Yvonne Szafran, senior conservator in the Museum's Painting Conservation department. "Our challenge was to safely re-establish the painting's structural stability while keeping Pollock's intentions at the forefront of our decision-making."

The study and treatment process resulted in a wealth of new information and insights into the painting and its creation. "It was wonderful to put some of the analytical techniques we've been developing for years to such great use," said Tom Learner, senior scientist at the GCI. "We had no idea that a seemingly



non-descript off-white color would turn out to be the highlight: a casein house paint—as far as we know the earliest instance of Pollock turning to these materials in his work."

Another discovery was that Pollock's initial marks were made in four highly diluted colors—lemon yellow, teal, red, and umber—all applied wet-in-wet and still visible in a few areas of the painting. This presents the intriguing possibility that one of the wildest myths might be partially true: Pollock did finish some kind of initial composition very rapidly, perhaps even in a single all-night session. However, the clear division in paint layers in Pollock's subsequent editing and refining strokes of less diluted, more substantial paint suggests there was a second period of application for the majority of the paint we now see. This new analysis is presented for the first time in the exhibition and the illustrated book, *Jackson Pollock's Mural: The Transitional Moment*.

Many mysteries still surround the oeuvre of this complicated and controversial artist. More than a half century after his death at age forty-four in an automobile accident, historians and curators continue to parse Pollock's story. One fundamental step along the way, all seem to agree, was the artist's radical conceptualization of *Mural* in 1943.