

Merlin F.  
Pollock

AN EXHIBITION OF DRAWINGS AND PAINTINGS BY PROFESSOR MERLIN F. POLLOCK  
Syracuse University Art Galleries  
THE JOE AND EMILY LOWE ART CENTER - January 1958

THE SCHOOL OF ART - SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

"My paintings evolve out of those aspects of nature that have always held for me a particular fascination: the miracle of growth, the power of wind and water, the sounds, the quiet, the smell of earth and vegetation, the warmth of sunlight, the cold of winter, the softness of rain, the erosive force of torrents.

"I do not paint to imitate objects but rather to express the ebb and flow of the forces of nature as they move within and through the objects. These aspects arouse in me a deep sense of mystery and reverence, and I believe they have always been a fundamental influence on man's evolution as a sensitive and intelligent being."

Thus Merlin Pollock has characterized the point of view expressed in this remarkable retrospective exhibition of his own painting and drawing. It reflects a philosophy deeply rooted in the wide experience, self reliance and educational opportunity that has meant so much to the development and recognition of genuinely creative talent in America during the past two generations.

Pollock, no relation to the late Jackson Pollock whose background and point of view were considerably different, was born in Manitowoc, Wisconsin in 1905, and followed the normal educational program in that city until his graduation from high school in 1922. His earliest recognition as an artist came in the sixth grade when without his knowledge his teacher submitted a portfolio of his drawings to a state fair competition and he was awarded first prize. He recalls with deep gratitude the high quality and cultural advantages of good music, the great books and the general sense of spiritual well-being that were made available to him within the limited resources of a small school of less than 400 students.

After graduation, he worked for two years in a variety of jobs to earn enough money to enter art school. From an assistant to the city surveyor he progressed to the shipyards, then worked as a rigger on high tension power line installation, and finally became assistant to the chief engineer of a local power plant. On entering the Chicago Art Institute in 1924, he took part-time employment as a station guard on the elevated transportation system, and later worked in a downtown restaurant. With a full program of studio work he was also a consistent student of the animals at Lincoln Park Zoo and the endless collection of habitat groups and natural objects in the Field Museum. Drawing and the study of nature, therefore, have always been a working method which he has continued to the present time.

Four years' study for the diploma and an extra year's graduate work in painting at the Chicago Art Institute provided the solid foundation for the professional painter, particularly under the inspired teaching of John Norton and Boris Anisfeld. Among the nationally known artists and educators in his class were Theodore Roszak, Francis Chapin, and Howard Church. He was awarded an American Traveling Scholarship which enabled him to visit many of the museums and private art collections of the East during the summer of 1929, and on graduation in 1930 received the James Nelson Raymond Fellowship. This gave him the opportunity to study and travel for a year and a half through the great cultural centers of Europe and pursue his special interest in fresco painting at the Paris Ecole des Beaux Arts and at Fontainebleau.

For the next dozen years, the problems of mural painting became his major concern. As a student, he had assisted Charles R. Knight on a number of mural decorations in the Field Museum. His first actual commission was a fresco in the entrance lobby of the Potter Palmer III apartment on Goethe Street in Chicago. Difficulties of the depression then brought him back to Manitowoc and he received his first teaching assignment in adult evening classes in the high school there. With the establishment of the original Public Works of Art Program under the New Deal in 1933, he was commissioned to paint a mural for Lincoln High School, and, though the building has recently been remodeled, necessitating the removal of the mural, it is still a prized possession of the community and is destined for transfer to a new location in the school.

It was during these years that he met and married Barbara Pank, whose love of art and enthusiastic participation in the music activities of the community provided another cultural extension of the artist's experience. The same year, 1934, he accepted a position as an instructor in fresco painting at the Chicago Art Institute.

From 1935 on he was technical advisor for mural painting in the Illinois division of the Federal Art Project which at that time included such well known artists as Edward Millman, Mitchel Siporin and Edgar Britton. In 1936 he executed a large fresco decoration on the theme of the steel industry for Tilden Technical High School and the following year was commissioned by the Federal Government to travel through Alaska to make a pictorial record of that territory for the Department of Interior.

The seven-month Alaskan sojourn is an experience which the artist still remembers as one of the most inspiring and significant in his own development. Often under the most primitive conditions, he and his wife traveled over the entire territory, settling in Seward, Fairbanks, Circle City, Juneau and especially Palmer in beautiful Matanuska Valley where the Federal Government had transplanted farmers from Minnesota and the Dakotas in a long-range program to develop Alaskan agricultural self-sufficiency. That experience was chiefly the sense of grandeur, indescribable beauty and unlimited potentiality of primitive wilderness, made particularly tense and poignant at the time by the threat of Japanese aggression. As an aesthetic quality it is as alive and significant to artists today as it has been for the past three hundred years and is an essential part of the American artistic tradition.

He returned to teach painting and figure drawing at the Chicago Art Institute early in 1938. The government appointed him state supervisor for the Treasury Department's Fine Arts Project, and he himself executed another mural for the O'Fallon (Illinois) post office. In 1943 he entered the Navy and served as Lieutenant Commander in the Aviation Cadet Training program in Corpus Christi, Texas until 1946, when he was appointed assistant professor of Art at Syracuse University.

The new surroundings at Syracuse brought new responsibilities of both an intellectual as well as artistic and administrative nature. Along with a full teaching schedule, he continued graduate study and completed the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in 1949. When the new summer art school was established by the University at Pinebrook, Pollock became its director, a position he held until the school was discontinued in 1953. He was promoted to full professorship in 1954, and since 1947 he has been chairman of the Committee on Graduate Studies in the School of Art and is largely responsible for this important segment of the instructional and creative program. He has likewise been an active member of the teaching staff of University College since 1950.

Aside from his earlier murals in public buildings, his work is in the permanent collections of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Museum at Utica, New York, the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Museum of New Britain, Connecticut, and the Washburn Municipal Art Gallery of Topeka, Kansas. Portraits by Merlin Pollock hang in the library of the College of Law and in the lounges of the Shaw Dormitory at Syracuse University. Recent prizes awarded to him by juries in open competition include the Syracuse Museum Trustee Purchase Prize, 1955, Syracuse First Trust and Deposit Award in 1956, the James Hogarth Dennis Award from the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery Finger Lakes Exhibition of 1957, and first prize for watercolor in the New York State Fair Exhibition in 1957.

This exhibition, and the record of achievement which stands behind it, is of special significance to the educational environment of which it is a part. Indeed it has a special significance to contemporary art in general. For the American artist today is beset by the persistent drive - one might almost call it pressure - toward individuality, progress, and freedom. Certainly no art of any permanent value has ever been created in the past without these qualities, but there is a constant danger of straining too hard so that what is an integrated quality in the work of genuine stature often becomes a mannerism striving merely for a superficial effect.

What is evident here, particularly in the watercolors, is a quality of strength and honesty, a respect for the painters' materials and a modest faith in the ideals which motivate expression. These have a tradition which the artist is frank to recognize. He likes the simplicity and directness of the Archaic and early 15th Century rather than the sophistication of the Classic and Renaissance. He likes the brilliance of color of Gothic stained glass and Byzantine mosaics, the subtle sensitivity of Oriental art, German Expressionism without its brutality and coarseness. In our time these are qualities we need to study, and indeed they reflect something of the significance of Merlin Pollock as an educator as well as a creative artist.

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