

Tabitha Mire

“A Review of Sue Taylors article, ‘The Artist and the Analyst: Jackson Pollock’s *Stenographic Figure,*’ and Pollock’s Struggle for Originality”

Nicholls State University

Jackson Pollock’s *Stenographic Figure* (figure 1) was groundbreaking for American art in the 1940s. The visual interpretation of the subject of Pollock’s *Stenographic Figure*, made in 1942, has left art historians and critics befuddled. Sue Taylor’s article, “The Artist and the Analyst: Jackson Pollock’s *Stenographic Figure*” argued that the Jungian archetypes are displayed throughout the painting. Taylor makes a compelling argument about the Swiss psychoanalyst’s great iconographical influence. Yet, there are many factors to consider when interpreting this particular painting. Despite the Jungian influences, Pollock’s artistic image was beginning to evolve. Taylor fails to elaborate on how pivotal *The Stenographic Figure* was for his artistic career. Pollock was developing an expressionistic approach in this visionary work. This paper will expand upon the influences that contributed to Pollock’s *Stenographic Figure*.



Figure 1: Jackson Pollock. *Stenographic Figure*. c.1943 https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.nicholls.edu/#/asset/AMOMA_10312310822

Curator William Rubin was not convinced that Pollock's painting had any symbolic meaning. He felt that everything in the *Stenographic Figure* was abstract and purely aesthetic. Rubin had taken the term "stenographer" out of the title and assumed that figure, the singular noun, was to be taken literally. He described the figure as "female and animalistic" (Taylor 54). He drew a diagram emphasizing Pollock's violent depiction of a nude or clothed woman. Pollock utilized the female form in some of his compositions, such as, *Moon Woman Cuts through Circle* (1943), which serves as an example of his "quest for human wholeness".

To move beyond Rubin's literal interpretation, one must be familiar with Jung's concept anima and animus (the anima being the woman and the animus being the man) (Carter 2011). Langhorne states, "Pollock, suffering from Terrible Mother Complex, had to overcome this condition by connecting with his female anima (Taylor 55). There are symbols within the painting that support her theory. The equation "66=42" is placed on the woman's arm. Jung noted that the number 6 "traditionally represents the hermaphrodite and the number 4 represents the totality of self. For Pollock, the totality of self is to be achieved by the union of two" (Taylor 55).

While these Jungian archetypes are visually prominent in the *Stenographic Figure*, there are some other elements one must be made aware of such as the presence of another figure. Taylor revises Rubin's diagram, and arranges the curvilinear lines to show "a female figure at the left, with two red circles breasts, whose back is indicated by a red sail-shaped chair." When comparing the painting to her diagram, it is easy to see Pollock using expressive brush strokes and colors that put him in the stylistic category of Abstract Expressionist.

In the late 1930s, Pollock was battling alcoholism and depression, so he turned to psychotherapy undergoing treatment with an adherent of Jung named Joseph Henderson. Pollock continued therapy for a year and a half, until he was referred to Violet Staub de Laszlo, another Jungian. The sessions with de Laszlo spanned over the course of a year. Pollock was vulnerable and took his sessions seriously. De Laszlo's approach to Pollock's sessions was to have him do a series of drawings to aid in the psychoanalysis of his unconscious.

Taylor believes that these sessions could have played a part in the Jungian archetypes Pollock used in his work. Yet, even though she sees Jung's influence, she mentions that Pollock's drawings were "strongly derivative of work by Picasso and the Mexican painter Jose

Clemente Orozco” (Taylor 59). Pollock’s *Painting (1938)*, and even *Guardian of the Secret (1943)*, have Cubist elements.

Stenographic Figure also resembles Picasso’s *The Studio (1927-28)*, which exhibits abstract lines and expressive figures in the foreground of an office-like setting. Pollock made a statement in an interview, “I accept the fact that the important painting of the last hundred years was done in France... the fact that good European moderns are now here is very important, for they bring them with them an understanding of the problems of modernist painting. I am particularly impressed with their concept of the source of art being the unconscious” (Sandler 106).

Pollock respected these artists, but he did not want to copy them. He had the realization that his art was becoming predictable. This contradicted the Jungian theory of the unconscious as a source for creativity. Donald Gordon notes how the Jungian components had to be “accounted for” (Taylor 59). The argument that Gordon made indicated that Pollock was conscious of his “Jungian notions” and that he was using his conscious mind to reflect on his “unconscious imagery.”

After Pollock spent nearly three years in therapy, he needed to break away from this illustrated predictability. Taylor believes that the *Stenographic Figure* represents Pollock’s artistic crisis. He did not want to become an artist that made copies of ideas he had in his conscious mind. Since he was surrounded by the influences of Picasso, Kandinsky, and the Surrealists-in-exile, Pollock could have been using *Stenographic Figure* as a way to show critics how he was no longer allowing his conscious mind to dictate imagery. He wanted to have imagery inspired directly by his unconscious.

The *Stenographic Figure* was produced after Pollock had participated in a series of workshops put on by the surrealists in America. When these artists got together, they allowed themselves to free their minds and utilize the “collective unconscious” that they believed all beings were a part of. They ultimately created a new method of drawing and painting called automatism, in which they drew and painted without conscious control.

Surrealism’s founder Andre Breton recognized the surrealist technique of automatic painting as a kind of unparalleled dictation of the unconscious mind. Pollock was a part of this group that would reassess Surrealism. Included in this group were artists Adolf Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, and William Baziotes. The workshops they participated in took place in 1941 and were part of an experiment to use the collective unconscious and to explore a new medium of quick-drying lacquer. These experiments could be seen as a precursor for Pollock’s famous drip paintings. Pollock would later place unprimed canvas on the floor and pour and drip paint onto the surface claiming the painting process to be more spontaneous.

As the Abstract Expressionists emerged from these workshops, they encountered what they called, “a crisis in subject matter” (Sandler 31). During this time artists like Pollock and Baziotes were beginning to step away from the Surrealist movement. These artists felt that the art that was being created was beginning to look mechanically made. Pollock’s painting, *Search for a Symbol (1943)*, was made at this critical point and used the same flourishes found in *Stenographic Figure*. Taylor compares the two paintings, but she does not mention the fact that each painting has similar symbols such as the mathematical equations. Also, there are similarities in the use of curvilinear lines and the choice of colors; the palette used includes orange, blue, beige, yellow, and black. These similarities, according to William Rubin, are enough to indicate

that Pollock was painting purely for aesthetic reasons, even though he was trying to move away from such conscious efforts to carefully compose his paintings.

Taylor emphasized how the Surrealists had a “rehearsed spontaneity” which enabled Pollock to become much more than the illustrator Matta said he was. The Surrealists were able to see how Pollock’s quick notations in *Stenographic Figure* were more controlled and expressive in comparison to the spontaneous method of automatic drawing. This painting could be seen as his breakthrough, and marked the end of his struggle with identity. He combined influences such as Jungian archetypes and Native American sand painting.

Andre Breton, who developed the surrealist technique of automatism after he immigrated to America, caused Pollock to break away from the use of the predictable Jungian archetypes. However, Pollock was criticized for his sources. Roberto Matta called Pollock an illustrator, believing that he relied heavily on his influences. This critique hurt Pollock and could have led him to reflect on his artistic identity.

Taylor briefly notes that Pollock saw himself as a “secretary of art”, and the *Stenographic Figure* is a painting of a secretary. What a stenographer does is take dictation, mostly using shorthand. An artist could be seen in the same light. If there is a muse or a source of inspiration, the artist will make a visual record of it. To do so in shorthand form would be quite useful. Taylor has Pollock saying, “This is what it’s like when I’m painting.” (Taylor 64) Pollock uses his paintbrush as his recording instrument, just as a stenographer would use a typewriter. The expressive movement of the *Stenographic Figure* would indicate Pollock’s artistic mental state at the time it was produced.

Abstract Expressionism was recognized as an art movement around 1947, and artists such as William De Kooning, Hans Hofmann, and Pollock were embracing automatism. They were

considered gesture painters. Pollock was able to break free from his influences while using techniques that are notable in this category. Picasso did not use his paintbrush to express his unconscious as Pollock and other Expressionists did. The Expressionists were trying to take control of this “plastic weapon” by controlling the automatic procedure of painting. It was a tug-of-war to paint unconsciously.

Six years after *Stenographic Figure* was created, one of Pollock’s peers, de Kooning, created a painting called *Secretary (1948)*. Taylor suggests that this painting brings out the irony in Pollock’s painting, because even though it refers to taking dictation, *Stenographic Figure* marks his ability to break away from his influences. Taylor states, “Perhaps the greatest irony of the *Stenographic Figure* is the brilliant originality of a painting inspired by the anxiety of influence” (Taylor 67). Jungian archetypes have been placed throughout the canvas. The numbers and even the colors suggest the representation of Jungian theory. Yet, there is a lot of ambiguity regarding the subject matter of the painting.

The Jungian approach did play a major part in his iconographic representations. Taylor mentions how Pollock was part of the Workshop Project Administration art program, and he helped create a series of windows for advertisement purposes. They were a show of his psychoanalytical approach to his work. Taylor suggests that Jungian symbols were the “arcane substitutions for ordinary social language and that within the mind, distortions and substitutions mask meaning in the symbolic language of the unconscious” (Taylor 68). He was consciously using archetypes, and perhaps this is why his painting method would change to one that was shaped by automatism.

Jackson Pollock is considered to be one of the founders of Abstract Expressionism who became a gestural painter and used his body to create his well-known drip paintings. We can

now see that Pollock had his breakthrough with *Stenographic Figure*. It was part of his search for artistic freedom. Pollock was very aware of what he was creating when he made his work. When he produced *Stenographic Figure*, he was consciously trying to break away from his influences. A critic could see the influences of his peers and earlier artists, like Picasso, in his work. Yet, when Pollock painted the picture he said he created it “because I had to paint it” (Taylor 68). It is the painting that put American Expressionism in front of the eyes of the world and marked the transition to Pollock’s drip paintings.

Works Cited

- Carter, D. "Carl Jung in the Twenty-first Century," *Contemporary Review* 293 (1703) (December 2011), 441.
- Pollock, Jackson. *Stenographic Figure*. c.1943 https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.nicholls.edu/#/asset/AMOMA_10312310822.
- Sandler, Irving. *The Triumph of American Painting a History of Abstract Expressionism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1995.
- Taylor, Sue. "The Artist and the Analyst: Jackson Pollocks "Stenographic Figure"." *American Art* 17, no. 3 (2003): 53-71.