

Sons, Fathers and Forefathers

A CONVERSATION WITH AUTHOR HENRY ADAMS ABOUT JACKSON POLLOCK, FAMILY TIES AND THE NATURE OF INFLUENCE. BY JONATHAN LOPEZ

IN HIS NEW BOOK, *Tom and Jack: The Intertwined Lives of Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock* (Bloomsbury, \$35), Henry Adams, a professor of art history at Case Western Reserve University, challenges the received wisdom about these two great 20th-century painters—one, the foremost exponent of American Regionalism; the other, the mysterious genius of Abstract Expressionism—demonstrating that Pollock, Benton's favorite student, did not abandon the master's teachings to reinvent American art but rather built subtly on Benton's example. In conversation with *Art & Antiques*, Adams explains that Pollock continued to draw strength from the relationship even during his peak years of creativity as "Jack the Dripper."

IN TERMS OF STYLE, WHAT DID POLLOCK GET FROM BENTON?

ADAMS: What Pollock got was an underlying visual rhythm. When you see him absorbing modernist influences—Orozco, Picasso, the Surrealists—he has a way of taking these influences and "Bentonizing" them, introducing the Benton rhythm.

WHAT IS THAT RHYTHM?

ADAMS: It has different aspects. One Benton idea is that of leading the eye all the way through the composition, so that you can basically pick it up anywhere. You're led in a continual visual arc that circles around and eventually brings you through the whole.

BENTON WAS LEADING THE VIEWER THROUGH A DEEP SPACE—A SPACE DRAWN IN PERSPECTIVE—BUT POLLOCK'S WORK, OF COURSE, IS FLAT.

ADAMS: People always say his work is flat, but I think there's a kind of semantic confusion there. If you read books like Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception*, the fundamental way of representing depth is to show one object on top of another, and that's what Pollock does with his complex interweaving in the drip paintings. There's a sense of circular motion that's not only sinuous on the surface, but also sinuous in depth.

DURING THE LATE 1940S, WHEN HE WAS WORKING ON HIS MAJOR DRIP PAINTINGS, POLLOCK WAS NO LONGER STUDYING WITH BENTON, WHO HAD LEFT NEW YORK TO MOVE BACK WEST. WAS THERE ANY CONTINUING CONTACT BETWEEN THE TWO?

ADAMS: Recently, Benton's daughter, Jessie, was talking with T. P. Benton, her brother, who was the one who really knew Pollock well; Pollock was his babysitter and so forth. Apparently, T. P. came out of the army sometime in 1947, and this was just when Benton was trying to get the Harzfeld



Thomas Hart Benton, *Steel*, from the *America Today* series, 1930, distemper and egg tempera with oil glaze on gessoed linen.



Jackson Pollock's *Mural*, 1943, painted for Peggy Guggenheim's apartment, shows Benton's influence but marks a definitive turn toward abstraction.

mural, a commission in Kansas City. Benton was having this big dinner party for all these Kansas City businessmen; they sat down to eat, and at that moment the phone rang. Benton's wife, Rita, got up to get it. She was gone for quite a while, and when she came back to the table, she said, "Tom, it's Jack. He's drunk." And so Benton got up and talked on the phone with him for a long time. Everyone wanted to know who Jack was, and of course it was Jackson Pollock, who had already been written up as the most controversial figure in the New York art world.

DID POLLOCK CALL FREQUENTLY?

ADAMS: It seems that he was calling Kansas City regularly throughout the 1940s. And in that period, long distance phone calls were terribly expensive. If you were going to talk for half an hour or an hour on the phone with Kansas City, you were paying 50, 60, a hundred dollars. It was a big investment to maintain that contact.

SO THERE WAS NO RIFT. POLLOCK DIDN'T JUST FORGET ABOUT BENTON AND MOVE ON TO NEW THINGS.

ADAMS: There wasn't a rift. There were periods where they would denounce each

other, but then Pollock would call Benton up and they would talk. And I think that the father-son metaphor is useful here, because there's some level at which, even when Benton was angry at Pollock, Pollock was also like a son to him, and he couldn't repudiate him.

YOU'VE BEEN WORKING ON THOMAS HART BENTON FOR MORE THAN 20 YEARS, WRITING BOOKS AND ARTICLES, ORGANIZING EXHIBITIONS AND COLLABORATING WITH KEN BURNS ON A DOCUMENTARY. BUT IT SEEMS ODD THAT BENTON'S GREAT UNCLE, A UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM MISSOURI, WAS A POLITICAL ANTAGONIST OF ONE OF YOUR ANCESTORS, JOHN QUINCY ADAMS. WAS THAT A POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR YOU?


ADAMS: A point of humor. For me, learning about Benton has been a life-expanding experience. He's made me see that parts of the United States that seemed utterly without culture actually have a lot of culture.

IN YOUR BOOK YOU MAKE PASSING REFERENCES TO FIGURES SUCH AS JOHN ADAMS AND YOUR NAMESAKE, THE HISTORIAN AND MEMOIRIST HENRY ADAMS. AS A SCHOLAR OF AMERICAN ART,

DO YOU THINK A LOT ABOUT THE GENETIC THREAD THAT LEADS BACK FROM YOU, PERSONALLY, THROUGH THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY?

ADAMS: I think that there's an analogy with Benton, who, in his Missouri mural, put his own family into the painting. If you figure out how many genes I've inherited from John Adams, it's probably one percent at this point. But there is some level at which, if someone is part of your family, you feel a connection to them, and it gives that moment in history an immediacy that it might not otherwise have.

BENTON ALSO INCLUDED POLLOCK IN ONE OF HIS MURALS, PERHAPS SYMBOLICALLY ADOPTING HIM, OR BRINGING HIM INTO THE FAMILY.

ADAMS: Yes, if you look at human history, great breakthroughs often come from the places that you would least expect. I'm not a believer in inherited privilege. And this is part of what I admire in Benton. You never know whether he befriended Pollock because he was sorry for him or because he identified with him. But there's no question that very early on Benton saw there was something quite remarkable about Jackson Pollock. 

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