



CHAPTER 4

CALL OF THE SHE-WOLF

"I'm searching for who I really am," Jackson wrote in 1944 after his return to America, "what I can do to somehow justify the death I am part of, to get permission to live. Why did men right next to me die and I live? Why them and not me? I want a signal, saying 'Yes, the men you knew, that served with you and died, are a part of you now and will live through you.'"

The intense emotions within him were shrieking for release, but the realistic painting of the professional illustrators he knew was inadequate to express what he felt and understood. They seemed to be "skating along on the surface of life." Twice, in *Crossfire* (pl. 48) in January 1945, and again in *Stop* two months later, he had approached the easel to paint "on the abstract conception of moods and tensions," then "later boiled down, at a loss, to its more realistic manifestations for the sake of the good old USMC."

These explorations were prophetic of the kinship he was about to discover with other artists working and thinking along similar lines. Later in March he represented the Corps at a show of Marine war art at the Stendahl Gallery in Los Angeles. While there he looked through a copy of *DYN*, an art magazine put out by Wolfgang and Alice von Paalen, and found a color reproduction of a painting that caught his attention. On March 18 he wrote in his journal: "What I saw was an incredible authority and certainty, a vitality. It was a very Plains Indian sort of thing, mixed with German Expressionism." The painting was *The She-Wolf* (pl. 49) of 1943 by

Jackson Pollock, who stood in the forefront of the movement later to be labeled Abstract Expressionism. Pollock and other painters in New York were engaged in a radical transformation of American art. Their work would soon become totally abstract, but in 1945 many of them, including Pollock, were exploring the pre- and unconscious imagery of myth and dreams, and Jackson was drawn to the raw power that emerged in Pollock's handling of this material. The expressive violence of brushstrokes in *The She-Wolf* "stopped me. This man felt deep and straight. He painted tough, not from the fingertips. Pollock's paintings had what I felt in combat. It was visceral. And I didn't even know who he was." He also did not know at that point that Pollock was a native Westerner, born north of Cody, Wyoming, and brought up in California.

The encouragement gained from Pollock's work was soon reinforced by an encounter in San Francisco with Robert Motherwell's paintings on brown wrapping paper. The radical changes that were occurring in American art paralleled the urgent stirrings of Jackson's own ambitions as an artist, and he began to see the possibility of a new direction.

His journals just before his honorable discharge in October 1945 reflect this change in mood and purpose. With his Marine and artist friend Paul Ellsworth, he planned a mural to celebrate the Marine victory in the Pacific and produced a great number of sketches and drawings for it. About the project he wrote: "I must mention that the colors should be intense and new, expressing the emo-



48. *Crossfire*. 1945. Oil on cardboard. Collection of the artist



49. Jackson Pollock. *The She-Wolf*. 1943. Oil, gouache, and plaster on canvas, 41 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 67". The Museum of Modern Art, New York

tional content of their various areas. It should also swirl and kick vigorously throughout the entire composition, accounting for itself in the abstract force, tension and impact... The whole order of the composition must move inevitably and irreparably towards death and violence and utter frustrating destruction, carrying the viewer right along."

The mural was never begun, but Jackson's plans for it charted the way he wanted to go. When he became aware of abstract art he was already thinking along similar lines, and what he wished to express, shaped by his experience of war, found an outlet in possibilities presented by the work of Pollock, Motherwell, and José Clemente Orozco and the Mexican muralists he became familiar with at this time. The connections between "abstract force, tension and impact," emotional content, and epic subject matter were established in a way that would characterize the synthesis he achieved almost twenty years later, particularly in the monumental painting *Stampede* (pl. 256).

In February 1946, Jackson showed four paintings at the Los Angeles Art Association—a nude, an interior, a still life, and a portrait—and shortly afterwards left the city for good. His first stop was the Pitchfork, where he spent a few weeks getting his bearings and renewing his connections with old friends and cowboy life. He then started out for New York, hitchhiking first to Chicago for a brief stay with his mother. In Ohio he was joined by his Marine friend Phil Smith, and together they detoured to see the murals by Orozco at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire before arriving in New York in the late spring.

In New York, Jackson settled at 3 Baruch Place on the Lower East Side, "west only of the East River. I got myself a four-room apartment for eighteen bucks a month, but I needed a little more space, so I tore down the wall into the adjacent apartment. Took it out a brick at a time, tried not to hit the ground too hard with the bricks. I was on the fifth floor. The two apartments shared one toilet in the hall; each had a bathtub in the kitchen. Then I put one bathtub on the roof, and I had an eight-room apartment."

Under Public Law 16 for disabled veterans he enrolled in art classes at the Brooklyn Museum with the Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo, and later, in 1948, with Hans Hofmann at the latter's school on Eighth Street. Tamayo was generous and helpful. He recognized in Jackson a fellow artist and was sensitive to the occasional grand mal seizures that afflicted him. Hofmann, on the other hand,



50. Harry Jackson in his first New York studio, at 3 Baruch Place, which he occupied from summer 1946 to Nov. 1952

behaved like a Prussian drillmaster—dictatorial, caustic, and "too full of himself with too little reason."

The art scene in and around Baruch Place had taken on a certain aspect of creative community. The avant-garde composer John Cage and the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham were about a block away. With the added company of artists Nate Hale, Paul Beatty and his fashion model wife Elaine, Sue Nevelson, Adja Yunkers, and Sonja Sekula, a strangely assorted colony came into being, its members sharing their intensely unique purposes in art and their out-of-town origins. It was Sekula who suggested to Harry that he look up her friend Jackson Pollock. When he finally did, the two men got together at Pollock's house on Long Island. "We sat down at the kitchen table, talked all day long, all night long. He analyzed Tintoretto for me out of four volumes of *Cahiers d'Art*, skipped up to Matisse and Braque; we were on a wild and limitless astral ride through art history, a ride I never dreamt could exist. And that night, at his kitchen table, Pollock taught me a 'don't-fence-me-in' view of art history that I never forgot."

Pollock and Jackson had a wide range of interests



51. Jackson Pollock. *Mural*. 1943. Oil on canvas, 19'9 7/8" x 8'3 3/8". The University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City. Gift of Peggy Guggenheim

in common in addition to their attitudes toward art. They were Westerners who remained conscious of and attached to their origins. American Indian art had a special significance for both of them; Jackson was particularly excited by Pollock's totem paintings of his earlier figurative period. Thomas Hart Benton, who had been one of Jackson's heroes since childhood, had been Pollock's most important teacher and was still a close friend. Jackson was overwhelmed by the eight-by-twenty-foot mural Pollock had painted on commission in 1943 for the hallway of Peggy Guggenheim's house in New York (pl. 51). This powerful painting, later presented to the State University of Iowa, envelops the viewer in violent motion. It suggested to Jackson the kind of turbulent emotional action he had written about in his journal some two years earlier in Los Angeles, and he even discussed the painting with Pollock in terms of the relentless movement of a stampede of cattle, the subject to which Harry would return in 1958.

But by 1947 Pollock was developing free of the figurative references that were still present in the monumental *Mural*. It was a year of breakthrough for him. His huge canvases were now painted on the floor in all-over networks of lines, splatters, and paint drips that were capable of holding the large surfaces in two-dimensional tension while implying great spatial depth. Pollock had found a

way of creating a tremendous field of activity and expression, a direct aesthetic reflection of his inner being, by getting himself literally into the painting. Harry was immensely impressed. Pollock had given him a great deal to assimilate before he would emerge with his own distinctive abstract style in the early 1950s.

Jackson's work in 1947, however, was quite different. He was developing his own language of color, line, and form in paintings that clearly show the influence of Matisse and, more basically, of Cézanne. The abstracting of form and surface tensions in his still lifes and figure studies of this period have more to do with Cubism and Fauvism than with Abstract Expressionism. His concern was to achieve a firm grounding in the modern tradition, and that meant going back to the early twentieth-century masters, as it did for Jackson's teachers—Tamayo, Harold Kramer, Charles Seide, Bernard Perlin, John Ferren, and finally, Hans Hofmann. In his journal he wrote: "Studying the tradition is the only way for me right now—to grope back in the past for the means to proceed in the future. I have arrived at this conclusion through my own means and in my own time. I will leave it in the same way. . . . The masters too must be limited as to their ultimate value to the creative person. The final word must come from within."

As a student of Hofmann in late 1948, Jackson

gravitated toward the center of Abstract Expressionism in New York. Hofmann was the most prominent teacher associated with the movement, although his own roots were in prewar Paris, in the art of Picasso and Matisse, and his teaching had to do with the building up and structuring of color areas (the "push-pull" theory of color and of formal oppositions and attractions) rather than with the more open and individualized American approach to abstraction. More important examples and advice came from Pollock and Willem de Kooning. The latter, as Jackson recorded, "spoke about my weakness in brushing as far as it aids expression and the building of form. Bill considers drawing and brushing to be of more importance than color relations in the stating of form and space. Compared with pedants like Hans Hofmann and Ferren these words from Bill or Jackson can be like streaks of well-aimed lightning."

Jackson participated in group exhibitions in 1948 at the Norlyst and Jacques Seligmann galleries in

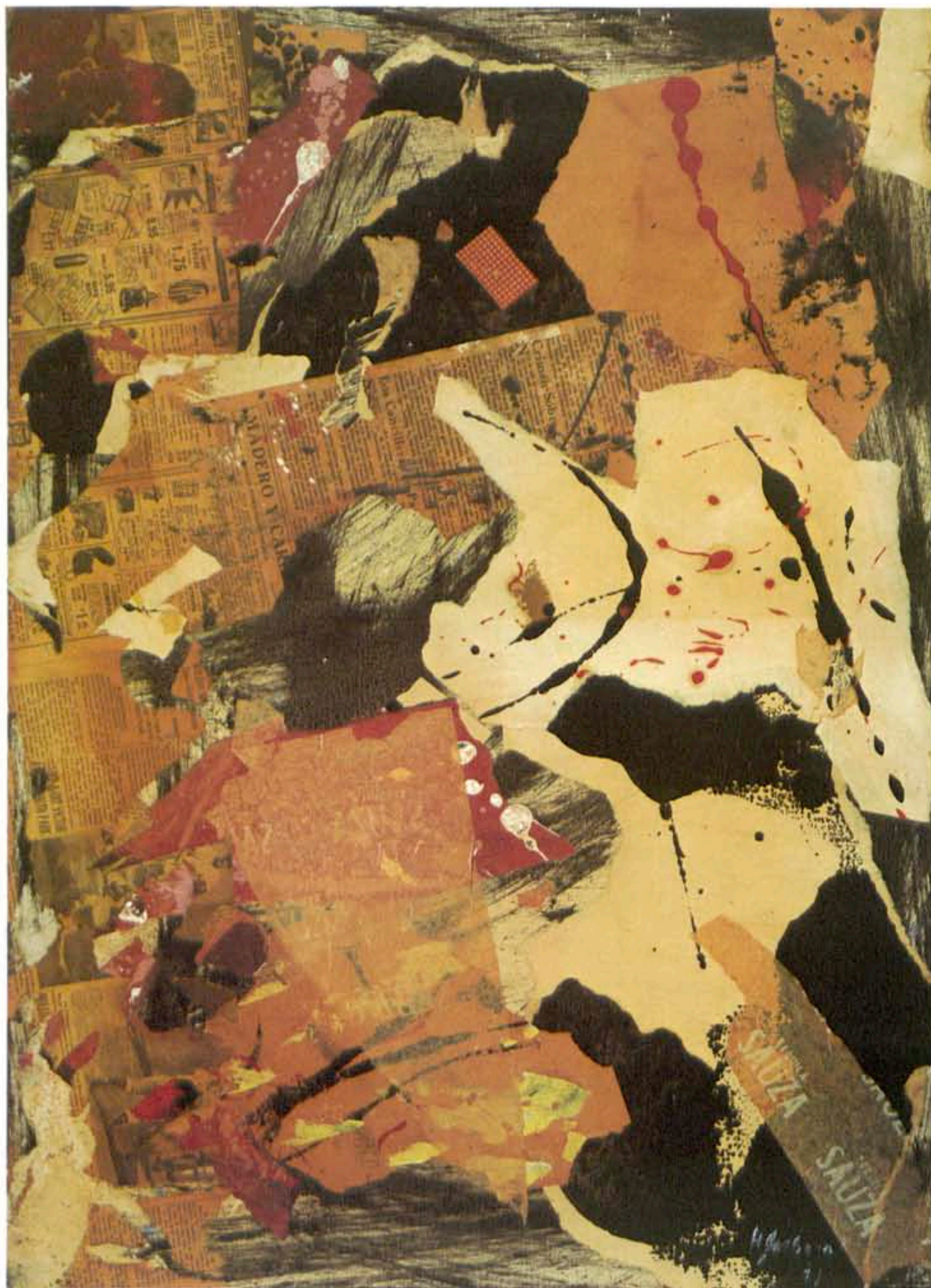
New York and a traveling exhibition sponsored by the American Federation of Arts. In December he had his first one-man show, which was also the first given to a former student by the Brooklyn Museum of Art School. He was also becoming associated with several younger artists, a "second generation" of Abstract Expressionist painters that included Helen Frankenthaler, Alfred Leslie, Robert Goodnough, and also Grace Hartigan, whom Jackson would soon marry.

The young artist had achieved a degree of success and recognition rather rapidly—within two and a half years of his arrival in New York. But he was discouraged with art dealers and "empty, cute, modern academy things," as well as the recurrence of epileptic seizures ("saw the psychiatrist today and he told me of the physical impossibility of a cure, but that all in all, I had the makings of a powerful creative person").

Grace Hartigan had been living with Jackson for some months and in January 1949 they were mar-



52. Jackson Pollock in Model-A Ford bought with \$250 Harry lent him in 1948. Springs, L.I.



53. Collage. 1949. Oil and newspapers on canvas, 33 x 24". Private collection

ried at the Long Island home of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner. Their immediate plan included a change of environment, partly in response to the virulence of Jackson's grand mal epilepsy attacks. Tamayo suggested a year in Mexico, where they could both attend the Escuela Universitaria de Belles Artes in San Miguel de Allende, which had become a haven for American art students on the G.I. Bill.

In February they left New York in a 1936 Hudson Terraplane, acquired for one hundred dollars, camped and cooked outside, and made it as far as Monterey in Mexico before their money ran out. Jackson wired his mother in Chicago and Cal Todd in Wyoming, but neither could spare the funds. The last resort was Pollock, whom Harry had lent 250 dollars a year before to buy a Model A Ford. The favor was returned immediately, with a check in full for 250 dollars and an encouraging letter. Arriving in San Miguel, Jackson immediately bought a saddle horse and settled into modest quarters near the school.

In Mexico, Jackson freed his painting from all recognizable images, exploring total abstraction with an intensity that climaxed in three collages in which the "dripped" paint is combined with torn newspapers in a tight and turbulent unity (pl. 53). The school itself was in an uproar, a battleground of conflict between the politically rampaging pistol-packing muralist, David Alfaro Siqueiros, who seemed to be more concerned with reorganizing the school than teaching, and the new owners, submachine-gun wielding gangsters from Mexico City who had acquired the school as part of a large ranch. Art study became impossible. Then came a prolonged series of epileptic seizures leading to a three-day coma. Wrongly medicated by a Mexican cavalry doctor, Jackson developed bromide poisoning: "I was so depressed, so wild, I'd start fist fights I couldn't finish—I couldn't even finish sentences."

The return trip in August was agonizing. Grace, who had never driven, found a fellow art student from Texas to teach her and then drove them all the way back to New York, with only enough money for the cheapest food (they slept on the ground). The burden was almost intolerable, and Jackson could do little to help: "My God, what a woman. I just love her for what she did. Someone else could have easily abandoned me. Every time we stopped I was telling somebody off, and I couldn't even lift a hand to hit them. Grace had to take care of it all."

Grace and Harry separated two months after



54. Harry Jackson on his saddlehorse Baldy in San Miguel de Allende, Mex. Mar. 1949

their return to New York, and later divorced. She could not handle the grand mal seizures and violent psychomotor rages of his epilepsy. But despite the anguish and turbulence, Jackson had come some distance toward a cohesive abstract vision. Mexico had given him the chance, away from his own culture, to explore with greater confidence the liberating techniques of Abstract Expressionism. Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning both were high in their praise of the artistic progress evident in the three collages. Even so, for Jackson there had to be more: "There is that vision for an art so great that these recent things, that please most all, are still like exercises and notes. There is no great orchestration as yet. That is the important thing: to compose in space like Cézanne."

In the fall of 1949, Jackson moved into a heatless and waterless fifth-floor factory loft at 25 Willett Street for three months. It had been abandoned until his friends Gene Powell, Bill Shekan, and Jerry Hatofsky occupied it for studios. Robert Rauschenberg, whom Jackson had told about the space, later moved into the building. Jackson had given his old studio on Baruch Place to Grace Hartigan and Al Leslie, but when the winter got too cold, Jackson reclaimed the space and moved back with a new girlfriend, Claire Pangborne.

He returned to classes with Hofmann briefly in the fall and winter, and concentrated on his work. The New York avant-garde was beginning to form a school of its own, and a way of life for a small but growing community of artists, writers, and hangers-on. Its cultural centers were places like the



55. *The Condor*. 1951. Oil on canvas, 68¼ x 45". Private collection

Cedar Bar on University Place and the slightly more programmed Studio 35 of Robert Motherwell and Tony Smith on Eighth Street. There was also the Artists' Club nearby, where the presiding critics of "The Movement" (Harold Rosenberg, Thomas Hess, and Clement Greenberg) might be found "telling the artists," as Jackson put it later, "what they were *really* doing." Though Jackson occasionally sat in on the fringes of an Artists' Club roundtable ("I couldn't even afford the dues for *that* poor-man's outfit"), he found most of the talk ingrown and nonproductive.

But his work was entering into this mainstream. In April an untitled painting of his appeared in the initial group show at Studio 35. His most important painting to date, *Triptych* (pl. 57), which carried out on a large scale the automatic painting methods and all-over schemes he had begun to use in Mexico, was selected by Clement Greenberg and the art historian Meyer Schapiro of Columbia University for a show called "New Talent" in April at the Kootz Gallery, which also included work by Franz Kline, Helen Frankenthaler, and Larry Rivers. Later in the year he showed paintings done in Mexico at the New Gallery.

In early 1950, Jackson ended his classes with Hofmann rather abruptly. Even though his Public Law 16 benefits were secure, he was bored with art school, and he had a terrible fight with Hofmann, who openly ridiculed the three collages that Pollock and De Kooning had praised so highly. His ex-wife Grace, who was earning money as a nude model for the class, and the painter Milton Resnick kept Jackson from attacking Hofmann and tearing up the school. He then took a succession of jobs, including lunchroom dishwasher and construction worker. Before joining the United Scenic Artists' Union he took a crash course in the craft of scene painting with septuagenarian stage designer Woodman Thompson, and then went to work at the George Dunkel Scene Painting studios.

"It was a very physical thing," Jackson recalled, "without the preciousness, the head-tripping, the intellectual crap of the fine art gang." He was working "on the floor" (not unlike Pollock), with long-handled brushes and gallons of color, doing sets for the Metropolitan Opera, CBS Television, and Broadway shows. The experience was significant to Jackson in that it meant "that an artist wasn't just somebody sitting in an old shack in the hills or a rented room fighting off starvation." The teamwork related back to what he knew of the Renaissance studios—and to the camaraderie of the



56. *Portrait of Grace*. 1949. Oil on canvas, 36 x 60". Collection of the artist

Marine Corps and the cow-work on the Pitchfork. In addition, the scale and theatricality of the work pointed to his later wall-sized paintings.

In his own studio in March 1951, Jackson was working on drawings of Claire Pangborne. "They are all bad but one, and it is the best thing I have done in a long time. . . . I have only five or six canvases to show for all of 1950 and they are stiff, overcomplex. . . . But there are two that I will exhibit this spring that have some little coherence." These works and one more were exhibited in a group show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery on East 53rd Street in May under the title "The New Generation." Fellow exhibitors were Helen Frankenthaler, George Hartigan (as Grace then called herself professionally), Robert Goodnough, and Alfred Leslie.



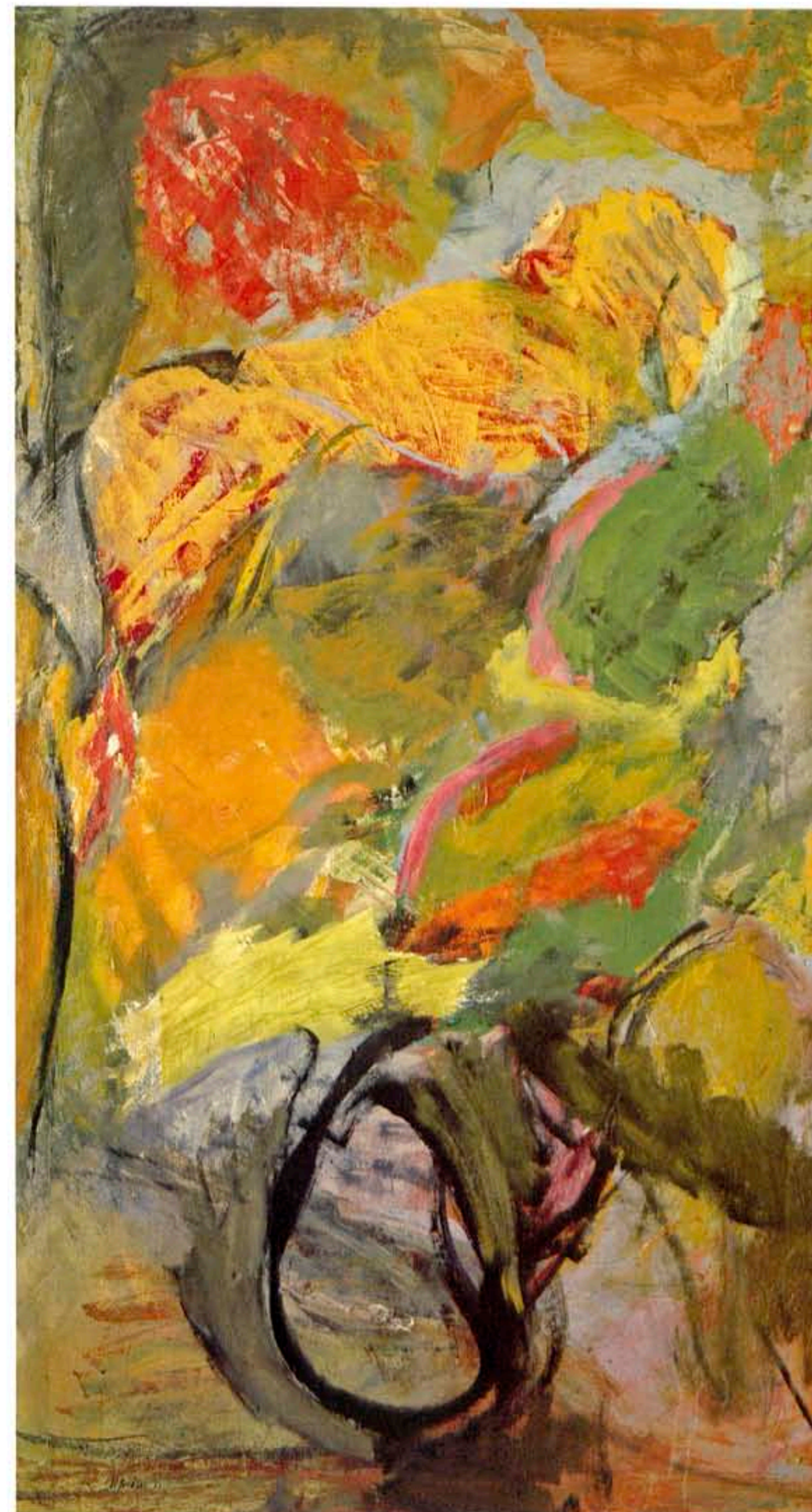
57. *Triptych*. 1950. Oil on canvas, 40 x 48". Collection Paul Warshaw, Berkeley, Calif.

Jackson's cyclically pessimistic view of his own work was not shared by those who reviewed the show, including Aline Louchheim of *The New York Times*, who wrote, "Why do we stop longest before Harry Jackson's 'Picture, 2'? For us, it is because these bold black swirling forms, with counterplay of subtle yellows and blues, have an inescapable intensity. We feel the artist's compassion. We feel the impact of his vision, and we see the strength and unity of his result."

Among the group shows that followed were one at a gallery on Ninth Street that brought together almost every artist of significance in New York at the time, and a second appearance at Tibor de Nagy in March 1952. Enthusiasm for Jackson's work was on the rise, and in April he was given his first one-man exhibition at Tibor de Nagy, which had become the leading showplace of the younger "ac-

tion painters." Clement Greenberg called it "the best 'first show' since Jackson Pollock's," and Stuart Preston in *The New York Times* wrote that "the potency of the paintings rests on the buoyant, generous, and intricate arabesque of shapes and on the freshness and pungency of its color. He is an artist of energetic gestures, refusing to be limited by one style or another." The paintings were mostly abstract, although there were suggestions of figures in works such as *Odalisque*, *Gray Still Life*, and *Portrait of Grace* (pl. 56). No matter how free his line and color became, there was always the urgency to draw *something*, and this resulted in a lyrical treatment of shape and a breathing sense of space that recall Matisse.

Jackson was, nevertheless, unhappy with the private, personal limitations of his efforts, and increasingly disillusioned by the financial world of



58. *Red, Green and Several Others*. 1952. Oil on canvas, 82½ x 45". Private collection



59. *Portrait of Joan*. 1952. Charcoal on paper. 21½ x 15½".
Collection of the artist

art dealers and marketing. The part of him that kept him away from the Artists' Club was developing a deep concern about painting himself into some kind of precious stylistic corner. In his journal he held up the specter of "a private club in which life membership is achieved by the creation of certain impossible, useless, and pedantically complicated problems," through which "with deathless devotion" the artist turns what is an "enjoyable part of the process into an actual symbol of the act." Abstraction as an end of art he began to see as a subjective, no-return box canyon.

The answer was to leave New York for a while, to sign on for the summer of 1952 as a theatrical scene painter at the Municipal Opera in St. Louis. Walking around the city, observing a different social structure, seeing new art (the Ingres and Pissarros in the Joseph Pulitzer collection), he was able to gain some perspective on his career. That fall Jackson picked up his mother in Chicago and took her



60. *Couple Embracing*. 1951. Charcoal on paper, 21½ x 15½". Private collection

for a visit to Wyoming, "to show her where I'd been born." He plunged back into life at the Pitchfork with Cal Todd. "When I'm out riding with you," Cal told Harry, "I see more as you point it out to me, I appreciate my own surroundings more. You love it here, and it seems to me I could understand more of your paintings if they were about what I understand."

Jackson had in fact been doing cowboy sketches all along, as well as a few unfinished paintings of Western themes. Although he declined Cal's offer of a winter in Wyoming to caretake a ranch property and spend his time painting, his journals reflect the profound impact his friend's counsel had on him. He returned to New York with a positive feeling toward his art, that "much is being built beneath the surface, a structure upon which I shall stand quite easily one day and from which I shall mount to the next period of gestation and assimilation."

61. Cal Todd and Harry Jackson at the Pitchfork Ranch, Meeteetse, Wyo. 1955

