

CHAPTER 5

TO EUROPE, ON THE WAY WEST



62. *The Family*. Feb. 1953. Oil on canvas, 92½ x 134". Collection of the artist

"I have been working on a canvas 92½" by 134"; the subject is three figures seated on the grass in a lush garden in the summer. Last night I finished it and stretched and stripped it, and hung it on the large back wall... I am very happy with it!"

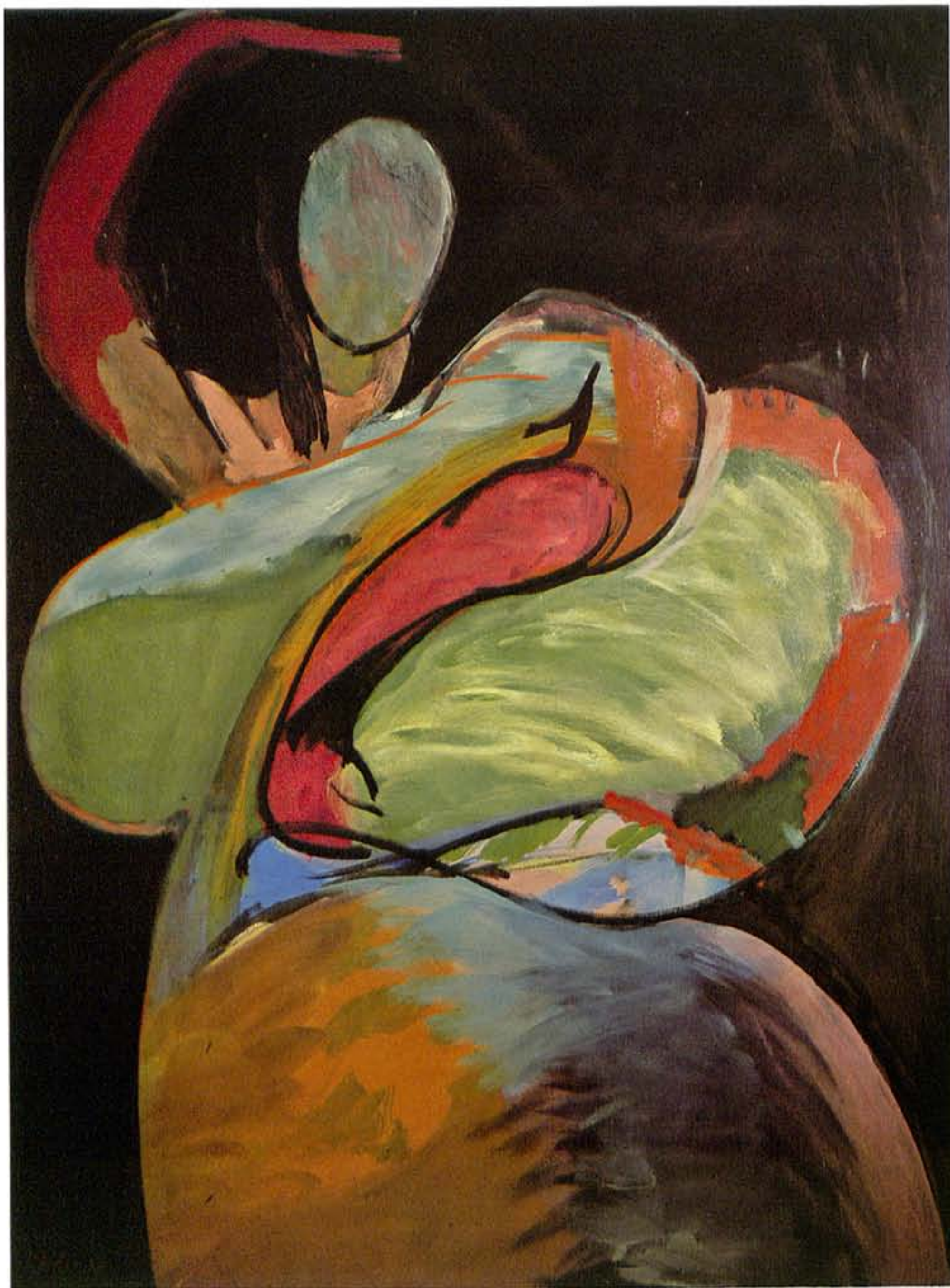
This journal entry, of February 15, 1953, describes a landmark in Jackson's career. *The Family* (pl. 62), as he later called it, was not only the largest but also the strongest of his works balancing abstract and figurative, and the centerpiece of Jackson's second one-man show at Tibor de Nagy in November, to which there was now full-scale critical reaction.

Jackson's recognition, however, could not hide the fact that he had reached a turning point, that he would not be simply a second-generation Abstract Expressionist playing out the inventions of the first generation. The change in his work after his return from St. Louis and the Pitchfork was subtle but unmistakable. The new paintings achieved a greater vigor and breadth of abstraction than ever before. They contain, as the reviewer for *Art News* noted, the contradictory impulses of sensual pleasure and disquieting violence, the Arcadian order of Matisse and the inchoate force of Pollock. They burst with "grand tumbling rhythms" and "baroque vitality," with sweeping contours, bold colors, and seemingly slapdash brushstrokes that set the entire surface of the canvas in motion. Abstract energy and structure pushed images into being

that had been submerged since childhood. His work could now admit the raging torrents that had been more or less subdued during his earlier years in New York. There was room for the darker side of his sensibility, for ambiguity and contradiction—and for the emergence of a new, intensely personal subject matter.

The 1953 paintings—particularly *The Family*, *Blue Horse* (pl. 64), in which the horse is mounted by a mother and child, and *Spanish Dancer* (pl. 63), Jackson's earliest use of music as a theme—are closer to the particulars of Jackson's own history and being as well as to the archetypal, mythical themes of art. They replace the standard repertoire of still lifes, portraits, landscapes, and abstract exercises that had engaged him since the war, evoking the childhood dreams and fantasies that filled his youthful drawings. The "blank stare" of abstraction was not enough. There had to be something to identify with and to answer back, and Jackson was beginning to find it within himself. He was also becoming more interested in traditional methods of painting and returned to Max Doerner's *The Materials of the Artist & Their Use in Painting*. Pollock advised him to "throw away that goddamned book. You can't do realistic work anymore." For Jackson there was no such word as can't.

The "large back wall" on which *The Family* first hung belonged to the spacious factory-loft apartment Jackson had leased in 1952 after returning



63. *Spanish Dancer*. 1953. Oil on canvas, 40 x 54". Private collection



64. *Blue Horse*. 1953. Oil on canvas, 16 x 20". Collection Ted Castle, San Francisco

from Wyoming. It was located at the corner of Mulberry and Broome streets in Little Italy, with the Café Roma and the Mare Chiaro Tavern and Restaurant on the ground floor. As the first artist-outsider to move into the exclusively Italian quarter, adjacent to the artists' quarter of SoHo that developed later, he was treated at first with suspicion and eventually with total acceptance by the community. He shared the loft with Joan Hunt, an artists' model and modern dancer whose comprehension of the arts in general was complemented by a combustible temperament that equalled Jackson's. Epilepsy continued to mark his life deeply. Doctors at the Veterans Hospital on Third Avenue and the Columbia University Neurological Institute managed to suppress the grand

mal seizures with anti-convulsive drugs, but the as yet undiagnosed non-convulsive psychomotor epileptic seizures, every bit as violent, continued. Joan's passionate energies were almost a match for Harry's wild behavior. Their culturally stimulating union was destined to be a tumultuous, on-and-off affair.

In 1953 the jobs of scene painting were becoming tedious. Jackson was well paid as foreman at the Rock Creek Summer Opera in Washington, D.C., and in late October he executed several murals designed by René Bouché for the Packard Motor Company in Detroit. But there was a growing resentment to anything that stole time and energy from his own work. More and more Jackson felt drawn toward the Renaissance, which he had



65. *Portrait of Joan Hunt*. 1956. Oil on canvas, 10 x 12".
Collection of the artist

known since his childhood visits to the Art Institute of Chicago. "Have been looking at Giotto a great deal. . . . Such untroubled and simply stated forms." And, months later: "I have a dream of some day mastering color through the lessons of Matisse and Cézanne till I can again utter something of the deep simple grandeur and humanity of Giotto in pure color."

The opportunity of studying these works at first hand came not much later. On February 6, 1954, Harry and Joan were married by a justice of the peace at the home of his old friends Gene and Neva Powell in Nyack, New York, after a trip up the west bank of the Hudson River in Al and Esther Leslie's pickup truck. The occasion and their send-off to Europe were celebrated at a party given by Helen Frankenthaler, Clement Greenberg, Ken and Cornelia Noland, and Friedel Dzubas at Frankenthaler's West 23rd Street apartment. Then, on the evening of February 27, the Jacksons headed for the docks, again in Al Leslie's truck, and boarded the Italian freighter *Posilipo* with "three smallish suitcases (very heavy), Joan's very small makeup kit, a canvas overnight satchel, and last but not least my oil box, tripod easel and other materials all stuffed into the biggest goddamned mountaineer's

knapsack I have ever carried or seen." At 10 P.M. they cast off for Naples.

At sea, Jackson sketched the ship's crew and became immersed in reading Goethe, Emerson, Montaigne, Martin Buber, Ezra Pound, and above all, the journals of Eugène Delacroix. There were huge uncertainties: "Almost all of my actions seem to be on the surface of myself," he noted, "like flotsam on the sea. Yet I don't feel even that much contact. . . . [My paintings] are on me like clothes and I never come to grips with my skin, with me." Three weeks later they arrived with the sun coming up behind Naples and Mount Vesuvius. His laconic musings came to an end: "Joan and I have been violently reborn. I am dazed, slapped in the face; the sun of Naples fries my eyes dry, eyes still blind from the air-conditioned milk of mother America."

At Naples the voracious scribbling and sketching through five countries and six centuries began. Jackson spent hours in the Naples National Museum, and after one such session wrote incredulously: "It is as if each day I saw sunlight for the first time," and pensively, "I have yet to see as I dream to." Renaissance and Baroque Europe were central to his study, but always with free lateral references. An hour's contemplation of a Titian portrait reached out beyond Raphael to Ingres, to Cézanne, to Poussin, Matisse, and Picasso, each growing out of the other, as he also felt that within Rubens "the way one form grows from the other [creates] true form and plastic, vital volumes."

From Naples they journeyed to Florence, where Jackson remarked on several paintings in the Uffizi Gallery. About Hugo van der Goes' *Adoration of the Shepherds* he wrote: "The unity and simple beauties here were only made possible through a mastery of the craft when it was at the height of its complexity." In Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* he noted "passages rendered with the directness and simplicity of Matisse," and in Rubens' *The Consequences of War* that there is "not a superfluous line despite the apparently wild abandon of its movements. The miracles unfold in every direction with the rhythm and order of a flower as it buds and finally blooms. The greatest secret of composition is finally found repeated on each level and in each aspect of nature. We as artists need only to step aside and merely do again what was already done before the Beginning."

Though impatient with his drawings, Jackson put them to work along with the outpourings of words that filled his journals. His mind and eye were as attentive to people and customs as to art.

In Assisi during Easter he wrote: "I am sitting beside a dirt road leading out from one of the stone towered portals in the ancient city wall and watching the men and women and children returning to the farms that sit, many of them, within sight perched here and there on the patchwork hills exactly as in some of the works by the Peasant Brueghel or one of the Sienese miniatures. As the laughing, sun-baked children run by me on foot or on their donkeys and the older girls and women pad by barefooted or in wooden clogs, their silk stockings and fine shoes in their hands, saving them for the next feast day, I see the futility of those shouting reforms that are so insensitive to the essential and timeless nature of man. How envious I am of these people who have no desire to depart from where their deep roots reach clean through all tradition to the very center of the earth. If they were to be cut off from this taproot they



66. Jackson in his Broome Street studio, New York. 1953



67. Helen Frankenthaler and Clement Greenberg with Jackson at his first one-man show. Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York. Apr. 1952

would dry up and die inside and then the children would not be like firm buds and full blooming flowers and the young girls like a freshly turned field of moist earth or the mothers a standing field of ripened grain while the young men have the vigor of work studs or bullocks drawing plows through the spring wet dirt or carrying seed to the fields ready for sowing. And the old men and women are like the rows of gnarled but firm olive trees that stand in easy ranks covering all the hills and bottom land pinning the thin carpet of soil to the immovable rock with their firm roots. You have never seen humans until you see them united with their work, giving endless birth to it and it to them."

He went on to draw an analogy with the current situation in art: "What greater fulfillment can there be for a man than to nourish both in life and in death that which nourished him. How can I say what I feel in painting? . . . The esoteric position of art with its crutch of fruitless intellectual theories, its motley crew of camp following apologists and bloodless hangers-on, all signifying the lack of any essential vitality, offers nothing of any true worth. I know we artists are correct in crying because there is no longer a properly schooled and cultured audience for our art, but must we also not ask if we are really artists and producing an art worthy of commanding an audience. What do we feel as men and express as artists that is of importance to other men that they should wish to stop and look and desire to open themselves and learn to read those



68. Self-portraits from Jackson's European sketchbooks. 1954



69. Study after Rembrandt's *Hendrickje Stoffels* in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Aug. 1954



70. Study of Centaur after a Roman sculpture in the National Museum, Naples. 1954



71. Study after Raphael's *Self-Portrait* in the Uffizi, Florence. 1954

finer nuances that have never contained but only enhanced and heightened the basic concepts." Jackson's course was rapidly turning from the nonobjective toward "canvases directly using everyday observable objects and concerned with more accessible, apparent, 'human' expression." On May 19, after traveling throughout Sicily for two weeks, Joan and Harry settled in a small house at Taormina, where they remained for a month. He was impatient to put what he had seen into plastic form. "I am hard at work," he wrote his mother, "with great joy and growing drive, digesting and making use of my recent observations to strengthen my command of drawing and completely relearn painting as best I can from the Italian masters and Rubens. I am very heartened by the few slight indications already appearing in the drawings and oil sketches of the last few days. My large ambition may not be altogether mad."

These drawings and oil sketches—landscape studies, portraits of Joan and himself, still lifes—were deliberate attempts to capture rhythms, shadings, and other effects and details of handling that had excited him, particularly in the work of Raphael and Rubens, but he was also getting a fresh start toward his immediate surroundings. He concentrated on the mechanics as well as the spirit of painting: "I have noticed that when details have not yet been introduced into a work, a misplaced mass so strongly jumps or falls out of place that it is almost self-correcting. This is not true where a concentration of surface details reduces the visibility of mistakes in concept or in many cases the complete and utter lack of concept altogether." He also saw the development of his own work in a different perspective: "Gradually my idea of painting is evolving.... I am again interested in portraiture and horses and animals of all kinds and human figures in strong action, for here in the European museums I am able to follow the full development of Western art and learn the abstract implications in the earliest work and I am inspired to turn away from today's schools of abstraction and Constructivism with their purist doctrines, practiced for their own sake, in order to re-employ these tools of formal order."

By August the Jacksons were in Venice. In September they moved on to Vienna and then Munich, where they separated. Joan departed for the United States, while Harry remained in Europe another month. He traveled alone to southern France to visit Cézanne's studio in Aix-en-Provence, Matisse's Chapel at Vence, and the Picasso Mu-



72. Study after Fra Angelico's *Noli me Tangere* in the Museo di S. Marco, Florence. Aug. 9, 1954

seum in Antibes; to Barcelona, where he studied the Romanesque frescoes; and to Madrid. The Texas writer John Graves, who had also served with the Marines in the central Pacific, recalls seeing him sitting at a café table after a day at the Prado with "big dirty notebooks, as fat as stock show bulls. He would poke it with his finger and read to me what he had written in it and show me sketches after Rubens or Goya, and we would argue, or agree."

In late October, Jackson boarded a freighter at Naples for the voyage back to New York. At sea he was able to reflect on his observations and to begin making the connections between European tradition and the Western themes that had remained just under the surface during his New York years. On the ship he was struck by the singing of the Italian crew: "There were moments when the tone



73. Study after Raphael's *Deposition* in the Borghese Gallery, Rome. 1954

qualities were pure Wyoming bunkhouse." There was also a deeply prophetic dream about painting in which appeared "images jumping from the most directly realized, subjective, tactile ones of my last eight years' work, with the Paris and New York influences, to the images of cowboys standing singly... to the most wonderful violent tumult of men and horses and cattle. It was kind of a natural blend of Rubens and Charlie Russell, Delacroix with Frederic Remington, the figures of Velázquez, Monet, W. Homer and Eakins."

New York, on arrival, seemed remote from either the European or Western part of the equation, "filthy and depressing, kind of a mechanized Naples." Moving back into his studio above the Mare Chiaro Bar with Joan, he returned to the suspended opportunity of a bright future as an Abstract Expressionist. *Tall Blue*, an efflorescent abstraction done almost three years earlier had been chosen by Clement Greenberg for the Gloria Vanderbilt collection. Yet Jackson's goals lay in quite a different direction. "Every moment I am haunted by the great works I saw in Europe and I work under the shadow of their unbelievable achievements, so deeply inspiring and humanizing, challenging the very best in me. What a bitter piddling wasteland we have here, this cultural



74. Study after Titian's *Pietà* in the Academy, Venice. 1954

micro-jungle we swing and climb through like so many gibbering monkeys. With the lessons and examples of Europe behind me I will yet paint great pictures for America. They will be about and of the images I have always known and loved, the pictures I have dreamed of, the faces, all of them I have known and loved all my life."

In a social and professional scene now conditioned by the growing dominance of Abstract Expressionism, Jackson felt to an extent immobilized and again left New York after a few months to pursue his own independent vision. Following a scene-painting job in the summer of 1955 with the Pittsburgh Opera (pl. 75), he returned almost by instinct in the fall to Wyoming. With Joan he was swept up in dinners, parties, rodeos, and general Western hospitality interspersed with several commissions for portraits, which replaced scene painting as Jackson's means of support. Western subjects, however, remained an undercurrent. There were sketches and a few tentative paintings, including one of Cal Todd as a trail driver. For the most part, such themes were being held back, kept in abeyance. They were too much part of Jackson's life, too elemental to be treated anecdotally or sentimentally, as the Western illustrators had done. It was still necessary for him to understand how the

lessons of Europe applied to his art. He returned to New York to sketch people in the street and subways and to paint portraits of friends in his Broome Street studio.

His paintings in 1955 and 1956 were deliberately, and at times outlandishly, patterned after European prototypes. The portrait of his wife Joan as Bathsheba recalls Rembrandt and Rubens; the one of Al Leslie (who may have absorbed something of Jackson's example for his own later return to figurative work) as a Spanish dancer is reminiscent of Goya (pl. 77). In both paintings the effect is to insist, with flamboyant playacting, on the aesthetic and philosophic role of the human figure. His elaboration of the aesthetic context drew on the methods, techniques, and conceits of the masters: the creation of deep space with perspective and foreshortening, of volume with modeling in light and shadow, of pictorial unity with compositional structure. Costume and pose further emphasize these purposeful references to the past.

Jackson seemed to be making a complete break with Abstract Expressionism. In fact, he was adding a new dimension to the relationship between the artist and his work by extending it into illusionistic space, one of the things that couldn't be done according to the modernist doctrine of flatness. He was finding a way back into the "real world" without sacrificing the immediacy and energy of abstract painting. While the devices he used, perspective and modeling for instance, came from an older tradition, he used them in an entirely different way. Whereas Renaissance and Baroque art defined forms within a singular, though sometimes infinite, spatial unit, Jackson activated space to create a continuous, multidirectional three-dimensionality. He was therefore able to project the all-over field of Abstract Expressionism into specific human, natural, and historical settings. It now became possible to embrace a tremendous range of information without either surrendering the "reality" of the scene or confining it to a single point of view. Jackson was simulating in paint the experience he had had in the Battle of Tarawa, in which the entire world seemed to be on fire and he could perceive everything at once, down to the smallest detail and finest texture, in all its horror and beauty.

The full implications of these developments were not to emerge until Jackson actually began to work in the three dimensions of sculpture in 1958, but the process was well on its way in the paintings of 1955–56. In February 1956, he began work on *The*



75. Jackson painting scenery for the Pittsburgh Light Opera Company production of *Song of Norway*. Summer 1955

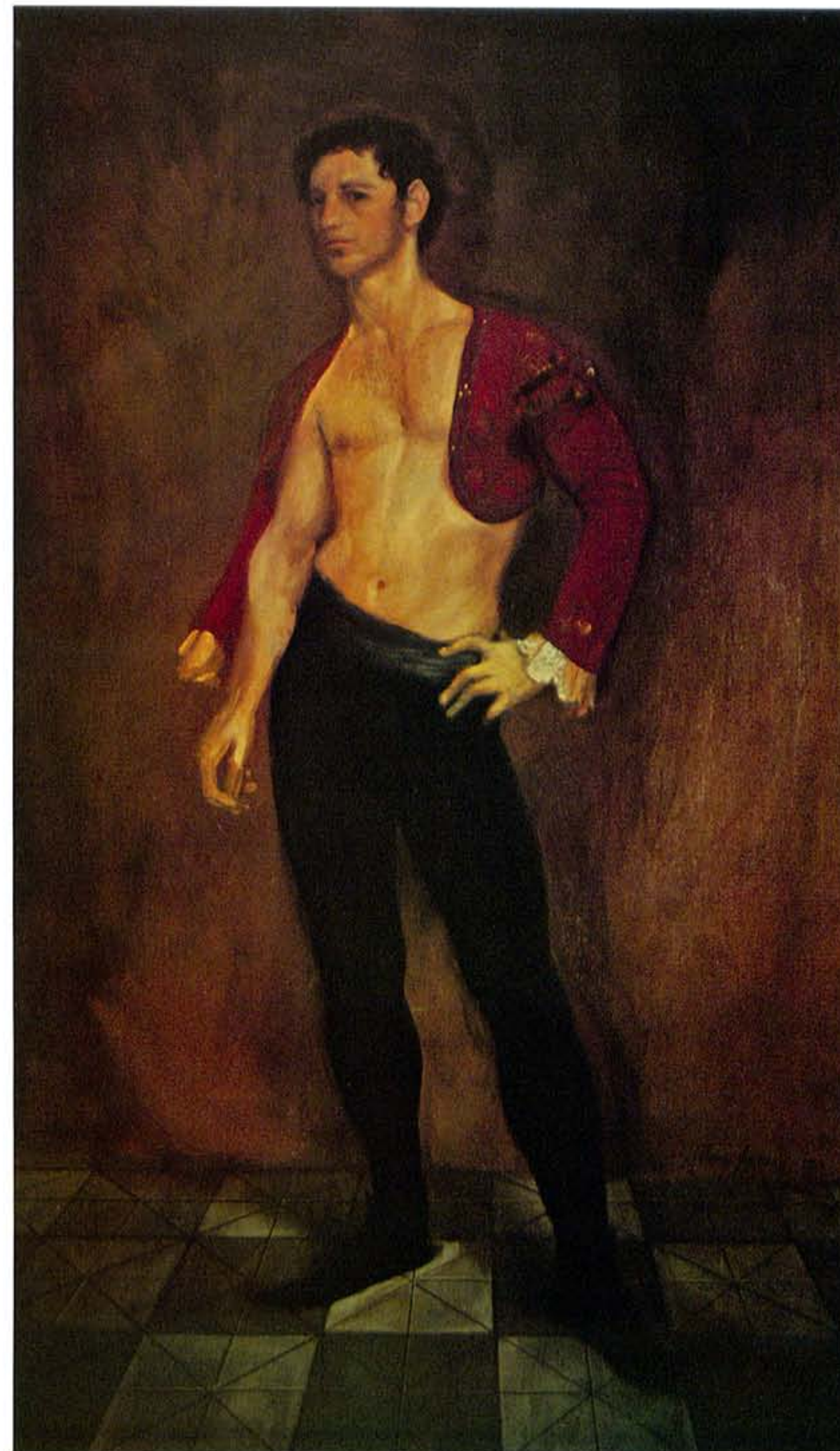
Italian Bar (pls. 78–85), the monumental seven-by-nine-foot canvas that climaxed this period. For two months he sketched the patrons of the Mare Chiaro Bar, people he had come to know intimately during the past four years. Scores of drawings describe the attitudes and idiosyncrasies of single figures and groups of figures—no dramatic action, just men sitting at tables or standing at the bar, talking, reading newspapers, drinking, lighting pipes, dozing off. They were much like his sketches of Marine camp life, but now with greater attention to the overall pictorial space that would evolve. "To conceive a vision is the first impulse of a sketch," he wrote alongside the drawings in his sketchbook, "and then to use all of the painter's skill, the artist's gifts to fulfill, and even in the final days of true mastery, to heighten the mood and the idea, in other words to command composition, touch and finish only in order to conserve and contain the first spontaneous vision. This is the life's work of a painter."

From this mass of material came a number of preliminary studies for the entire scene and eventually a master design from which the composition was enlarged and blocked out on canvas in tempera underpainting of burnt sienna on a gray



76. *The Spanish Act*. 1955. Oil on canvas, 48 x 68".
Collection of the artist

77. *Portrait of Al Leslie as a Spanish Dancer*. 1956. Oil on canvas,
94 x 50". Private collection





78–81. Sketches for *The Italian Bar*. 1956. Collection of the artist and (upper right) private collection

ground. Once begun, the painting underwent continual refinement until its completion in June. A major change occurred after several of the men being portrayed most prominently, including the proprietor, Chris Tenneriello (pl. 83), visited Jackson's studio to sit for sketches individually. The frontal, candid poses they adopted were finally incorporated into the painting, which had the effect of anchoring the composition with a more stable and imposing group seated around the foreground table.

The composition is one of structures within structures. A unitary spatial illusion is created by the perspective of the checkerboard floor which focuses centrally on the clock on the back wall. But within and against this overall unit of space, a myriad of diagonal movements pushes laterally with panoramic force, radiating from the central foreground along the edges of the table and from one figure to another, and gradually dissipating toward the background to be finally absorbed in the flat back wall. Within these two interlocking structures, one converging, the other expanding outward, is interwoven a curvilinear, arabesque rhythm. Only one figure, the man seated in the central foreground, is seen in its entirety. The rest overlap in a continuous flow of energy, although the figures themselves remain still. The crosscurrents of Renaissance symmetry and Baroque asymmetry are resolved in the all-over pattern, so that the viewer, standing outside the painting, is enveloped by its multidirectional sweep rather than pinioned by a single perspective. In the foreground the chair and coat seem to spill out into the viewer's space, and the room itself opens out to both impose itself on us and engulf us. It is a masterful integration of the two-dimensional reality of the canvas and the three-dimensional illusion of perspective that allows us to move among the figures as though we could experience them from every



82. Retrospective one-man exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery, New York. Nov.–Dec. 1956

angle, just as Jackson had experienced them in his preliminary drawings. He had arrived at his own abstract means of dealing with the human themes he was impelled to engage.

In November and December of 1956, *The Italian Bar* and fifteen other paintings, along with some drawings, were shown at the Martha Jackson Gallery (pl. 82). It was Jackson's third one-man show in New York and his last for three and a half years, by which time the medium and subject matter of his work were to be dramatically transformed. The exhibition covered the past seven years in Jackson's career, from Mexico to Little Italy, and included two of the early collages, the semiabstract *Blue Horse*, several portraits, subjects related to the Spanish dance, and two Western subjects done during his recent extended stay in Wyoming, as well as *The Italian Bar* and studies for it. This display of diversity was both true and deliberate, but most of the critics were unable to see either the interior development or where it was headed.



83. Chris Tenneriello, proprietor of the Mare Chiaro Tavern and Restaurant, poses in Jackson's Broome Street studio for *The Italian Bar*. 1956

84. *The Italian Bar, Study*. 1956. Tempera on paper, 37 x 45½". Private collection

Opposite page:
85. *The Italian Bar*. 1956. Oil on canvas, 7 x 9'. Collection of the artist

