



The Extraordinary Interventions of Alfonso Ossorio, Patron and Collector of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner

Author(s): GAIL LEVIN

Source: *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 1/2 (SPRING 2011), pp. 4-19

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23025819>

Accessed: 14-05-2020 04:09 UTC

---

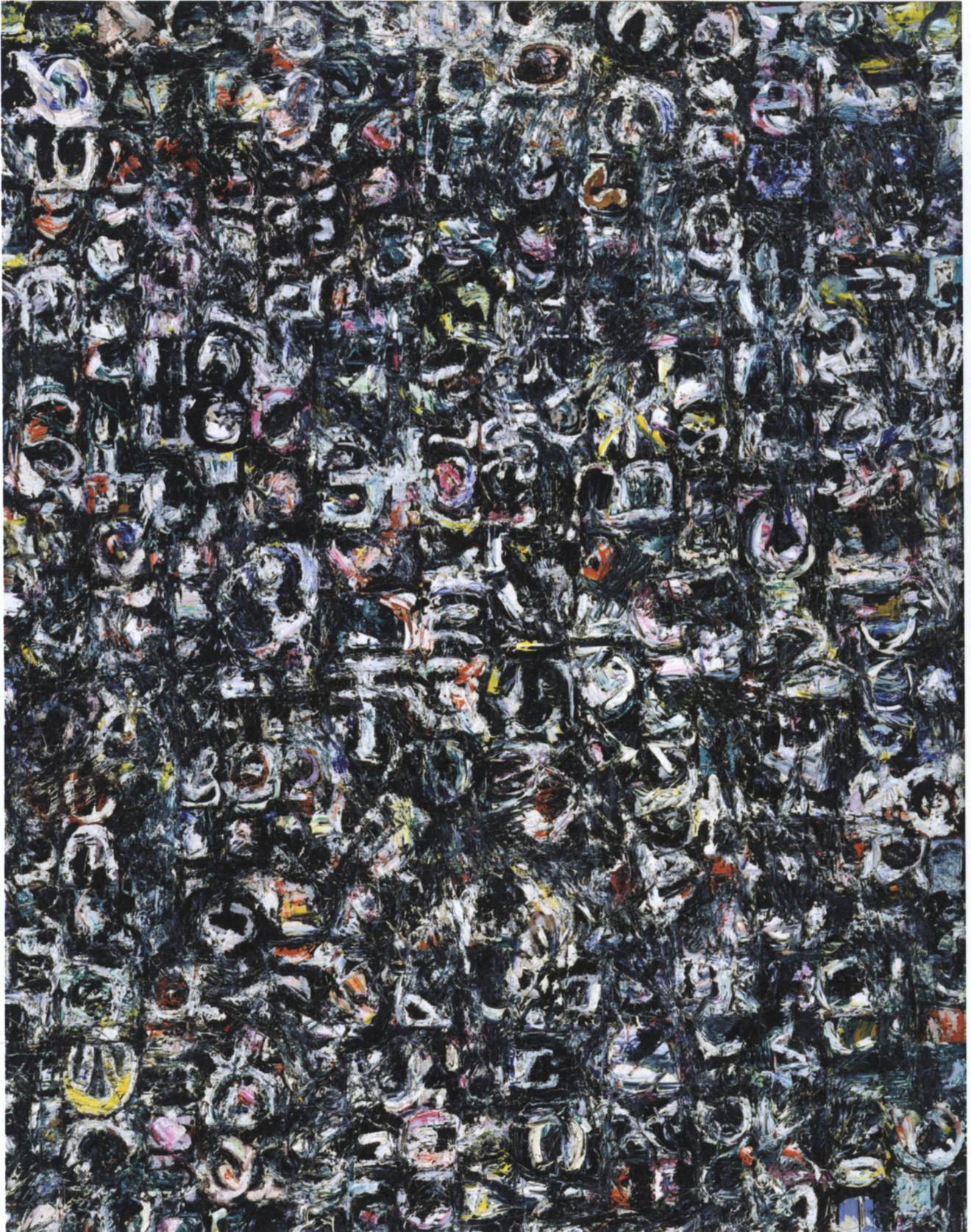
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*The University of Chicago Press, The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Archives of American Art Journal*



# The Extraordinary Interventions of Alfonso Ossorio, Patron and Collector of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner

GAIL LEVIN



The artist Alfonso Ossorio is best known for his colorful Abstract Expressionist paintings and his extravagant sculptures and assemblages, which he called "Congregations." It is less well known that Ossorio became a friend and patron of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner at a time when they were both exhibiting their work and struggling to make ends meet. The three were introduced in 1949.

Ossorio, born in 1916 in Manila, was an heir to a Philippine sugar fortune. He attended prep schools in England and studied printing and wood engraving in London with associates of Eric Gill, a British wood engraver, sculptor, typographer, and draftsman. He attended Harvard and by graduation in 1938 had already pursued a variety of artistic activities. He made watercolors, drew, and tried sculpture.<sup>1</sup> He took a course in the restoration and preservation department taught

*Opposite: Lee Krasner, Untitled, 1949. Oil on composition board, 48 x 37 in. © 2011 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.*

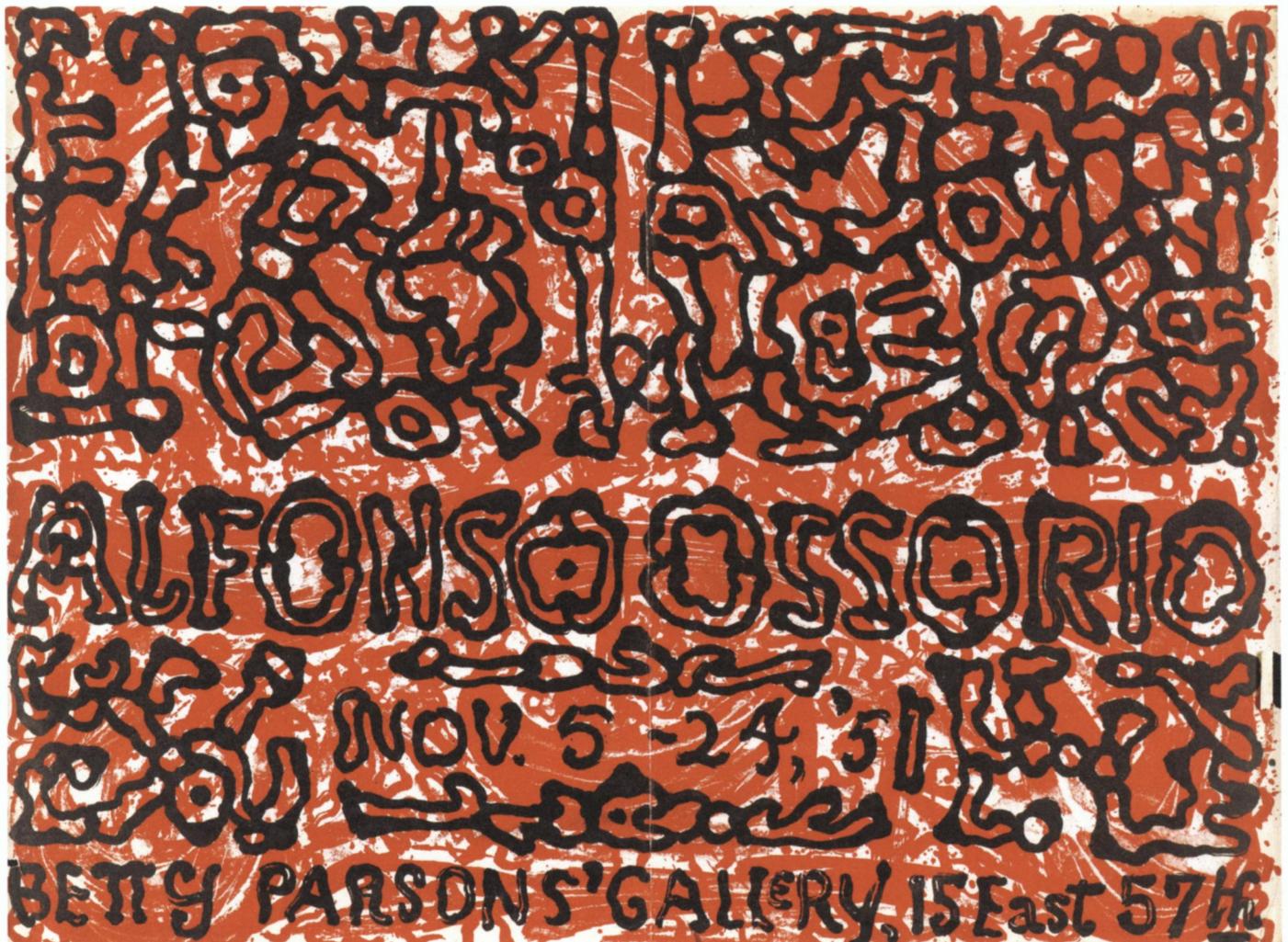


in the laboratories of the Fogg Museum and in general found studying the methods and processes of painting "fascinating."<sup>2</sup> He spent the year after graduation at the Rhode Island School of Design working with Eric Gill's disciple, the graphic artist, calligrapher, and stone-carver, John Howard Benson, whom he already knew; and Eugene Kingman, who taught him how to use egg tempera.

Wealthy, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan, as a teenager Ossorio also began collecting art. He focused on traditional Western art as an undergraduate and started buying prints after discovering the wood engravings of Gill and his circle, having seen a copy of the Kelmescott Chaucer at the New York Public Library. Ossorio showed part of his collection at Harvard in 1936 (at the request of his art history professor Edward Waldo Forbes),<sup>3</sup> and quickly developed into a collector of wide-ranging tastes that included medieval, Asian, American religious folk art, and Native American work. He began to pay attention to modernism in 1939, just as Picasso's 1937 painting *Guernica* was being shown in the United States to raise money for refugees displaced by the Spanish Civil War.<sup>4</sup> At the time, Ossorio was seeking his direction both as a collector and as an artist in his own right, two activities that claimed his attention for the rest of his life.

*Opposite: Alfonso Ossorio in 1952 at his home and studio, The Creeks, East Hampton, NY. Photograph © Estate of Hans Namuth.*

*Below: Poster for Alfonso Ossorio's show at the Betty Parsons Gallery, 5-24 November 1951.*



In the summer of 1940, Ossorio moved to Taos, New Mexico, where he came into direct contact with the Modernist painter Andrew Dasburg, among others. It was there that the art dealer Betty Parsons discovered Ossorio and offered to show his work in New York.<sup>5</sup> From the moment Ossorio had the first of his two solo shows with Parsons

at the Wakefield Gallery (in 1941 and 1943), he explored Modernist ideas. In one of the earliest reviews of his work, for instance, *New York Times* critic Howard Devree immediately associated Ossorio with “a certain morbidity all too common to Surrealism,” though he praised the beautiful execution and color of his watercolors.<sup>6</sup> Ossorio served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps during World War II and settled in New York only in 1948, after having had another show with Parsons in 1945, when she worked for Mortimer Brandt Gallery.

Given both Ossorio’s collecting and creative interest in Modernism, it was not surprising that when Parsons gave Pollock a solo show in January 1949 (she had opened her own gallery in 1946), Ossorio bought something. At the time he knew about Pollock’s work from reproductions and the painter’s first show with Parsons in 1948, but Ossorio hadn’t met him yet. Ossorio’s first encounters with Pollock’s works had made a strong impression on him, and as he later remembered “it was simply by going to Betty’s gallery. . . . I think it was as late as 1947 or ‘48 that I suddenly realized the so-called drip panels had an intensity of organization, had a message that was expressed by its physical components, was a new iconography.”<sup>7</sup> Seeing the 1949 show convinced him to buy a major painting. “Here was a man who had pulled together—existentialized—all the traditions of the past, a man who had gone beyond Picasso,” Ossorio exclaimed. He bought *Number 5*, a canvas measuring eight by four feet.<sup>8</sup>

By 1949, after some years of negative press and few sales, the critical response to Pollock’s work was improving. The *New*

*York Times*’ Sam Hunter equivocated somewhat but concluded that Pollock had come up with “a pure calligraphic metaphor for a ravaging, aggressive virility.”<sup>9</sup> More positive was Clement Greenberg, writing in *The Nation*, who called Pollock’s show a continuation of his “astounding progress” and pronounced him “one of the major painters of our time.”<sup>10</sup>



*Number 5* arrived damaged, so in April 1949 Parsons took Pollock and Krasner to Ossorio's new place at 9 MacDougal Alley in Greenwich Village to have a look at the work's condition. Pollock offered to repair it in his studio in the Springs hamlet of East Hampton on Long Island. The next month, Ossorio and his companion, Edward (Ted) Dragon, a dancer with the New York City Ballet, drove out with the painting, staying over with the Pollocks, becoming friends in the process. Years later, the painter Grace Hartigan, who had helped hang the show, told a revealing story about the damage and follow-up.

*Home Sweet Home was [Pollock's] shipper from Long Island. Home Sweet Home came in with a painting in one hand and a lump of paint from the center of the painting in the other hand. . . . Pollock liked the painting, so what he did was, I think I loaned him some colors and he just patched it. Not as thick as it should have been, but he patched it so no one would know the difference. Well, an artist named Alfonso Ossorio . . . went to the Pollock show and bought that painting. Pollock fumed about it for a while, he said, "He'll never know, never know." . . . [But Ossorio] called Pollock and said, "There's something wrong with the center of that painting." So Pollock said, "All right, get [it] to the studio and I'll fix it." So Pollock repainted the whole thing, again saying, "He'll never know. No one knows how to look at my paintings; he won't know the difference." He sent it back to Ossorio, and Ossorio called him and told him [Pollock] every single thing he did, and said he liked it even better. What a relief.<sup>11</sup>*

*Opposite: Lee Krasner, Clement Greenberg, and Jackson Pollock, ca. 1950.*

*Below: Lee Krasner, Mosaic Table, 1947, mixed media mosaic in cement, with wood and steel; 21 3/4 x 46 3/4 x 46 3/4 in., signed and dated. © 2011 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.*



The visit affirmed Ossorio's high estimation of Pollock's work and introduced him to Krasner's paintings and mosaic tables, which also interested him. Ossorio and Dragon decided to rent a place and spend the summer in East Hampton.

"I saw a good deal of Lee and Jackson" that summer, Ossorio recalled, and the new friends exchanged views on art.<sup>12</sup> "With Jackson one didn't sit and have a long connected conversation. He would show the work, he would make very perceptive comments. His vocabulary was psychoanalytical in the sense that he had been in analysis and his intellectual vocabulary was based on that rather than on aesthetics or art history or philosophy."<sup>13</sup> That fall, Ossorio went to Europe. Pollock and Krasner stayed on in Springs, but they kept in touch.

During their years of friendship, Ossorio was both a sophisticated influence on Pollock and Krasner and stimulated by them. Ossorio's grasp of Modernism in the broad context of international art, philosophy, and culture enabled him to respond to Pollock's daring innovations; he later told an interviewer that after seeing the Parsons show in 1949, he "realized that Pollock was carrying on exactly in the tradition that I was interested in and in a way had bypassed the Renaissance and had gone back to a much earlier tradition of art in terms of dealing with forms and shapes dictated by the ideas rather than by appearance."<sup>14</sup>

The new friends shared other artistic affinities. Studying fine arts and art history at Harvard, Ossorio had known such scholars of Asian art as Benjamin Rowland and the important Indian philosopher and art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who worked at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. He also absorbed lessons from the anthropologist Frederick Pleasants at Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, where Ossorio recalled that "there was no sharp line drawn between fine arts and the primitive artifacts."<sup>15</sup> At the Peabody, Ossorio had studied objects from the Pacific Islands and exhibits on the history of indigenous peoples of North America. Pollock and Krasner shared Ossorio's interest in non-Western art. Krasner had painted a mural for the Museum of Modern Art's 1941 show, "Indian Art of the United States,"<sup>16</sup> and Ossorio recalled that Pollock was very interested in Native American traditions. "I remember being very surprised to see some twenty volumes of the proceedings of the Smithsonian Reports [in Jackson's possession], obviously a battered old set he'd picked up somewhere—which were full of nineteenth-century renditions of American Indian art, everything from buffalo hide paintings, tepees, the sand paintings."<sup>17</sup>

As Krasner and Pollock discovered that Ossorio held their mutual interests in high regard, their friendship deepened, and the year following Pollock's January 1949 solo show was an opportune time for them to develop a new patron-friend. Almost from their first meeting, Ossorio responded to the couple with both material support and friendship. During the winter of 1950, when Ossorio was away for ten months painting a mural in the Philippines, Krasner and Pollock stayed in Ossorio's New York City townhouse. As Krasner wrote to



Ossorio, the couple took advantage of the time in the city to visit lots of artists' exhibitions.<sup>18</sup> Their stay also coincided with the formation of The Club, a famous discussion group of contemporary artists that held meetings on East 8th Street. The couple attended, and the meetings exposed Pollock to fierce competition among his male peers and Krasner to their sexism. According to one of the Club's founders, the sculptor Philip Pavia, the shy and inarticulate Pollock "would come and stand in the back—later sometimes drunk—then Bill [de Kooning] and Franz [Kline] would take care of him." Pavia also admitted that "The women's movement was born in the Club. They would get up there and tell us off—aggressive, and the joke was that we'd make monsters out of these women and got even the wives to talk. They did, too—like Lee, wanting to compete against Jackson."<sup>19</sup> It was in

*Alfonso Ossorio, Mirror Between, 1963, congregation of mixed media on panel, 31 x 28 3/4 x 3 in. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.*

this charged atmosphere, stressful for Pollock and Krasner both, that Betty Parsons opened Pollock's fourth solo show, which presented his now classic large-scale poured paintings.

Running from 28 November through 16 December 1950, the exhibition included thirty-two works, several of them now consid-

ered Pollock's best: *Autumn Rhythm*, *Lavender Mist*, and *One*. Pollock's brother Marvin Jay wrote from New York to their brother Frank in Los Angeles: "The big thing right now is Jack's show. Alma and I were there and it was bigger than ever this year and many important people in the art world were present. Lee seemed very happy and greeted every one with a big smile."<sup>20</sup> Among those whom Krasner could not have been pleased to see was the painter and critic Elaine de Kooning, still married to Willem de Kooning, although

by then estranged from him. According to Greenberg, "this was Jackson's best show, and up came Elaine de Kooning, who said the show was no good except for one painting—the only weak picture in the show, the one he painted [on glass] when they were working on the [Hans Namuth] movie. The show was so good, it's unbelievable."<sup>21</sup>

Ossorio purchased *Lavender Mist* for \$1,500, but it was the only work in the show to sell.<sup>22</sup> Reviews were mixed; Devree, writing in the *New York Times*, called Pollock one of two (with Mark Tobey) of "the most controversial figures in the field."<sup>23</sup> Parsons, who had crammed Pollock's monumental paintings into an inadequate space that could not do justice to them, recalled: "The show was a disaster. For me it was heartbreaking, those big paintings at a mere \$1,200. For Jackson it was ghastly; here was beauty, but instead of admiration it brought contempt."<sup>24</sup>

In spite of the setback, Pollock was becoming more famous. As his reputation grew, though, so did the pressure. His doctor, Edwin Heller, an East Hampton general practitioner who had somehow managed to get him to stop drinking, died suddenly. Six months later, Pollock reacted badly while his work was being shown in Venice, and *Time* magazine published an article on him in November 1950 titled "Chaos, Damn It!," taking remarks by an Italian critic out of context and falsely claiming that he had "followed his canvases to Italy."<sup>25</sup> Pollock thought that the media took aim at him as a symbol and was so disturbed by this article that he told his friend Jeffrey Potter: "What they want is to stop modern art."<sup>26</sup> Next, after having endured Hans Namuth filming him from below as he painted on glass, Pollock must have felt that by recording it for all to see, the filmmaker had turned a private act in the studio into a psychic violation. He suddenly resumed

"The show was a disaster. For me it was heartbreaking, those big paintings at a mere \$1,200. For Jackson it was ghastly; here was beauty, but instead of admiration it brought contempt."



drinking, and Krasner's life came under considerable stress as well. She later reflected: "As Jackson's fame grew, he became more and more tortured. My help, assistance, and encouragement seemed insufficient. His feelings towards me became somewhat ambiguous. Of course, he had many other supporters."<sup>27</sup>

Pollock began to deteriorate rapidly, and nothing seemed to go right for him. He wrote Ossorio and Dragon in early 1951 that he "found New York terribly depressing after my show—nearly impossible—but I am coming out of it."<sup>28</sup> In late January 1951, Ossorio offered Pollock \$200 a month "towards the next painting of yours that we acquire,"<sup>29</sup> but no other sales materialized. A few weeks later, Pollock wrote Ossorio that he had "really hit an all time low—with depression and drinking—NYC is brutal."<sup>30</sup>

Ossorio again lent Pollock and Krasner his New York townhouse so that Jackson could visit a new therapist, Dr. Ruth Fox, a psychiatrist who treated alcoholism through psychoanalytic therapy combined with participation in Alcoholics Anonymous, which meant maintaining sobriety through total abstinence.<sup>31</sup> When Pollock signed his will on 9 March 1951 he asked that in the event Krasner predeceased him, his brother Sande McCoy and Clement Greenberg act as first and second executors. Pollock designated

*Jackson Pollock, Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist), 1950. © 2011 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Image courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.*

Ossorio as a third alternative executor to Krasner, a clear sign that he considered him a close friend, something Krasner and Pollock reaffirmed in the summer of 1951 when they learned that a fabulous East Hampton seventy-acre estate was on the market. They wrote to Ossorio in Paris recommending that he buy it and move

out to Eastern Long Island.<sup>32</sup> Ossorio took their advice, visiting East Hampton briefly in August, when he saw for the first time the large mansion overlooking Georgica Pond and the sprawling grounds. He called the place, which he took title to in January 1952, The Creeks, and starting the following summer received many weekend visitors, among them Parsons and Abstract Expressionist painters Clyfford Still and Grace Hartigan, who each lived and worked for a time in the barn studio.

In November 1951 Ossorio, who was still spending time abroad collecting, traveled from Paris to New York for an exhibition of his drawings at Betty Parsons Gallery. He stayed in the city for the winter and took part in a number of art activities that helped further Pollock's reputation. He wrote the catalogue introduction for Pollock's "black-and-white" show, held immediately after Ossorio's at Betty Parsons, opening on 26 November 1951. He also made plans for Pollock's show to appear at Studio Paul Facchetti in Paris, in March 1952, whose owners used his essay, translated as "Mon ami, Jackson Pollock." Ossorio's good efforts notwithstanding, very little went smoothly for Pollock and Krasner.

Disappointed with sales, Pollock made a decision to leave Betty Parsons, a move that affected Krasner's career as well. Pollock moved to the Sidney Janis Gallery in spring 1952, and Parsons soon told Krasner that she could not continue to show her work because the association with Pollock was "too painful."<sup>33</sup> Ossorio stayed with Parsons, but his belief in Pollock remained strong. As for Pollock, despite his personal problems, he continued to attract attention, especially from Greenberg, who organized his "first retrospective show" (consisting only of eight paintings) at Bennington College in Vermont from 17 to 30 November 1952. For that occasion, Ossorio lent Krasner and Pollock his station wagon to drive up to the show. Greenberg and the painter Helen Frankenthaler were also in the car, but in the face of Pollock's uncontrollable drinking, they returned home by train. Pollock and Krasner made it home safely, but many of their relationships deteriorated under the pressure of Pollock's antisocial behavior.



*Lee Krasner. Photograph by Harry Bowden.*

Pollock's growing dysfunction led to economic problems. Ossorio recalled: "Their financial plight was very serious. Pollock suggested that perhaps he and Krasner might move to The Creeks, live here. Well, I didn't know how to put it but finally said, 'I love you both very much, but . . .' I'm afraid it may have changed our relationship."<sup>34</sup>

When Pollock began a rather public affair with Ruth Kligman and Krasner fled to Europe to think things over, Ossorio was loyal to Krasner. He recalled: "Lee and I crossed each other on the Atlantic, she bound for Europe and I returning. I didn't call Jackson because you know, I thought, 'Let's wait and see what happens.' . . . I thought 'I don't want to get involved now. Let him find himself and then call.' It was always Lee and Jackson that Ted and I knew; it was not Jackson alone, and there were enough complications without my pushing into a new relationship."<sup>35</sup>

Pollock's death in a car crash in August 1956 did not end Ossorio's close relationship with Krasner. He declared himself to be "devoted to Lee" and several times asked her to marry him, but always when he was "very drunk," according to the poet Richard Howard.<sup>36</sup> Another friend recalled that Ossorio was sort of "appealing," but Lee said that she found Ossorio "revolting"<sup>37</sup> and refused to marry him. Krasner saw Ossorio often after Pollock's death and she was friendly with Dragon, which some were not.

Ossorio also supported Krasner's work and continued to act as her patron. In 1957, Ossorio joined the ranks of dealers when, together with artists John Little and Elizabeth Parker, he opened the Signa Gallery in East Hampton at 53 Main Street, a space that was formerly a small market. Financed by Ossorio, this was the first commercial gallery in the area devoted to contemporary vanguard work. The gallery's profile was high, and its openings became popular social events, attracting enthusiastic crowds of five hundred people.<sup>38</sup> Krasner showed regularly at the Signa Gallery, which lasted for four years.

For Krasner, being able to show her paintings meant continuing to exist in the art world in a meaningful way even after Pollock's death caused many to define her as an artist's widow rather than as an artist. During the summer of 1958, Krasner participated in the second season's first show called "The Artists' Vision: 1948–1958," in which she showed *Continuum* (1949, a canvas on loan from Ossorio and not for sale), a collage called *The City* (1953, not for sale), and *Four*, a canvas of 1957, for which she asked \$1,000. She also participated in the Signa's third show that season, which was called "The Human Image" and, thanks to Ossorio, projected an international perspective by including, among others, the work of Jean Dubuffet, the Dutch artist Karel Appel, as well as sculpture by David Smith and James Rosati, in addition to pictures by Pollock, Hartigan, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, and the gallery's founders.<sup>39</sup> Krasner also showed *Prophecy* (1956, misdated in the catalogue as 1951), which was the canvas she had left on her easel when she left Pollock to go to Europe in 1956, just before his death. Since Ossorio already had purchased the work for \$720 from the Martha Jackson Gallery, it was not for sale,

“It was always Lee and Jackson that Ted and I knew; it was not Jackson alone, and there were enough complications without my pushing into a new relationship.”

but Krasner's agreement to have it in this particular show marks her public acknowledgment of the work's "human" or figurative image.<sup>40</sup>

Ossorio's role as dealer and financial backer of the Signa Gallery did not disrupt his friendship with Krasner. It was at a dinner party at Ossorio's home, for instance, during the summer of 1959, that

Krasner met the English art dealer David Gibbs, who was visiting along with Parsons. Krasner soon passed over an eager Clement Greenberg and hired the sly and flirtatious Gibbs to manage the Pollock estate, including marketing it in Europe. Later, in 1961, when she prepared to go to London for the opening of a selection of Pollock's work to be shown at Marlborough Fine Art, it was Ossorio who convinced her to have the designer Charles James, known for his romantic "architectural clothes," create a wardrobe for her trip. Ossorio's desire to influence Krasner's appearance might be viewed more as empathetic concern for the significance of his friend's public debut in England than as any kind of a sexist put-down.

Most important to Krasner personally was Ossorio's direct support of her painting. When she needed money, he purchased several of what she referred to as her "Little Image" paintings made from 1947 to 1949. One, a 1949 canvas, *Untitled*, he gave to the Museum of Modern Art in 1969, where it was shown in "The New American Painting and Sculpture: The First Generation."<sup>41</sup>

Krasner's art can also be seen as having influenced Ossorio. Her mosaic table with its bold combination of bright colored shapes of broken tesserae and glass, keys, pebbles, shells, jewelry, and coins must have appealed to Ossorio's eclectic taste and preference for color. His admiration for the tables and their diverse materials is surely reflected in his own work, especially his "Congregations" of the 1960s. Several of these are, like her tables, even in round format.<sup>42</sup>

After Pollock's death, Krasner continued to show her own work in East Hampton even as she promoted Pollock's work around the world. Beginning in 1968, she showed her work together with Ossorio and other local artists at Ashawagh Hall, an unpretentious community center not far from her home in the Springs. Krasner continued to see Ossorio socially, and he was among the many friends whom she enlisted to read aloud to her, probably because she was what is now called dyslexic.<sup>43</sup>

Ossorio's relationship to Krasner and Pollock was a friendship with constant engagement and exchange. He functioned as a friend, a colleague, and a patron. He collected and was influenced by both of their work and he offered them intellectual stimulation, financial support, and access to European artists and critics from Dubuffet to Michel Tapié. They in turn introduced him to the East Hampton artist colony, which they helped to found and where he became a fixture. ●

- 1 See B. H. Friedman, Alfonso Ossorio (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1973), 17.
- 2 Alfonso A. Ossorio, interview conducted by Forrest Selvig, 19 November 1968, Archives of American Art (AAA), Smithsonian Institution, [www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/alfonso-ossorio-interview-5517](http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/alfonso-ossorio-interview-5517) (hereafter cited as Ossorio interview, 19 November 1968).
- 3 See Loan Exhibition of Work of Five Contemporary English Artists: Engravings, Drawings, Water Colours, Illustrated Books, & Small Carvings, Introduction by A. Graham Carey; catalogued by Alfonso Ossorio (Cambridge, Mass., 1936). Ossorio, who lent wood engravings and copper engravings, was one of eleven lenders.
- 4 Picasso's Guernica was shown at the Valentine Gallery in New York for three weeks in May 1939. From that November, it was at the Museum of Modern Art in a Picasso retrospective exhibition.
- 5 Ossorio interview, 19 November 1968. Parsons was at the time still working at the Wakefield Gallery in New York.
- 6 Howard Devree, "A Reviewer's Notebook," New York Times, 23 November 1941.
- 7 Ossorio interview, 19 November 1968.
- 8 Friedman, Ossorio, 32.
- 9 Sam Hunter, "Among the New Shows," New York Times, 30 January 1949.
- 10 Clement Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, and Josef Albers," The Nation, 19 February 1949, reprinted in John O'Brian, ed., Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 2:285–286.
- 11 Grace Hartigan, interview conducted by Julia Link Haifley, 10 May 1979, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, [www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-grace-hartigan-12326](http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-grace-hartigan-12326).
- 12 Ossorio interview, 19 November 1968.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Alfonso Ossorio, interview conducted by Judith Wolfe, in Alfonso Ossorio: 1940–1980 (East Hampton, N.Y.: Guild Hall Museum, 1980), 7.
- 16 See Gail Levin, Lee Krasner: A Biography (New York: William Morrow, 2011), 157.
- 17 Ossorio interview, 19 November 1968.
- 18 Lee Krasner to Alfonso Ossorio, 1950, quoted in Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 4:247.
- 19 Jeffrey Potter, To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1985), 121–122.
- 20 Marvin Jay Pollock to Frank Pollock, 3 December 1950, quoted in Pollock: Catalogue Raisonné, 4:255.
- 21 Clement Greenberg quoted in Potter, To a Violent Grave, 134.
- 22 Friedman, Ossorio, 42.
- 23 Howard Devree, "Artists of Today: One-Man Shows Include Recent Paintings by Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey," New York Times, 3 December 1950.
- 24 Betty Parsons quoted in Potter, To a Violent Grave, 134.
- 25 "Chaos, Damn It!," Time, 20 November 1950.
- 26 Quoted in Potter, To a Violent Grave, 130.
- 27 Krasner quoted in John Gruen, The Party's Over Now (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), 232–233.
- 28 Jackson Pollock to Alfonso Ossorio and Ted Dragon, 6 January 1951, Pollock: Catalogue Raisonné, 4:257, D93.
- 29 Jackson Pollock to Alfonso Ossorio, late January 1951, Pollock: Catalogue Raisonné, 4:257, D94.
- 30 Jackson Pollock to Alfonso Ossorio, later January 1951, Pollock: Catalogue Raisonné, 4:257, D94.
- 31 Ellen G. Landau, Lee Krasner: A Catalogue Raisonné (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), chronology, 310, erroneously reports that Pollock was already seeing the "Sullivanian" therapist Ralph Klein, but in fact that treatment began several years later. Robert Hobbs, in Lee Krasner (New York: Independent Curators International in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 116, repeats this error. On Fox's approach see, Eva Maria Blum and Richard H. Blum, Alcoholism: Modern Psychological Approaches to Treatment (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1974), 174–175 and 245.
- 32 Helen A. Harrison and Constance A. Denne, Hamptons Bohemia: Two Centuries of Artists and Writers on the Beach (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 76. The estate had once been owned by the painter-designers Albert and Adele Herter.
- 33 Betty Parsons quoted in Gruen, Party's Over Now, 238.
- 34 Potter, To a Violent Grave, 207.
- 35 Ossorio quoted in Potter, To a Violent Grave, 236.
- 36 Richard Howard, interview conducted by Gail Levin, 18 January 2007.
- 37 Cile Downs, interview conducted by Gail Levin, 21 August 2007.
- 38 "Signa Gallery Opens with Distinguished Guests," East Hampton Star, 25 July 1957.
- 39 Signa Gallery press release for "The Human Image," 25 July–August 1958, East Hampton, NY, microfilm reel 3984, frame 94, Signa Gallery Records, AAA.
- 40 Martha Jackson to Lee Krasner, 8 August 1960, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner Papers, AAA, apologizing for the delay in payment to her for Prophecy, of which \$120 went to Signa Gallery for its commission.
- 41 See Landau, Krasner: Catalogue Raisonné, numbers 217, 231, 236, 237, 265, 302, 307, and 418.
- 42 See Friedman, Ossorio, plate 128 (Wreath of Eyes, 1963), and plate 130 (Halcyon, 1963).
- 43 On Krasner, dyslexia, and her desire to be read to, see Levin, Lee Krasner: A Biography, 52–53 and 377.

# Alfonso Ossorio and Zen

The extent and direction of artistic influence among Alfonso Ossorio, Jackson Pollock, and Lee Krasner has not been sufficiently studied. Scholars have credited artists Robert Motherwell and others with introducing Zen ideas to the artists of the New York School, but it is likely that Ossorio also had some part in disseminating Zen concepts in East Hampton in spring 1952, when he began to see Pollock and Krasner regularly. Their discussions of Zen may have influenced Harold Rosenberg's famous essay "The American Action Painters," published at the end of the year.<sup>1</sup>

We know that among the books Ossorio acquired in that year, possibly as early as that spring, was Langdon Warner's just published *The Enduring Art of Japan*.<sup>2</sup> Warner, a Harvard professor, Asian art expert, and one-time student of Okakura Tenshin,<sup>3</sup> had taught art history at Harvard when Ossorio was a student there. Warner's book (and probably his teachings) contained an introduction to Zen, and his bibliography listed Daisetz T. Suzuki's 1934 *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, a book much read in art circles in New York during the 1950s, and most probably read by Ossorio while still at Harvard.<sup>4</sup>

Warner's introduction notes how "in the practice of putting down their paintings in ink on paper, Zen artists discovered that the principle of *muga* (it is not I who is doing this) opens the gate for the necessary, essential truth to flow in. When the self does not control the drawing, meaning must. The principle runs all through Zen teachings, especially where action is involved."<sup>5</sup> Suzuki had written in his earlier book that in a state of *muga* "the unconscious is realized" and described "a state of ecstasy in which there is no sense of 'I am doing it.'"<sup>6</sup> In *muga*, he explained, "your natural faculties [are] set in a consciousness free from thoughts, reflections, or affectations of any kind."<sup>7</sup> Buying his old professor's new book made Ossorio focus on Zen concepts, with which he was already familiar from Suzuki's book. It is extremely likely that he discussed such things with Pollock and Krasner when they carried on their wide-ranging discussions of art.

In summer 1952, the critic Harold Rosenberg sometimes joined his East Hampton friends Pollock, Krasner, and Ossorio when they talked about art.<sup>8</sup> It appears that hearing about *muga* influenced him as he wrote his essay, which appeared in *Art News* in December. Rosenberg wrote, for example: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, when Rosenberg observed that "The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material

Alfonso Ossorio '52  
THE ENDURING ART  
OF JAPAN  
East Hampton -

# THE ENDURING ART OF JAPAN



LANGDON WARNER

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS • CAMBRIDGE • 1952

in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would result from this encounter," he again evoked the Zen action that is "consciousness free from thoughts."<sup>10</sup> Eleven years later Rosenberg described the state of painting in 1952 more specifically: "Art in the service of politics declined after the war, but ideology has by no means relaxed its hold on American painting. Zen, psychoanalysis, Action art, purism, anti-art—and their dogmas and programs—have replaced the Marxism and regionalism of the thirties. It is still the rare artist who trusts his work to the intuitions that arise in the course of creating it."<sup>11</sup>

Recent interviews with Ossorio's longtime assistant, artist Mike Solomon, suggest that Ossorio's ideas about art carried weight. Solomon told me that Ossorio complained that during conversations with both Rosenberg and Greenberg he felt that he intimidated them.<sup>12</sup> Ossorio's contributions to theories of postwar painting have not yet received their due. ◉

1 Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News*, December 1952, 22–23, 48–50.

2 Langdon Warner, *The Enduring Art of Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), copy inscribed on the half-title page in the artist's hand: "Alfonso Ossorio '52 East Hampton," collection of the author.

3 Tenshin was a Japanese scholar who was invited to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1904. See Constance J. S. Chen, "Transnational Orientals: Scholars of Art, Nationalist Discourses, and the Question of Intellectual Authority," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 9, no. 3 (2006), 215–242.

4 Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (Kyoto: The Eastern Buddhist Society, 1934). New York artists were more likely to have read the 1949 edition published by the New York Philosophical Library.

5 Warner, *The Enduring Art of Japan*, 101.

6 See William Barrett, ed. *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki* (New York: Anchor Books, 1956), 349.

7 Ibid.

8 Mike Solomon, interview conducted by Gail Levin, 16 February 2011 (hereafter cited as Solomon interview, 16 February 2011). Solomon, founding director of the Ossario Foundation, met Ossorio through his father, artist Syd Solomon.

9 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 22.

10 Ibid.

11 Harold Rosenberg, "Painting Is a Way of Living," *New Yorker*, 1 February 1963; reprinted as "De Kooning: 1. Painting Is a Way of Living," in Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience* (New York: Horizon Press, 1966), 90.

12 Solomon interview, 16 February 2011.