



Detail, Jackson Pollock, *No. 29, 1950, 1950*, black and aluminum enamel paint, expanded steel, string, beads, coloured glass and pebbles on glass, 121.9 × 182.9 cm, National Gallery of Canada, purchased 1968. Photograph used with the permission of the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives. (Photo: NGC)

The National Gallery Lands a Jackson Pollock: A Case Study in Curatorial Agency

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The 1960s and 1970s represented an era of expansion of the National Gallery of Canada's (NGC) permanent collection in both geographic scope and historical range. Under Director Jean Sutherland Boggs (1966–76), the NGC began collecting postwar and contemporary American art, reversing a longstanding policy formalized in 1956.¹ This turning point in the institution's history signalled Canadian culture's increasing connectedness with wider North American developments. Boggs's vision was carried out by Brydon E. Smith, the NGC's first Curator of Contemporary Art (1967–79). Boggs had brought Smith to Ottawa from the Art Gallery of Ontario, where she had hired him in 1964. While in Toronto, Smith had showed flair as a young curator and organized the first exhibition of what is now known as Pop Art by a Canadian museum titled *Dine, Oldenburg, Segal*.

Under the Boggs-Smith tandem, the NGC would build an impressive core collection of some of the most innovative, radical art being produced in the USA. One of the earliest works acquired by the NGC was Jackson Pollock's *No. 29, 1950*. It was acquired in 1968 on Smith's recommendation. It became the foundational piece on which the Gallery subsequently built its small, but significant holding of Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture. While an important acquisition in its own right, the work thus also deserves study for the change it heralded in the shape and direction of the permanent collection.

My research on this acquisition has been inspired by the concept of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), developed by French polymath Bruno Latour. His method examines the associations and connections between "actors," who may be people or things, such as art objects or institutions.² Of course, art historians are accustomed to the study of art objects, exhibitions, and collections viewed in the context of their creation, their innovations, and their impact within a broader visual culture. I have looked at Smith as an active mediator, creating new associations with American works and players.

Smith's interest in Pollock (1912–1956) can be traced to his graduate studies in art history at the University of Toronto in the early 1960s, following undergraduate study in science at McMaster. His most influential professor appears to have been Robert Welsh, then a junior instructor and PhD candidate from the United States, who would go on to a distinguished



1 | Thomas Reid MacDonald (1908–1978), *Portrait of Brydon E. Smith*, 1962, dimensions and location unknown. Photograph used with the permission of the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives. (Photo: NGC)

academic career. Smith wrote a notable essay on Jackson Pollock for Welsh’s course which contains a discussion of *No. 29, 1950*. In this essay, Smith argued that Pollock’s painting on glass was more discordant and less rhythmical than others in the artist’s oeuvre, always exposing its original undercoat on the reverse side of the glass.³ He concluded that “Pollock was a romantic painter who tended to push outward the frontier of experience toward the mystical, the unique, and the overwhelming; he accomplished this all within the intense privacy of his vision.”⁴

The NGC’s curatorial file and the Pollock and Krasner papers at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, provide the background on how *No. 29, 1950* came into the NGC collection. In 1964, eight years after Pollock’s death, Lee Krasner (1908–1984), Pollock’s widow, consigned 144 of his paintings to the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery in New York. The asking price at that time for *No. 29, 1950* was \$60,000.⁵ The work did not sell. Two

years later, however, Krasner signed a long-term agreement with the Gallery in effect from 1966 to 1975. Under this arrangement, an updated museum price of \$75,000 was agreed upon for *No. 29, 1950*.⁶ This amount, though strikingly modest by the standards of today's art market, nonetheless represented a substantial sum for the NGC.

On what was likely his first curatorial trip to New York after his recruitment, Smith spotted the work at the Marlborough Gallery where he found it “very wonderful, very different, kind of unique.”⁷ After an inspection trip by Jean Boggs, Mervyn Ruggles (Conservation), and Smith in late June 1967, the Marlborough Gallery's Stephen Weil wrote to Smith: “I have now given a complete report to Mrs. Pollock and she seemed most pleased by the way things had gone. What a marvelous thing it would be if this very great painting finally found a permanent home in Ottawa.”⁸ Boggs validated Smith's recommendation and lined up approvals for the purchase. She had the responsibility to estimate how much the trustees and the Minister would be prepared to approve. Former NGC Director Pierre Théberge, then a curator, recalled that the amount presented real challenges.⁹ A mail-in ballot was sent to NGC trustees in July 1967, a rare opportunity in the NGC's institutional history to see a recorded vote. Boggs secured six votes in favour with one opposed and one blank.¹⁰

In her letter to Secretary of State Judy LaMarsh requesting approval for Supplementary Estimates, Boggs cited the absence of any work in the NGC's collection representing Abstract Expressionism, the reasonable price requested in light of the work's status as “one of the best documented paintings of the 20th century,” the rapidly rising art market, and the potential interest for Canadian artists.¹¹ The work's Pollock estate provenance, excellent condition, and prominence in the artist's oeuvre would all have counted with Boggs and Smith. The short film by Hans Namuth capturing the work's creation had gained it a place in the Pollock literature. At the time of purchase, the work had been cited or illustrated in eleven publications.¹² While the unusual glass support intrigued Smith, it may have raised doubts among other potential buyers seeking a more typical work or one less fragile. The use of collage materials would also have aroused Smith's interest. Smith would often prefer works that showed special features while still reflecting an artist's signature style.

The painting's exhibition history ultimately confirmed its importance. It had been shown at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950, a sign of Pollock's early approval. It had toured the United States with MoMA's *Modern Relief* (1951–53); been included in Dorothy Miller's celebrated *15 Americans* show (1952) at MoMA; and then shown again at MoMA in 1956.¹³ For *15 Americans*, Dorothy Miller displayed the work in an open frame in the centre of the gallery. Her

installation deliberately evoked Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–23).¹⁴ Situating the work within a broader art historical narrative would also have weighed with Boggs and Smith.

Following Parliamentary approval, the NGC made the final payment in March 1968. Smith's enthusiasm permeated the NGC's press release announcing the acquisition of a "delicate, shimmering and lyrical work" in which Pollock "synthesized the unconscious energies of his mind, the muscular rhythms of his body and inert objects from his environment into harmonious forms in space."¹⁵ *Toronto Star* cultural critic Gail Dexter, conscious of the acquisition's significance, interviewed Smith and analyzed Pollock's legacy.¹⁶ The remainder of the Canadian daily press does not appear to have found the arrival of the first Pollock in Canada newsworthy. Arts publications in Canada, Britain and the United States, however, did take notice.¹⁷

Thanks to the Marlborough records in the Pollock and Krasner papers, we can compare this NGC acquisition with other important Pollock works for sale on the same occasion. This acquisition represents a rare opportunity to evaluate Smith's choice of a major work in comparison with others of broadly similar quality. In addition to *No. 29, 1950*, the Marlborough offering in 1967 included:

Pasiphae (1943) for \$120,000 and now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York;
There were Seven in Eight (1945) for \$90,000 and now at MoMA;
Totem Lesson II (1945) for \$75,000 and now at the National Gallery of Australia;
White Cockatoo No. 24A (1948) for \$100,000 and now in a private collection in California; and
Summertime (1948) for \$175,000 and now at the Tate Modern, London.¹⁸

The unique character of *No. 29, 1950*, its exhibition history, related documentation (film, photographs), and the published references all argued in its favour. Of the paintings noted above, *No. 29, 1950* has drawn the most attention from art historians, albeit in large part because of the related Namuth film. In the 1978 catalogue raisonné, only *One: Number 31, 1950* has an equally extensive bibliography. When scale is considered, however, the NGC's more modestly sized work falls short. In addition, the circumstances surrounding its creation and experimental technique on glass required a rapid execution in unfavourable conditions. No "cooling off" period occurred after

which it could be reworked as per Pollock's usual practice. Notably, however, none of the large Pollock works above ended up in museums until the 1980s. In any event, Smith seems to have wanted *No. 29, 1950* first and foremost.

The enduring interest in *No. 29, 1950* arises in large part from the awkward, but ultimately productive, collaboration between Pollock and Hans Namuth, a young German refugee and photographer. The circumstances of the filming of the work have been described at some length in Naifeh and White Smith's comprehensive biography.¹⁹ In this ten-minute colour film, Namuth and Pollock created a powerfully resonant image of an American genius performing what T.J. Clark has described as "metaphorics of masculinity . . . space, scale, action, trace, energy."²⁰ Barbara Rose argues that this film and related photographs did much to foster the idea of art as an event and the artist as a performer.²¹ The simultaneous completion of *No. 29, 1950* and of Namuth's filming of its creation on 25 November 1950 were to mark the end of two years of Pollock's most productive (and sober) period, and a turn away from his experiments in pure abstraction.

In a letter to Smith following the NGC's purchase, Namuth claimed that the idea of filming the execution of a painting on glass was his own:

I wanted to show the painter at work facing you, the onlooker, which cannot be the case if the painting is on an easel or on the floor . . . Pollock liked my idea, and we both worked it out together. He was a great carpenter and built the construction which held the glass at a sufficient height for me to lie under.²²

Lee Krasner, however, always maintained that Pollock had been inspired to paint on glass by Duchamp.²³ Smith met with Krasner at the Marlborough Gallery in May 1969 to discuss the work. While no notes have been found from that meeting, Smith did write afterwards to thank her and to express the hope that he might pursue the conversation at The Springs, Long Island, during the summer.²⁴

The accessibility of the Namuth film and photographs has given scope for many critics and scholars to write about the NGC work without necessarily travelling to Ottawa to see the original. Although the work travelled in the 1950s, the NGC has never agreed to loan it, even when requested by such prestigious institutions as MoMA (1998) and the Tate Modern (1999).²⁵ Post-1968 scholarship about the work may have diminished as a result.

Without the experience of the original, historians and critics are likely to overlook the differing visual effects on each side of *No. 29, 1950* or to underestimate its impact as a work of art in its own right.²⁶ Smith and Boggs, however, did not overlook these differences. In the NGC press release of



2 | Jackson Pollock, *No. 29, 1950*, 1950, black and aluminum enamel paint, expanded steel, string, beads, coloured glass, and pebbles on glass, 121.9 × 182.9 cm, National Gallery of Canada, purchased 1968. Photograph used with the permission of the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives. (Photo: NGC)

19 June 1968 announcing the work's acquisition, Smith quoted from Frank O'Hara's 1959 monograph where the poet observed that *No. 29, 1950* "is the same masterpiece from opposite sites of viewing."²⁷ Jean Boggs's 1971 history of the NGC collection provided commentary about each side of the work.²⁸ More recently, German curator Jürgen Harten, who has viewed the work, underlined its multi-layered collage features.²⁹

What Smith learned from his 1969 interview with Krasner was no doubt incorporated into a lecture he gave at Carleton University on 27 January 1970.³⁰ He saw the work as a record of its own creation and an important statement about action painting. He revealed his abiding interest in science



3 | Jackson Pollock, *No. 29, 1950*. On the reverse side, the base of aluminum paint assumes prominence, tending to mask the collage materials and resulting in a more purely abstract perspective. Photograph used with the permission of the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives. (Photo: NGC)

by reviewing the technical specifications of the materials, including the aluminum-coloured paint. He noted that on the surface of *No. 29, 1950* worked by Pollock, the very real presence of the collage materials (steel, coiled string, beads, coloured plastic, pebbles) had not been completely abstracted by the paint. The embedded objects found in the artist's studio and yard evoked the physical surroundings of the work's creation. Smith claimed that Pollock was fond of this work and would take it outdoors to observe "the landscape around his studio through his abstract creation." In a 1971 lecture to a different audience, Smith characterized the work as "energy suspended in space," effectively eliminating all background.³¹

Following his retirement, Smith returned to Pollock in a 2002 essay for the *National Gallery Review*. He structured the article to flow from Pollock's response to a question from Lee Krasner about why he began many works with figurative elements, which were only retained in varying degrees, or not at all, in the final work. Pollock's answer, "I choose to veil the imagery," became Smith's departure point.³² He reviewed the creative stages entailed in *No. 29, 1950*, noting Pollock's initial, repeated gesture of running his fingers in a circular motion over the glass "to establish its physical relationship to him." Smith noted that the work presents itself quite differently on the reverse side with silvered abstract shapes effectively "veiling" the collage material and other colours. He concluded that Pollock was comfortable using both abstraction *and* figuration, though critics of the period had attempted to establish a rigid, irreconcilable separation between the two practices.

Smith's longstanding interest in this work thus stretched over a forty-year period from his student years to post-retirement, in effect bookending his career. His observations grew more complex and layered over the years and following many hours of direct study. At no point, however, did Smith situate the work theoretically or relate Pollock to the broader art-historical or cultural context. Smith tended to eschew labels for artists, avoiding suggestion of theoretical concepts which might inhibit more open-ended interpretations, or which had not formed part of the artist's original plan. Smith's early scientific training placed primary importance on close personal observation.

The relation of *No. 29, 1950* to architecture was made by Pollock himself in a late 1950 interview with William Wright, who noticed the work in his studio. Pollock's response is worth noting: "Well that's something new for me. That's the first work I've done on glass and I find it very exciting. I think the possibilities of using painting on glass in modern architecture – in modern construction – terrific."³³ Other peers of Pollock shared an interest in architecture, in working on a large scale, and in controlling the environment where their works were displayed.

No. 29, 1950 can be linked to a chapel project which grew out of discussions in the summer of 1950 among potential Catholic patrons, including curator James Johnson Sweeney.³⁴ This group wanted to explore for the United States the concept of a modern chapel such as Matisse was then executing at Vence in the south of France.³⁵ Alfonso Ossorio, Pollock's and Krasner's wealthy friend and fellow artist, acted as a go-between and catalyst. At Ossorio's urging, Pollock became involved, but he insisted that his friend Tony Smith, an architect who also happened to be Catholic, do the design. Tony Smith's plans were still awaited when Pollock created *No. 29, 1950*. The architect recalled being questioned by Pollock about applying painting on



4 | Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Tony Smith at the Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1951 (printed in 1992). Photograph used with the permission of the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives. (Photo: NGC)

glass to the proposed chapel windows after the screening of the Namuth film, which premiered at MoMA on 14 June 1951.³⁶

In 1952, with Tony Smith's architectural sketches at last completed, Ossorio arranged a meeting with the potential patrons to float the proposal.³⁷ Pollock himself is not recorded as present. In his final plans, Pollock's paintings on glass were envisioned as clerestory windows.³⁸ In the event, Smith's unconventional, suspended honeycomb design met with incomprehension and Pollock's Christian ethos was questioned.³⁹ This interesting, albeit aborted, proposal may be seen as part of the history of *No. 29, 1950*. A later attempt to associate some later Pollock works with religious imagery gave rise to scholarly controversy.⁴⁰ Whatever his own religious views, Pollock was interested in the relationship between art and architecture, and exploring the architectural potential of painting on glass.

Brydon Smith ensured that *No. 29, 1950* enjoyed a fitting architectural setting for its permanent installation. In the 1980s when planning the interior



5 | Brydon Smith, laureate (Outstanding Contribution) of the 2014 Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media. Photograph used with the permission of the Canada Council for the Arts/Martin Lipman. (Photo: CCA)

of the new NGC building on Sussex Drive, Smith conceived a room installed around the Pollock and works subsequently acquired by four other postwar Americans: Barnett Newman (1905–1970), Mark Rothko (1903–1970), Clyfford Still (1904–1980), and Tony Smith (1912–1980). The theme for the high-ceilinged gallery was to be “wholeness.” Smith engaged Canadian artist Ron Martin (b. 1943) to work with him in resolving the final installation. Martin saw the significance of Pollock’s work in “its capacity to convey a self-reflexive knowledge of our being in the world, and is, in fact, our link with what is the earliest and essential principle of late Modernist Abstract Art.”⁴¹ The NGC’s Pollock is appropriately displayed in a free-standing frame allowing for viewing from both sides. The NGC display evokes Dorothy Miller’s framing for *15 Americans*, which met with Pollock’s approval.⁴² The viewer may choose to imagine the work’s potential for architecture and a possible affinity with Duchamp’s masterpiece.

The acquisition of *No. 29, 1950* marked a new direction in NGC collecting. In Latour's terms, *No. 29, 1950* acted as an intermediary and Smith took the role of the active mediator, developing new contacts among influential American art world players and helping establish the NGC's place within a broader North American discourse. In the latter part of his career and still committed to the postwar abstract artists whom he admired, Smith would raise the quality of the NGC's holdings with the acquisitions of two major works: Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* (1967) and Mark Rothko's *No. 16* (1957). With his early selection of *No. 29, 1950*, Smith had made an unconventional but prescient choice with his initial foray into this area of collecting. He deserves credit for seizing the moment in 1967, effectively the only time a first-rate Pollock has fallen within the NGC's ambit. With Boggs's support, the NGC secured an influential and unique painting with impeccable credentials. It remains a work which any modern art museum would be only too willing to display today. The painting now counts among the NGC's treasures for the lasting benefit of Canadians.

NOTES

- 1 Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the NGC held 23–24 May 1956, National Gallery of Canada (NGC) Library and Archives.
- 2 Latour cites artworks and museum collections as examples of objects which can become actors in a social network. See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 81, 97, 100, 102.
- 3 Brydon SMITH, "Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)," box 1, file 7 Fine Arts (1963–65), Brydon Smith fonds, NGC Library and Archives.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 "Price List for Jackson Pollock Paintings Included in the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery January/February 1964 Catalogue," Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner Papers, circa 1914–84, box 1, file 54, Archive of American Art. Accessed 17 Nov. 2013, http://www.aaa.si.edu/assets/images/collectionsonline/pollock/fullsize/AAA_jpoljack_78
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 "Interview with Brydon Smith by Kitty Scott, 3 November 2002," box 22, file 3 Brydon Smith interviewed by Kitty Scott (2001–2002), Brydon Smith fonds, NGC Library and Archives.
- 8 Stephen E. Weil to Brydon Smith, 30 June 1967, Curatorial File for *No. 29, 1950*, National Gallery of Canada. Weil left in the course of these negotiations to pursue a distinguished career at the Whitney, Hirshhorn, and Smithsonian Institution's Center for Museum Studies.
- 9 Interview with the author on 9 Jan. 2014.

- 10 Boggs counted Colonel Sydney Oland's willingness to go along with the majority as a positive vote, although he wrote that he was "not intrigued by abstract expressionist painting." She expressed no surprise at trustee Frank Panabaker's negative vote and comment that he had "never seen anything in Pollock's squiggly doodlings." See Sidney Oland to Jean Boggs, 10 July 1967, and Frank Panabaker to Jean Boggs, 14 July 1967, Curatorial File for No. 29, 1950, National Gallery of Canada. The trustees voting in favour were Jean Raymond (Chair), I.C. Pollock, Dorothy Dyde, Mrs. Hugh MacKay, and John MacAulay. Mrs. Otto Koerner cast the blank ballot, perhaps inadvertently.
- 11 Jean Boggs to the Hon. Judy LaMarsh, 10 Oct. 1967, Curatorial File for No. 29, 1950, National Gallery of Canada.
- 12 Francis O'CONNOR, ed., *Jackson Pollock: Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works, Volume 4* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 110.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ellen G. LANDAU, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 197.
- 15 National Gallery of Canada Press Release, 19 June 1968, Curatorial File for No. 29, 1950, National Gallery of Canada.
- 16 Gail DEXTER, "Brydon Got His Jackson Pollock," *Toronto Star*, 6 July 1968, in Brydon Smith clippings file, NGC Library and Archives.
- 17 See: "Accessions of American and Canadian Museums," *Art Quarterly* 32:2 (Summer 1969): 234; *Art Journal* 27:1 (Fall 1968): 102; Brydon SMITH, "Recent Acquisitions: The National Gallery — from the United States," *artscanada* xxv:4 (October-November 1968): 47; François MEYER, "Entretien avec Brydon SMITH," *Vie des Arts* xiv:58 (Spring 1970): 58; "Jackson Pollock's 'No 29,'" *The Burlington Magazine* lxxvii (July 1969): 451, 453. The foregoing may be found in the Curatorial File for No. 29, 1950.
- 18 "Price List for Jackson Pollock Paintings Included in the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery January/February 1964 Catalogue," with annotations dated and signed 3 Mar. 1967, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner Papers, circa 1914–84, box 1, file 54, Archive of American Art. Accessed 17 Nov. 2013, http://www.aaa.si.edu/assets/images/collectionsonline/pollock/fullsize/AAA_jpoljack_78.
- 19 Steven NAIFEH and Gregory WHITE SMITH, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (Aiken, SC: Woodward/White, 1989), 647–53.
- 20 T.J. CLARK, "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945–1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 229.
- 21 Barbara ROSE, ed., *Pollock Paintings* (New York: Agrinde Publications, ca. 1980), 78.
- 22 Hans Namuth to Brydon Smith, 28 Apr. 1968, Curatorial File for No. 29, 1950, National Gallery of Canada.
- 23 "Pollock's Studio: Interview with Lee Krasner by Barbara Rose," in ROSE, *Pollock Paintings*, 92.
- 24 Brydon Smith to Lee Krasner, 8 May 1969, General Correspondence, box 2, file 26, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner Papers, circa 1914–84, box 1, file 54, Archive of American Art. Accessed 17 Nov. 2013, http://www.aaa.si.edu/assets/images/collectionsonline/pollock/fullsize/AAA_jpoljack_78.
- 25 Curatorial File for No. 29, 1950, National Gallery of Canada. The work is on shatterproof, Herculite glass used in car windshields. It may not be as fragile as it appears. According to Namuth, the glass cost \$10. See Pepe KARMEI, "Pollock at

- Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth,” in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Harry Abrams, 1999), 112.
- 26 A Pepe Karmel essay does illustrate both sides of the work, though the focus is on Namuth. See KARMEL, “Pollock at Work,” 113, 274.
 - 27 “National Gallery of Canada Acquires Canada’s First Pollock,” 19 June 1968, NGC Press Release, Curatorial File for No. 29, 1950, National Gallery of Canada.
 - 28 Jean Sutherland BOGGS, *The National Gallery of Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971), 130.
 - 29 Jürgen HARTEN, *Siqueiros/Pollock: Pollock/Siqueiros* (Dusseldorf: Kunsthalle, 1995), 53.
 - 30 “Lecture Notes,” undated, box 10, file 9 Jackson Pollock – Lectures, Brydon Smith fonds, NGC Library and Archives. All citations in this paragraph are from this source.
 - 31 HARTEN, *Siqueiros/Pollock: Pollock/Siqueiros*, 53. Harten’s citation refers to a lecture by Smith to the University Art Association of Canada in Halifax, 4–6 Mar. 1971. The notes for this specific lecture have not been located in the Brydon Smith fonds.
 - 32 B.H. FREIDMAN, “An Interview with Lee Krasner Pollock,” in *Jackson Pollock: Black and White* (New York: Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, 1969), 7. Cited in Brydon SMITH, “Jackson Pollock: Abstracting Over the Figure,” *National Gallery of Canada Review* 111 (2002): 29. Subsequent quotes in this paragraph are from the same Smith article.
 - 33 “Interview with William Wright,” reproduced in ROSE, *Pollock Paintings*, Annex 10, 112, and in O’CONNOR, *Catalogue Raisonné*, Vol. IV, 251. The interview was never broadcast and may not have been known to the NGC at the time of the acquisition. Krasner claims that Pollock had considered installing No. 29, 1950 into their porch structure. See: ROSE, *ibid.*, 84.
 - 34 Robert STORR, “A Man of Parts,” in *Tony Smith, Architect, Painter, Sculptor* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Harry Abrams, 1998), 16–17, 45–47.
 - 35 Pollock had shown curiosity about Matisse’s project. See Robert STORR, “A Piece of the Action,” in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, 30 and 64.
 - 36 E.A. CARMEAN, “The Church Project: Pollock’s Passion Themes,” *Art in America* 70:6 (Summer 1982): 114.
 - 37 NAIFEH and WHITE SMITH, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, 681. The Catholic representatives included *inter alia* Father Ford of Columbia University and Rosalind Constable of *Time/Life*.
 - 38 STORR, “A Man of Parts,” 17.
 - 39 NAIFEH and WHITE SMITH, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, 681.
 - 40 See CARMEAN, “The Church Project,” 110–22, and Rosalind KRAUSS’s reply “Contra Carmean: The Abstract Pollock,” *Art in America* 70:6 (Summer 1982): 123–31.
 - 41 Ron MARTIN, “Layout of the Red and the American Room,” Curatorial File for No. 29, 1950, National Gallery of Canada.
 - 42 ROSE, *Pollock Painting*, 83. The current frame appears to be of the NGC’s own manufacture, although no written record has been found.

Le Musée des beaux-arts du Canada acquiert un Jackson Pollock : étude d'un cas d'agence curatoriale

IAN FERGUSON

L'article documente le rôle décisif, proactif joué par Brydon E. Smith, premier conservateur de l'art contemporain du Musée des beaux arts du Canada (MBAC), dans l'acquisition du tableau de Jackson Pollock *No. 29, 1950*. Cette recherche montre comment l'autorité et l'autonomie curatoriales peuvent définir l'esthétique et la cohérence d'une collection publique.

En 1967, le MBAC, sous l'impulsion de sa nouvelle directrice, Jean Sutherland Boggs, renversait une politique de longue date et ouvrait sa collection à l'art américain. Cette même année, Boggs donnait à Smith le mandat de mettre sur pied cette nouvelle politique. L'acquisition de *No. 29, 1950* en 1968 marquait l'expansion de la collection permanente du MBAC vers un mouvement de l'art américain d'après-guerre connu sous le nom d'expressionnisme abstrait. Ce point tournant dans l'histoire de l'institution signalait les liens croissants de la culture canadienne avec les importants développements de la culture nord-américaine.

Le processus d'acquisition a été retracé à travers les dossiers de la galerie Marlborough-Gerson de New York trouvés dans les documents de la Fondation Pollock-Krasner, les procès-verbaux du conseil d'administration du MBAC et le dossier de l'œuvre. Cette documentation sur le processus global a permis de comparer les recommandations du conservateur avec d'autres œuvres de Pollock (1912–1956) disponibles et les points de vue des administrateurs. Vu le montant en jeu, l'acquisition devait être approuvée par le Parlement. Boggs a entériné les recommandations de Smith et obtenu les autorisations requises pour l'achat. Il lui incombait d'évaluer le montant que les administrateurs et le ministre étaient disposés à approuver.

Les raisons du choix de Smith et de Boggs en faveur de cette singulière œuvre sur verre sont énoncées, y compris sa provenance, la bibliographie et l'intérêt critique. Le documentaire réalisé par Hans Namuth sur la création de l'œuvre et le nombre impressionnant d'expositions auraient pu être des facteurs supplémentaires convaincants aux yeux des décideurs. Les collages et la possibilité de voir l'œuvre des deux côtés sont d'autres caractéristiques qui ont retenu l'attention de Smith. Il n'a pas été rebuté par le support de verre inhabituel qui, à son avis, ajoutait au caractère particulier de l'œuvre.

L'achèvement simultané de *No. 29, 1950* et du film réalisé par Namuth pendant sa création, le 25 novembre 1950, devaient marquer la fin des deux

années de la période la plus productive (et la plus sobre) de Pollock, et l'abandon de ses expériences en abstraction pure. Le rapport subséquent de *No. 29, 1950* avec un projet de chapelle raté, au début des années 1950, auquel avait participé l'ami de Pollock, l'artiste-architecte Tony Smith (1912–1980), est étudié. Selon les plans de Tony Smith, les œuvres sur verre de Pollock devaient servir de fenêtres de claire-voie. Le projet de chapelle illustre l'intérêt de Pollock pour le potentiel architectural de la peinture sur verre et prolonge l'histoire de ce travail expérimental.

Vu la fragilité présumée de l'œuvre, le MBAC ne l'a jamais prêtée, même lorsque les demandes venaient des plus grands musées du monde. Cela a pu avoir pour effet de restreindre le nombre de critiques à l'extérieur du Canada. S'ils ne voient pas l'œuvre originale, les historiens de l'art risquent de négliger les collages et les importantes différences, apparentes lorsqu'elle est vue de l'un ou l'autre côté.

Smith a écrit au sujet de *No. 29, 1950*, d'abord quand il était à l'université puis après avoir pris sa retraite, ce qui confirme un intérêt soutenu pour l'œuvre. Il a souligné que les objets incrustés, trouvés dans l'atelier et la cour arrière de l'artiste, évoquaient l'environnement physique autour de la création de l'œuvre. Smith affirmait que Pollock aimait bien cette peinture et qu'il l'apportait parfois à l'extérieur pour voir les différents aspects du ciel et des nuages à travers le verre. Il en a déduit que Pollock était aussi à l'aise avec l'abstrait qu'avec le figuratif, bien que les critiques de l'époque aient essayé d'établir une séparation irréconciliable entre ces deux pratiques. À aucun moment, cependant, Smith n'a situé l'œuvre de manière théorique ni relié Pollock à un plus large contexte historique ou culturel. En général, Smith s'abstenait d'étiqueter les artistes, évitant de suggérer des concepts théoriques qui pourraient limiter des interprétations plus ouvertes ou qui ne faisaient pas partie du plan original de l'artiste.

Dans les années qui suivirent, Smith allait s'intéresser aux œuvres d'artistes américains maintenant associés au minimalisme (Donald Judd, Dan Flavin et Carl Andre) avant de revenir, vers la fin de sa carrière, à l'expressionnisme abstrait. Après 1988 et le déménagement du MBAC dans un nouvel immeuble, il s'est assuré que *No. 29, 1950* reçoive un cadre architectural adéquat pour son installation permanente. L'œuvre y fut exposée avec les dernières acquisitions spectaculaires de Smith, *Voice of Fire* de Barnett Newman (1905–1970) et *No. 16 (1957)* de Mark Rothko (1903–1970).

L'acquisition de l'œuvre de Pollock apparaît comme audacieuse, ponctuelle, à un moment rare, peut-être unique, où les œuvres de Pollock de cette qualité et de cette époque étaient à la portée du MBAC. Au fil du temps, *No. 29, 1950* est devenu le fondement de la petite mais remarquable collection d'expressionnistes abstraits du MBAC. Smith a eu le mérite d'avoir su saisir le moment.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette