

JANET SOBEL

PRIMITIVE MODERN AND THE ORIGINS OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

By Sandra Zalman

When the critic Clement Greenberg set about compiling the collection of his writings that would be published as *Art and Culture* (1961), it is well known that he made several strategic edits. Among these revisions were a few additional lines about an amateur artist named Janet Sobel (1894–1968) in “American Type Painting,” Greenberg’s major essay on the New York School. Originally published in 1955, when the essay appeared again in 1961, the enhanced paragraph read:

Back in 1944, however, he [Jackson Pollock] had noticed one or two curious paintings shown at Peggy Guggenheim’s by a “primitive” painter, Janet Sobel (who was, and still is, a housewife living in Brooklyn). Pollock (and I myself) admired these pictures rather furtively: they showed schematic little drawings of faces almost lost in a dense tracery of thin black lines lying over and under a mottled field of predominantly warm and translucent color. The effect—and it was the first really “all-over” one that I had ever seen, since Tobey’s show came months later—was strangely pleasing. Later on, Pollock admitted that these pictures had made an impression on him.¹

As an authority on avant-garde painting, Greenberg’s admiration of Sobel’s work was notable in itself. But even more so, by positioning Sobel as a forerunner of Abstract Expressionism in general and of Pollock in particular, Greenberg was actively rewriting the recent history of American art.

For another artist, Greenberg’s appraisal might have launched a career. Yet Greenberg made sure to assert Pollock’s status as legitimate author by qualifying Sobel through labels like “primitive” and “housewife.”² Moreover, in his very next sentence, Greenberg mitigates Sobel’s significance, writing that Pollock “anticipated his own ‘all-overness’ in a mural he did for Peggy Guggenheim at the beginning of 1944.... Moreover when, at the end of 1946, he began working consistently with skeins and blotches of enamel paint, the very first results he got had a boldness and breadth unparalleled by anything seen in Sobel or Tobey.”³ Even as he selects Sobel as Pollock’s predecessor, Greenberg asserts that Pollock had already surpassed her. For the few scholars who have mentioned Sobel’s role in Abstract Expressionism’s history,

Greenberg’s comment is taken at face value as a (qualified) recognition of Sobel’s accomplishment.⁴ Gail Levin does probe this issue in the only academic article (prior to this one) devoted to Sobel; the present essay expands on her important work.⁵ The rationale behind Greenberg’s revised lineage becomes even stranger when we consider that Sobel’s career has only retroactively been linked to Pollock, Greenberg, or the developing ideals of Abstract Expressionism. In the three years that she was active in the New York gallery system, Greenberg never acknowledged her work. So it is curious that more than a decade after her brief artistic career, Greenberg invoked Sobel as he set about framing his definitive assessment of Pollock and the New York School.

Despite strong critical reception of her art at prestigious New York galleries, Sobel’s work did not fit easily into any of the categories of the burgeoning 1940s New York art world, or alternately, it slid into too many of those categories. Sobel was part folk artist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist, but critics found it easiest to call her a “primitive.” Greenberg’s endorsement functions ambivalently—it lends credence to Sobel’s aesthetic accomplishments, but safely sequesters her work. Still, as a “primitive,” Sobel not only participated in the art world but, for a brief moment, flourished. Her work, and its reception, are important for the ways they complicate the terrain of the primitive, a category that enabled her acceptance by the art world but restricted her artistic development. Sobel’s status is even more problematic when we consider how she has been historicized, ultimately at arm’s length from both the European and American avant-gardes. In this article, I argue that Sobel’s primitivism is emblematic of both the opportunities and limitations of the American art world at mid-century, as critics, curators, and artists grappled with the influences of modern European art as they attempted to establish a uniquely American modernism.

Sobel’s embrace by the American art world was made possible by modern artists’ interest in the “primitive,” a term that could refer to non-Western work or self-taught artists. While contemporary scholars have problematized the term for its stereotypical designations of the “other,” referring both to the term’s racial and gendered associations, the use of the word primitive to refer to self-taught artists has received less critical attention.⁶ In the U.S., many early supporters of modern art were also interested in self-taught artists. Sidney Janis, the collector and later dealer, was a fervent advocate for

“naïve” artists, and his influence at the Museum of Modern Art lent institutional support to his endeavors. Janis was appointed to MoMA’s advisory committee in 1934, based mainly on the strength of a collection that included his recent purchase of Henri Rousseau’s *The Dream* (1910).⁷ After his purchase of the Rousseau, Janis was obsessed with uncovering untrained talent. According to a 1960 *New Yorker* profile, “Janis was soon clocking thirty-five thousand miles a year in his quest for primitive artists. ‘Having picked up the scent of talent, he was like a terrier at a badger hole,’ Alfred Barr says.”⁸

In 1938, Alfred Barr, the founding director of MoMA, credited Rousseau with giving credence to the category of folk art in the large exhibition “Masters of Popular Painting,” which showcased untrained artists from Europe and the United States.⁹ The following year, MoMA’s Advisory Committee (likely at Janis’s urging) organized “Contemporary Unknown American Painters,” including eight paintings owned by Janis in the show. As an extension of that exhibition, Janis published *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century*.¹⁰ In the foreword to Janis’s book, Barr acknowledged that, while the broad historical category of the “primitive” stretched back centuries, serious attention to self-taught artists was a modern phenomenon.¹¹

But the framework of the primitive was double-edged at best. Many critics were quite taken with it because it implied an unimpeachable originality through ignorance of academic traditions. As American artists were struggling to find an identity independent of European practices during and just after World War II, untrained artists offered a model for self-reliance. Still, there were hierarchies. Despite having given untrained artists major museum exhibitions, Barr seemed wary of evaluating the self-taught alongside trained artists: “Perhaps it is imprudent to try to evaluate the importance of the self-taught artists in comparison with other schools or kinds of living artists. Some of the painters in this book seem to me so obviously superior to others that I wish Mr. Janis had not been quite so generously inclusive.”¹² The limits of primitive painting also concerned Greenberg, and his 1942 article on the subject in *Art and Culture*, reveals his disdain:

As a rule, “primitive” painters strive for realism... and it is by its bungled realism that their work most unmistakably declares itself to be “primitive.” ... one would expect them to learn the tricks of realistic drawing and shading sooner or later. That most of them never do seems, under the circumstances, more attributable to mental than to social or cultural handicaps....¹³



Fig. 1. Janet Sobel, *Untitled (JSP188)* (1945), oil on masonite, 18" x 14". © Estate of Janet Sobel. Courtesy Gary Snyder Fine Art.

This attitude embodies the resentment that self-taught artists could be subject to. Indeed, Barr’s support of untrained artists at MoMA was a factor in his dismissal from the directorship at the museum. When Janis convinced Barr to host an exhibition of the primitive painter Morris Hirshfield in 1943, the show was so ill-received that Barr was removed from his position soon after.¹⁴

It is no coincidence that it was Janis who first put Sobel’s work on public display in the 1943 group show “American Primitive Painting of Four Centuries,” which he organized at the Arts Club of Chicago.¹⁵ Janis showed Sobel’s *Summer Festival* (1943) alongside two Hirshfields and two paintings by “Mother” Moses, among others. When Sobel had her first “one-man show”¹⁶ at Puma Gallery in 1944, the reviews were quite positive. Henry McBride, critic for the *New York Sun*, wrote: “Mrs. Sobel’s colors are unfailingly good, her imagination absolutely unrestricted, and her compositions hang together into well-knit and decorative units on the wall. Of all the so-called primitives to come to light recently, she is the gayest.”¹⁷ Emily Genauer’s review also distinguished Sobel



Fig. 2. Janet Sobel, *Three Vases* (1943), enamel on canvas, 24" x 36". © Estate of Janet Sobel. Courtesy Gary Snyder Fine Art.

from other self-taught artists: "Mrs. Sobel is a middle aged woman who only recently took up her brushes. The results are rather extraordinary. This is not conventional primitivism in any sense of the word."¹⁸ Reviewing a group show that included Sobel's work at the Norlyst Gallery later that year, Genauer repeated her assessment of the "newly discovered 'primitive' Janet Sobel, a housewife in Brooklyn who really does have a delightful decorative flair for pattern and color. Very few of the other things need occupy you long."¹⁹ Critic Carlyle Burrows mentioned that "there is a touch of sophisticated 'white writing' here, but one is inclined to believe from the evidence at hand that the artist has never had a lesson in her life, nor been influenced in any conspicuous way. That is what makes her the painter she is!"²⁰ Even though Burrows found elements in Sobel's paintings that were in dialogue with the "white writing" of a professional artist like Mark Tobey, he retreated from the comparison. Sobel's work was seen positively, but it was always through the mediating lens of the primitive.

It was true that Sobel's work fit into the category of primitive as it was conceived in the 1940s. She rarely relinquished representation, a hallmark of self-taught painters. In her figurative works, we can see the complexity of Sobel's motifs. If modernism is located in the urban experience, Sobel's figures appear to be from a mythic era—in some

works, like *Untitled (JSP188)* (1945; Pl. 9 and Fig. 1), they hover like specters over an abstract ground; in others the figure becomes the landscape or is consumed by it, as in *Burning Bush* (1944; Pl. 10), seen at the Puma show. Yet many works, especially in the Puma show, also demonstrate Sobel's attachment to more conventional ideas of figure and landscape. *Three Vases* (1943; Fig. 2) shows two or possibly three women whose bodies are composed of tightly tangled lines that are legible as patterned clothing. One woman's face is seen in both frontal and profile views, that, when coupled with the warm sepia tones of the painting, recalls Cubist experimentation in shorthand. The third form remains ambiguous—another woman or simply a vase? Primitivism was a convenient category because it could absorb Sobel's attachment to the figure while putting her in conversation with modernism. Yet it did not offer full acknowledgment of Sobel's affinities with avant-garde movements like Surrealism or the emerging New York School.

Sobel started painting in 1937, a year that began with MoMA's massive "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism" exhibition organized by Barr. The exhibition showcased 700 objects covering five centuries, including sections of commercial art, children's art, work by self-taught artists, and, controversially, drawings by the mentally ill. Barr's massive exhibition demonstrated how the Surrealists' interests

dovetailed with the premise of the primitive as intuitive, free of technique, and staunchly anti-rational. Sobel later told an interviewer that she was not able to get to museums much, given her responsibilities as a wife and mother, but she did have access to catalogues and books.²¹ One of her ink drawings fills the copyright page of MoMA's 1941 Salvador Dali exhibition catalogue (Fig. 3).

When the Surrealist artists immigrated to New York as refugees during World War II, they were welcomed by Janis and other collectors. Janis recalled a conversation with Max Ernst around this time, in which Ernst asserted, "'You know that this [*They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters*] is the best American art.' He was probably right because up to 1942 the [American] avant-gardists had not done anything."²² The Surrealists admired intuitive ways of creating images unencumbered by academic strictures. As Janis described it, "We had the artists over very frequently, you know, for cocktails and for dinner. [André] Breton was very much interested in the work that I was doing with the auto-didacts."²³ The Surrealists in exile recognized Sobel's talents (called to their attention by Sobel's son, Sol, who had written to Max Ernst, as well as by Janis).²⁴ Breton and Ernst visited with Sobel, who hosted them for dinners in her home. In turn, Ernst introduced Sobel's work to his wife, Peggy Guggenheim, who later included Sobel in a juried group show and gave her a solo show in 1946 at her Art of This Century gallery. Sobel's unaffected approach to image-making, which led her to both figuration and abstraction, fit well with the Surrealists' interest in psychological exploration and spontaneous working methods that need not conform to a particular style.

But Surrealism's stylistic diversity—in particular its figurative dimension—was also problematic in the 1940s New York art world, where abstraction and figuration were increasingly set against each other by influential critics like Greenberg, as he and others strove to characterize the new American art.²⁵ Peggy Guggenheim had blithely played along with these divisions when she and Frederick Kiesler designed the Art of This Century gallery to include separate rooms for abstract and Surrealist art, even though she famously declared her neutrality in the division by wearing mismatching earrings at the opening of her gallery in 1942. One earring, designed by Yves Tanguy, represented her interest in Surrealism and figuration; the other, by Alexander Calder, demonstrated her affinity for the new avant-garde's abstraction.

Like Guggenheim, Janis also participated in articulating the contemporary art scene in New York as comprising coexisting Surrealist and abstract tendencies. In 1944, he published *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, one of the first books to attempt to characterize the new American avant-garde. (An exhibition with the same title was shown in San Francisco, Cincinnati, Denver, Seattle, Santa Barbara, and New York.) Janis included a color plate of Sobel's painting *Music* (1944; Fig. 4) in the Surrealist section, alongside works by William Baziotis, Joseph Cornell, Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, Adolf Gottlieb, Arshile Gorky, and Jackson Pollock. This section of Janis's book attested to the diversity of the new American avant-garde, for also included in this capacious category were



Fig. 3. Janet Sobel, drawing on Dali catalogue (JSP-094) (1941), pen and ink on paper, 10" x 7 1/2". © Estate of Janet Sobel. Courtesy Gary Snyder Fine Art.

Morris Hirshfield, O. Louis Guglielmi, and Walter Quirt. For Janis, Surrealism was a framework that offered American artists a place to experiment with style and could readily absorb the art of the self-taught.

Even as he tried to abide by his categories, Janis's selections made it clear that the divisions between abstraction and Surrealism were porous. As reported in *Art Digest*, "Identities are becoming lost...I would be surprised if many an artist in the show wasn't bewildered to find himself catalogued as he is."²⁶ Greenberg panned *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, calling it a "compost of exalted prattle...and irresponsible pronouncement..."²⁷ Yet, Janis's book was unique in bringing together American and European artists as well as attempting to articulate trends in contemporary art. Greenberg later recanted his initial opinion, acknowledging Janis's book as "one of the very first books that so much as noticed the 'movement' which...a few painters in New York were beginning to constitute."²⁸ Even if Janis's categories were permeable, the inclusion of so many of the painters who would later constitute the New York School demonstrated his knowledge of the state of contemporary art in the U.S.

When Sobel received a solo show at Art of this Century in 1946, Janis, who wrote the catalogue's foreword, asserted,

"Mrs. Sobel's work is no longer primitive and has taken another direction.... Today her paintings are filled with unconscious surrealist phantasy."²⁹ Critics seemed to agree, and Sobel's show garnered several reviews that specifically commented on Sobel's advancement beyond the primitive. *Art News* contrasted Sobel's primitive work with her "highly sophisticated abstractions."³⁰ And the local paper, the *Brooklyn Eagle*, balanced these competing categories in its headline declaring, "Critics Acclaim Boro Grandmother as Top Flight Surrealist Painter,"³¹ referencing Sobel's age and gender alongside her status as a member of the avant-garde. The *New Yorker* gallery listings summed things up succinctly "Paintings by Janet Sobel, a primitive gone modern."³²

As critics increasingly treated Sobel's works seriously, they also began to question her initial primitiveness. Edward Alden Jewell wrote in the *New York Times*: "Janet Sobel...began as a 'primitive' and is now an abstractionist. Whether her primitivism was ever genuinely such or from the start sophisticatedly 'pseudo,' may be debated."³³ Jewell's unwillingness to accept development in Sobel's practice demonstrates just how constraining the category of primitive really was. A month earlier, when Bill Leonard, host of the WCBS radio show "This is New York," had interviewed Sobel, he offered a reason for critics' attraction to self-taught painters: "Critics find the pictures refreshing because they're simple and uncomplicated and galleries vie with each other to show the work of these primitives, as they're called. It's as if everybody had suddenly reached the saturation point of sophistication... a point, I might add, that I don't find it hard to reach at all."³⁴ The implied unsophistication of untrained painters reflects the rejection of European artistic standards. Yet Leonard concludes that Sobel's works are hardly primitive: "By no stretch of the term could her paintings be called primitives. They're about as primitive as a B-29."³⁵ Leonard allows that "Mrs. Sobel isn't the least bit confused. 'I'm a surrealist,'" she says. "I paint what I feel within me."³⁶ But Sobel's own convictions about the ideas informing her art were not enough to gain her admission to the avant-garde.

Sobel's 1947 move to Plainfield, New Jersey, distanced her physically from the art world, and her allergy to paints limited her production in that medium, though she continued to produce work.³⁷ In 1948, Janis opened his own gallery, but it seems he did not show Sobel's work.³⁸ Instead he quickly became known as a successful dealer of Abstract Expressionism, giving Pollock several solo shows in the years before his death. It was also at Janis's gallery that the young art historian William Rubin first met Pollock, and it was Janis who facilitated the use of his collection to provide the funds for MoMA's purchase of Pollock's *One: Number 31, 1950* (1950).

Janet Sobel's entrance into art history came with the publication of Greenberg's edited compilation *Art and Culture*. In 1966, Rubin decided to follow up on Greenberg's proposal that Sobel had influenced Pollock. Rubin was in the process of planning a major MoMA exhibition entitled "Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage," which positioned Pollock as a lynchpin between European anti-modernism (Dada and Surrealism) and the triumphal American avant-garde. In some ways,



Fig. 4. Janet Sobel, *Music* (1944). © Estate of Janet Sobel. Reprinted from Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, 1944.

Rubin was walking in the footsteps of Janis, who had been the first to frame the burgeoning New York School as a tension between abstraction and Surrealism. On the other hand, like Greenberg, Rubin was interested in Sobel at least in part because her status as a primitive made her a more compelling muse for Pollock than what Greenberg and Rubin saw as the alternative—that fellow Abstract Expressionist Mark Tobey had influenced Pollock's all-over painting.

When Rubin wrote to Peggy Guggenheim, trying to track down Sobel's paintings from the 1940s, he summarized Greenberg's account without questioning it:

... All other efforts I have made to track her [Sobel] down have been fruitless. Her connection with Pollock is as follows: in 1943-44 she did a series of abstract pictures with 'all-over' patterns vaguely resembling superimposed marble veining. Clem Greenberg and Pollock saw these pictures—which anticipated Pollock's own all-over patterning to some extent—at Art of This Century in 1944. According to Clem, Pollock was very impressed by them. (Pollock did not see until much later—after he went into his own all-over style—comparable patterning in Tobey's white writing pictures although these were also shown in New York at Marion Willard in 1944).³⁹

Though there were several factual errors (including the location of Sobel's 1944 show), Rubin elaborated on Greenberg's proposed line of influence in the third installment of his major series of articles on Pollock, "Jackson Pollock and the Modernist Tradition," published in *Artforum* in 1967.

Part of Rubin's goal was to fortify and flesh out Greenberg's claims that Pollock was deeply influenced by Cubism (more so than Surrealism). After anointing Greenberg the "pioneer critic of the New American Painting,"⁴⁰ Rubin eventually turns to "all-overness" and Mark Tobey, whose work, Rubin re-affirms, Pollock did not see at the Willard Gallery in 1944.⁴¹ In making his case against Tobey's influence on Pollock, Rubin—as Greenberg had before him—diverts attention to Sobel, proclaiming, "Mrs. Sobel had gone beyond her conventionally 'primitive' images to a highly abstract and decidedly all-over kind of painting."⁴² Rubin recalled the furtive admiration Greenberg and Pollock shared for Sobel's work, illustrating Sobel's painting *Music* (1944), a high-contrast painting of energetic exploding lines, alongside Pollock's *Shimmering Substance* (1946). "*Music* is much closer to Pollock than is Tobey's painting," Rubin wrote, "in part because of the substantial corporeality of the pigment."⁴³ These paragraphs were the first to elaborate on Sobel's importance for Abstract Expressionism.

While Rubin allows that "Mrs. Sobel" has exceeded her primitivism, like Greenberg he too used Sobel to deflect attention from Tobey (whose work had been the focus of Greenberg's original paragraph in 1955). Greenberg had selected Sobel from obscurity in 1958—the year of his revision of "American-Type Painting"—and it seems more than coincidence that that year Tobey was especially prominent. In 1958, Tobey won the top prize at the Venice Biennale, becoming the first American painter since Whistler to receive the honor. As Jeffrey Weschler has noted, when William Seitz organized Tobey's solo show at MoMA in 1962, Seitz included a two-page footnote documenting the shift in Greenberg's critical appraisal of Tobey between 1944, when Greenberg perceived Tobey's white writing as "one of the few original contributions to contemporary American painting," and 1947, when Greenberg thought Tobey's work "turned out to be so narrow as to cease even being interesting."⁴⁴ It may not be coincidence that 1947 marked the beginning of Pollock's drip period and thus, his move toward Tobey's style.

Scholars have stressed how important ideas of originality were for the burgeoning New York School in the 1940s. Indeed, many artists and critics felt that it was only by rejecting European models that American art could come into its own in the postwar art world. But influence by other New York School painters may have been just as threatening. Being influenced by Sobel wouldn't count against Pollock in the same way, because Sobel could be fitted into the same critical space as the Native American sand painters who also influenced Pollock. Primitivism promised originality but it was simultaneously a condoned site for appropriation by the avant-garde. Sobel surely did influence Pollock, but in retroactively attributing influence to Sobel, Greenberg likely recognized that the untrained, unknown Sobel was less



Fig. 5. Janet Sobel and John Dewey (c. 1946). © Estate of Janet Sobel. Courtesy Gary Snyder Fine Art.

threatening—and made a more compelling narrative—than ascribing influence to fellow Abstract Expressionist Tobey.⁴⁵

Indeed, Sobel and Tobey have quite a bit in common. While several recent authors have taken Greenberg's comment about Tobey at face value,⁴⁶ art historian Judith Kays's research has revealed Greenberg's recollection to be flawed, if not entirely false.⁴⁷ Tobey showed before Sobel in 1944, and despite Greenberg's denial of it, Pollock almost definitely saw that show at the Willard Gallery. Moreover, Tobey exhibited in two group shows with Pollock, including Janis's "Abstract and Surrealist Art in America," in which they were both classified—along with Sobel—as Surrealist painters. In his 1990 exhibition, "Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions," curator Jeffrey Weschler was the first to critically investigate Sobel's relationship to American modernism. Weschler makes the case for a broader understanding of Abstract Expressionism, especially in terms of one of its signature characteristics—its large scale. Weschler points out the discrepancy between Tobey's strong exhibition record in New York and his dismissal as a West Coast mystic.⁴⁸ The fact that both Sobel and Tobey consistently painted small was another form of discrimination—stylistic, but with its own gendered associations.

Though Greenberg stated that Pollock had first seen Sobel's work in 1944 at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, in actuality, the first time Sobel was shown at Art of This Century was in the all-female group exhibition, "The Women," which ran from June 12 through July 7, 1945.⁴⁹ Sobel's work received unmitigated praise from *Art Digest*: "Janet Sobel is responsible for one of the most joyous chromatic expressions seen this season."⁵⁰ The *New York Times* critic and the *New York Herald Tribune* writer both distinguished Sobel's work from the other female artists on view.⁵¹ According to Guggenheim, the idea for the show came from Duchamp, and the thirty-one painters were selected by an all-male jury consisting of Duchamp, Breton, Max Ernst, James Johnson Sweeney, James Thrall Soby, Howard Putzel



Fig. 6. Janet Sobel at work (c. 1946). © Estate of Janet Sobel. Courtesy Gary Snyder Fine Art.

and Jimmy Ernst.⁵² In a letter the previous year, Guggenheim called Sobel “the best woman painter by far in America.”⁵³

In some ways, Sobel and Tobey were both part of marginalized communities. Tobey was gay and lived on the West Coast. Sobel was female, a mother and grandmother, and Jewish. Many of the New York School artists shared this religious background with her—including Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Adolf Gottlieb, and Lee Krasner. But Sobel’s Jewishness was foregrounded in critical accounts of her work. Bill Leonard’s interview is telling, for it combines both gender and cultural biases: “The grandmother in Mrs. Sobel is just as strong as the artist. When John Dewey, world famous American philosopher, called on her in Brighton Beach, he came to admire and talk about her paintings. But he stayed to consume her gefilte fish”⁵⁴ (1946: Fig. 5). Critic Maude Riley emphasized Sobel’s domestic life, believing that Sobel’s paintings “made at home in Brighton with the kids all around [were] the most charming.”⁵⁵ Riley was distinguishing her from her male colleagues whose children, if they had any, were largely irrelevant to their professional practice.

A photograph of Sobel at work (c. 1946; Fig. 6), taken for a

magazine story that never appeared, attests to the gendered lens through which Sobel was seen. Lying on her stomach, Sobel casually holds a paintbrush in one hand. She props her head with her other hand, and the pose is reminiscent of a child lounging in a bedroom, underscored by the rumpled blanket beneath her. Her horizontality is extended through to the flatness of the painting lying on the floor. It could not be more different from Hans Namuth’s famous image of Jackson Pollock at work—flinging paint, attacking the canvas, confidently acting in its arena (Fig. 7). In contrast, Sobel’s practice is domestic and her painting attire—skirt, stockings and heels—seems appropriate.

Yet at one point Sobel’s reach seemed like it would stretch beyond her Brighton Beach living room. In Ad Reinhardt’s 1946 illustration of “How to Look at Modern Art in America” (Fig. 8), Sobel has a designated leaf next to Tobey’s. Tobey’s leaf nearly grazes Pollock’s (misspelled as Pollack), which sprouts from an adjacent branch. All three are positioned on the healthy side of the tree, unencumbered by the weight of “Subject Matter” and other evils that Reinhardt asserts bear too heavily on American artists. However, there were other



Fig. 7. Hans Namuth, Jackson Pollock (1950), gelatin silver print on paper, 14 3/4" x 13 3/4". © Hans Namuth Estate. Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution / Art Resource, NY.

factors besides subject matter that limited Sobel's success. As painter Hedda Sterne said of her appearance as the only woman in *Life* magazine's iconic photograph of "the Irascibles," "In terms of career, it's probably the worst thing that happened to me." She continued, "They all were very furious that I was in it because they all were sufficiently macho to think that the presence of a woman took away from the seriousness of it all. Do you understand?"⁵⁶ Painter Lee Krasner also recalled sexism in the art world in a 1979 interview: "When I see those big labels, 'American,' I know someone is selling something. I get very uncomfortable with any kind of chauvinism—male, French or American."⁵⁷ Krasner implies that, with the ascension of American modernism as a marketable movement, female painters were increasingly left by the wayside.

Sobel's place in the history of art was bounded by the very limitations that enabled her moment of success. In the 1940s, her work was assessed on its merits, but as a woman, and as a primitive, she occupied a circumscribed space where she was at once in dialogue with the avant-garde but could not become part of it. Her inclusion in accounts of Pollock's development marshals her aesthetic innovations in order to advance the career of a more well-known male artist. Thanks to Rubin, Sobel was able to enjoy some credit for her aesthetic accomplishments before her death in 1968. Though her paintings were located too late to be included in "Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage," Rubin arranged for one of Sobel's all-over drip paintings *Milky Way* (1945; Pl. 11) to enter MoMA's collection (donated by the family); he acquired another for himself as a future bequest (Pl. 12).⁵⁸ Looking at

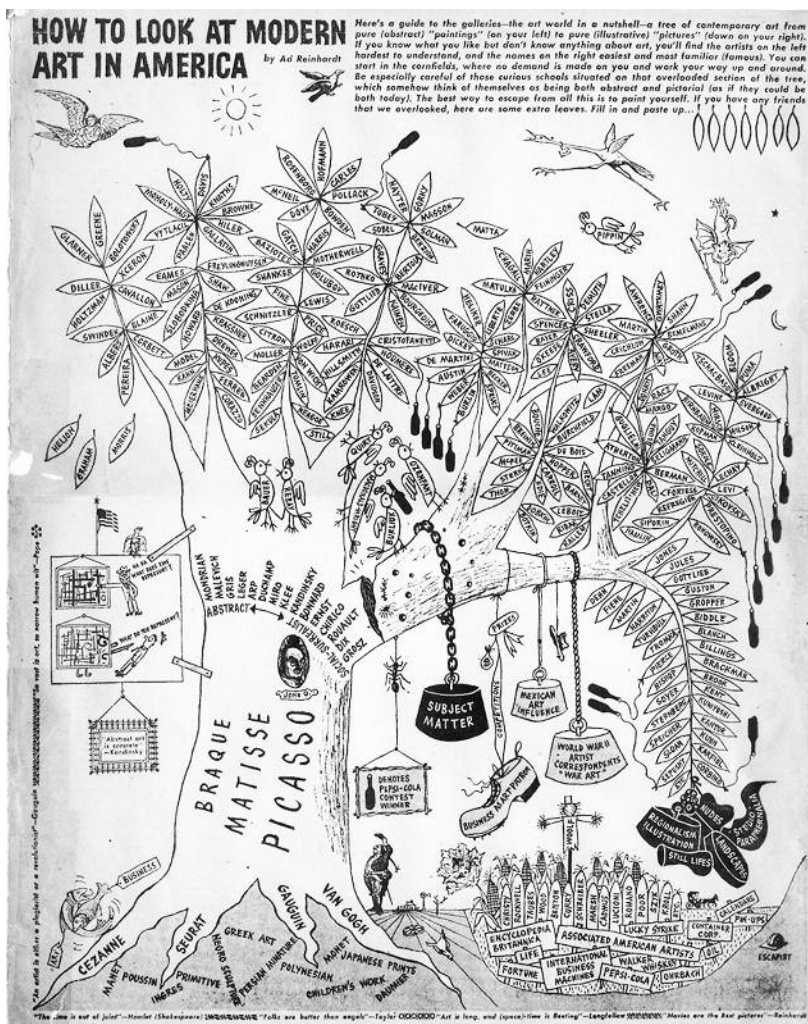


Fig. 8. Ad Reinhardt, "How to Look at Modern Art in America," *PM Magazine* (June 6, 1946).

Milky Way, it is easy to see why Rubin wanted the painting for MoMA. A delicate tracery of blown and flicked skeins of cream, pink and yellow paint circulate across a surface of smudgier blues, purples and greens that, in light of the title, recall the night sky. Sobel balances intricate surface incident with spontaneity to imply a universal expanse.

When Sobel's paintings were displayed in MoMA's 1970 exhibition "Recent Acquisitions of Painting and Sculpture," a press release identified Sobel's *Milky Way* as being part of Sobel's "one-man show at Art of this Century, the gallery run by Peggy Guggenheim where Jackson Pollock had his first one-man show in 1943."⁵⁹ According to the *New Yorker*, "For years, a drip painting by Sobel hung kitty-corner from Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* [sic] at MoMA."⁶⁰ Linked retrospectively to Pollock, Janet Sobel, and her supporting role in art history, is an example of the contradictions of Americans' search for a home-grown modernism. As artists, critics, collectors, and curators forged the ideals of a new avant-garde, there was no longer room in that catchall category of the primitive for a Jewish grandmother from Brooklyn, even if—especially if—that primitive had become modern. ●

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Notes

1. Clement Greenberg, "American-Type Painting," *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 218.
2. Anna Chave makes this important point as a side note at the end of her powerful article on the gendered dynamics between Pollock and Krasner, though she does so without questioning the accuracy of Greenberg's motives (or the accuracy of his statement). See Anna Chave, "Pollock and Krasner: Script and Postscript," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* (Autumn 1993): 110.
3. Clement Greenberg, "American-Type Painting," 218.
4. In addition to Chave, mentioned above, see also Jeffrey Wechsler, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1989) and Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1997).
5. See Gail Levin, "Janet Sobel: Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist," *Woman's Art Journal*, v. 26, n. 1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 8–14. Levin also provides a useful historiography of art historical interest in Sobel's work, as well as key biographical details, including much of the biographical information included here.
6. In Robert Goldwater's classic book on primitivism in modern art, originally published in 1938, Goldwater attempts to account for Picasso's simultaneous interest in African sculpture and Henri Rousseau. Goldwater argues that the term 'primitive' is used for both non-Western work as well as untrained Western painters to signify the supposed psychological connection they shared. See Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986, orig. publ. 1938), 157.
7. Alfred Barr, the founding director of MoMA, particularly admired the Rousseau for MoMA's collection. William Rubin, *A Curator's Quest: Building the Collection of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, 1967-1988* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2011), 43. It was sold to Nelson Rockefeller for the purposes of donation to MoMA in 1954 (John Brooks, "Why Fight it? [Profile of Sidney Janis]," *The New Yorker*, Nov. 12, 1960, 75).
8. Brooks, "Why Fight it? [Profile of Sidney Janis]," 76.
9. In the introduction to the American section of the exhibition catalogue, Holger Cahill described the importance of popular primitive art in parallel to the interest in ethnic primitive art, both of which were framed as a redemptive antidote to a hyper-rationalized modernism. Holger Cahill, quoted in MoMA's press release for "Masters of Popular Painting," April 27, 1938.
10. Sidney Janis, *They Taught Themselves* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, reissue 1965, orig. publ. 1942), n.p.
11. Alfred Barr, "Foreword," in Sidney Janis, *They Taught Themselves*, n.p.
12. Ibid.
13. Clement Greenberg, "'Primitive' Painting," *Art and Culture*, 131.
14. A confluence of factors contributed to Barr's demotion in 1943, among them, the Hirshfield show, and other exhibitions that the trustees felt were not in keeping with the standards of the museum.
15. Sobel Gallery talk in Gary Snyder documents. Janis had made the first sale of Sobel's work in 1942, writing her a letter of congratulations along with the check (Sidney Janis, letter to Janet Sobel, Oct. 26, 1942, Gary Snyder archives).
16. "Goings on About Town," *The New Yorker*, April 29, 1944, 6.
17. Henry McBride, [review of Puma Gallery Show], *New York Sun*, (n.d.) 1944 (clipping in Gary Snyder archives).
18. Emily Genauer, *New York World Telegram*, April 29, 1944.
19. Emily Genauer, "Gasparo Has a Surprise or Two," *New York World-Telegram*, Sept. 23, 1944.
20. Carlyle Burrows, "Art of the Week: Janet Sobel," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 21, 1944.
21. Emily Cheney, "Only Human," *Daily Mirror*, May 10, 1944. Sobel is quoted as saying: "No, I never went to museums much. I didn't have time and...I didn't understand these things. But I always read books..."
22. Sidney Janis, interview with Paul Cummings, Tape 2: April 11, 1972, Archives of American Art.
23. Ibid.
24. Levin, "Janet Sobel: Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist," 10-11.
25. In 1944, Greenberg unequivocally stated that the most ambitious and effective art was abstract (Clement Greenberg, "Abstract Art," *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* v. 1, ed. John O'Brian [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1986], 204, orig. in *The Nation*, April 15, 1944). And when it came time to historicize the New York School, William Seitz introduced his 1955 dissertation—the first written on modern art in the U.S.—by positing the new American avant-garde as one that overcame its figurative tendencies.
26. M.R., "Whither Goes Abstract and Surrealist Art?" *Art Digest* (Dec. 1, 1944), 8.
27. Greenberg, quoted in Brooks, "Why Fight it? [Profile of Sidney Janis]," 80.
28. Clement Greenberg, quoted in *ibid.*, 100. The essay was written on the occasion of the Hetzel Union Gallery of Pennsylvania State University's show "An Exhibition in Tribute to Sidney Janis," (Feb. 1958), but apparently arrived too late to be included in the show's catalogue.
29. Sidney Janis, *Paintings by Janet Sobel*, exh. cat., Art of This Century, Jan. 1946.
30. "Janet Sobel," *Art News* 44 (Jan. 1946), 22.
31. *Brooklyn Eagle*, Nov. 10, 1946
32. "Goings on About Town," *New Yorker*, Jan. 12, 1946.
33. Edward Alden Jewell, *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 1946.
34. Bill Leonard, "This is New York," (Dec. 16, 1946), transcript from Gary Snyder archives.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Levin, "Janet Sobel: Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist," 13. Sobel did not receive another solo show in New York City until 2002 at Gary Snyder Fine Art Gallery (See Roberta Smith, "Art in Review: Janet Sobel," *New York Times* (Feb. 15, 2002).
38. Despite the earlier debacle of the Hirshfield show at MoMA, which he admitted was "one of the most hated shows the Museum of Modern Art had ever put on," Janis gave Hirshfield a retrospective at his gallery in 1965 (Janis, quoted in John Brooks, "Why Fight it? [Profile of Sidney Janis]," 78.)
39. William Rubin, letter to Peggy Guggenheim, Oct. 31, 1966, *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage*, exh. files, MoMA Archives.
40. William Rubin, "Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition, Part III," *Artforum* (April 1967), 18.
41. *Ibid.*, 27.
42. *Ibid.*, 29. By and large, when Rubin refers to Sobel, he calls her Mrs. Sobel.

43. Rubin, "Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition, Part III," 29. Rubin continued, "These painters render every element, every part of the canvas equivalent; and they likewise weave the work of art into a tight mesh whose principle of formal unity is contained and recapitulated in each thread..."
44. Greenberg (*The Nation*, April 22, 1944; *Horizon*, October 1947) quoted in Seitz, *Mark Tobey* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962), 86-87, also quoted in Weschler, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions*, 160. Seitz also noted that Tobey was still "more highly regarded abroad than he is at home." Seitz, *Mark Tobey*, 7. Seitz reports that New York's art magazines were not interested in Tobey's international honors, even though mainstream publications like *Life* and the *New York Times* ran feature stories. Quoted in Weschler, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions*, 161.
45. See Judith S. Kays, "Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey: Setting the Record Straight," in *Mark Tobey* (Madrid: Reina Sofia, 1997), 91-114.
46. See Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 277; Kirsten Hoving, "Jackson Pollock's 'Galaxy': Outer Space and Artist's Space in Pollock's Cosmic Paintings," *American Art* 16, n. 1 (Spring 2002), 91.
47. See Judith Kays, "Mark Tobey and Jackson Pollock: Setting the Record Straight," in *Mark Tobey*, 91-114. Irving Sandler said: "Clement Greenberg says Pollock never saw the work of Tobey before doing his drip paintings. I do not believe that. They both showed in group shows in New York. So unless Pollock didn't go to his own show..." (Irving Sandler, interview with Jeffrey Weschler, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions*, 77).
48. Geographical remove is not the only issue with Tobey's work; as Weschler points out, Clyfford Still's reputation did not suffer from his West Coast residencies (he only lived in New York during 1945-46). But Still painted big, and Tobey did not (Weschler, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions*, 86-87). Size was also cited as an issue by art historian Anna Chave, who noted the dismissive accounts of Sobel as a housewife, but acknowledged that "what separates Pollock's work definitively from Sobel's is the heroic scale his pictures sometimes assumed and the relatively free flow of his paint" (Anna Chave, "Pollock and Krasner: Script and Postscript," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*: 109). Weschler records the numbers as 146 out of 290 having the dimensions of about 36 by 36 inches or less (Weschler, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions*, 104). Only 66 paintings have a height or width over 72 inches.
49. Indeed it was her strong work in this show that seems to have convinced Guggenheim to grant her the solo show. In 1945, Sobel was also included in a group show at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia.
50. Ben Wolf, "Bless Them," *Art Digest* (July 1, 1945).
51. See Carlyle Burrows, "Art of the Week," *New York Herald Tribune*, and Edward Alden Jewell, "Chiefly Modern in Idiom," *New York Times*, both June 17, 1945.
52. Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of this Century: Confessions of an Art Addict*, 279. Jimmy Ernst apparently left in the middle of the selection process because he did not want to be responsible for rejecting his girlfriend's submission. Sobel's work was exhibited alongside Louise Bourgeois, Kay Sage, and Leonora Carrington.
53. Peggy Guggenheim to David Porter, Nov. 17, c. 1944, David Porter Papers, Archives of American Art, noted in Jasper Sharp, "Seeing the Future: The Exhibitions at Art of This Century 1942-1947," in *Peggy Guggenheim and Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century* (Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2004), 329.
54. Bill Leonard, "This is New York," (Dec. 16, 1946), transcript from Gary Snyder archives.
55. Margaret Breuning and Maude Riley, quoted in Sharp, "Seeing the Future: The Exhibitions at Art of This Century 1942-1947," 329.
56. Hedda Stern, Oral history interview with Hedda Sterne, December 17, 1981, Archives of American Art. Despite her long career as a painter, Stern was interviewed for the Archives of American Art's Mark Rothko and His Times oral history project. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-hedda-sterne-13262>
57. Lee Krasner, quoted in Gail Levin, *Lee Krasner: A Biography* (New York: William Morrow, 2011), 391. Levin also quotes Krasner from a 1981 interview: "I had absolutely no consciousness of being discriminated against until abstract expressionism came into blossom" (p. 69).
58. Walter Bareiss, letter to Sol Sobel, Nov. 6, 1968.
59. "Recent Acquisitions of Painting and Sculpture on View," July 31, 1970, MoMA Press Release. In 1970, Sobel's son Sol corresponded with Rubin at the time of the MoMA exhibition, reporting later that Rubin's suggestion that he try to secure a show for his mother's work had so far been fruitless, since Janis had not returned his calls. Sol Sobel, letter to William Rubin, Oct. 19, 1970, Gary Snyder Archives.
60. "Goings on About Town," *New Yorker*, March 4, 2002. MoMA does not own "Autumn Rhythm," but it is safe to assume the author is referring to one of Pollock's other large drip paintings that MoMA does own, *No. 1, 1948* or *One: Number 31, 1950*.

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