

**Pollock family, *American Letters: 1927-1947***

Polity, Cambridge, 2011. Hardcover, 252 pages. RRP \$25. ISBN: 978-0-7456-5155-2

This is a surprisingly boring book. Surprising, because as an artist and historian, my eager anticipation after reading the front flap was shattered by the sad reality of the actual contents. The thought of reading about the motivations, dreams, fears and concerns of Jackson Pollock held so much promise. The jacket announced that this was a 'vivid, lively and often moving correspondence' which would deliver a 'novel glimpse of Jackson Pollock the man', but instead, most pages are dreary and contain little of interest about Pollock. Only 4 or 5 pages actually stimulate the reader with their descriptions of Pollock's depression, details of artists staging protests over conditions for workers, and the thoughts of the Pollock brothers concerning the international struggle for labour. Otherwise the letters mainly consist of uninspiring details like the amount of snow the last month, the interruption caused by building renovations, or the high cost of living, and rarely spark much interest.

Indeed, of the 215 pages, the majority of letters are even not from, or to, or about Jackson. Instead, the majority of letters are written by his various relatives to each other, asking about 'Mother', detailing minor issues of accommodation and travel, or discussing financial and political concerns. While the cover does say 'Jackson Pollock and family', the extent of Jackson's material makes this an overstatement especially when viewed against the large font size for 'Jackson Pollock' and the much smaller font size for 'and family'. A more honest attribution would have been 'the Pollock family'.

There are just a few interesting sections in this book. One is the letter from LeRoy (Jackson's father) outlining the value of a good education. Another is a letter from Charles (Jackson's brother) discussing his own former depression, and encouraging Jackson to have a new view of life and move beyond his depressive state. He discusses his hopes for the future of America and the positive signs of youth protest, the opportunities in art, and the value of creativity as seen in the Mexicans. A recurrent theme is the status of poor workers, their union battles and strikes, and there are multiple references to these issues, for example one letter contains an estimate of the number of garment workers on strike in Los Angeles in 1933. The

related paragraphs showing the link to how ordinary Americans thus viewed the upcoming elections are instructive. This book may actually be of far more use to historians of the Great Depression than of art or Pollock. Some letters also demonstrate the frustrations of artists with the disunity of the Left, and the letters of one brother show his growing disillusionment with the United Automobile Workers.

The introduction by Michael Leja is essential reading if one is to gain much from this book. Leja explains the social context and elaborates on various themes in the letters. His section on art and politics in the 1930s is possibly the best part of the whole work and it provides an excellent framework for interpreting the letters. The letters give considerable insights into how artists viewed the depression and the job creation scheme that provided them some income. Known as 'the Project', the scheme employed two of the brothers who engaged in deception and lived with the fear of being discovered. But this is one of the few really emotionally engaging topics, and the repetition of a labored concern for Mother is just wearying. A smaller book that just focused on art and politics with selected excerpts from these letters would have been more valuable than this carte blanche approach.

Contrary to the promise on the cover, this is not a 'remarkable' book, nor was it 'enjoyed'. There is far too little of real interest buried among pages of the very ordinary. But then, personal letters are often by nature mundane, and a more honest book description would have served better. For certain researchers there is some valuable material to be mined, but this is certainly not an 'extraordinary book'.

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