



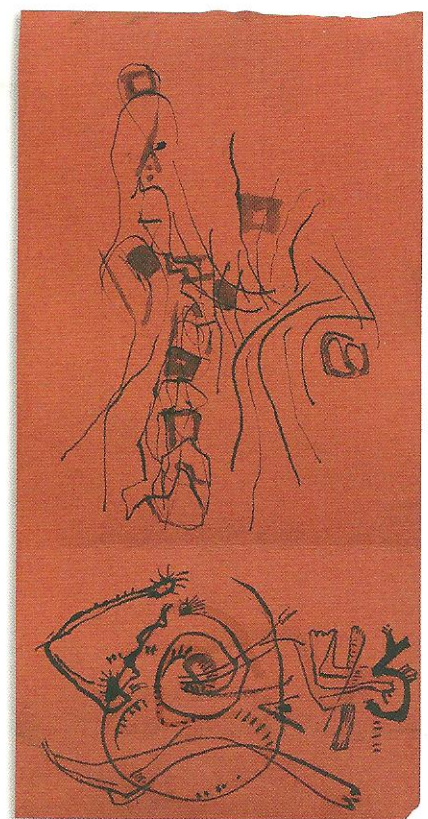
Left: raven mask, Nuxalk, Central Coast, British Columbia, c1860-80. Below: Pollock applies sand to canvas in his Long Island studio, December 1948. In a statement for *Possibilities* magazine, he once likened his drip technique to Native American sand painting, saying it put him 'literally... in the painting'

POLLOCK THE SHAMAN

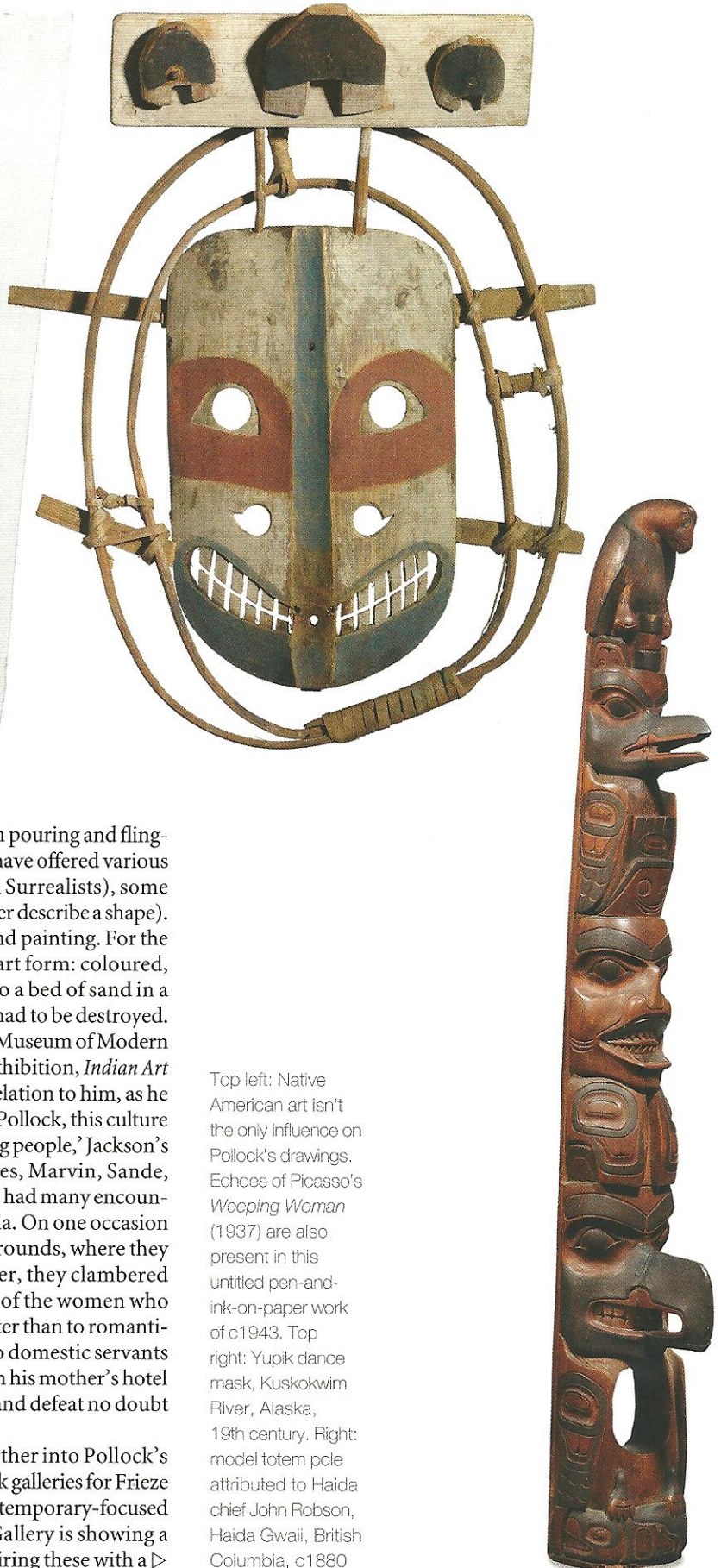
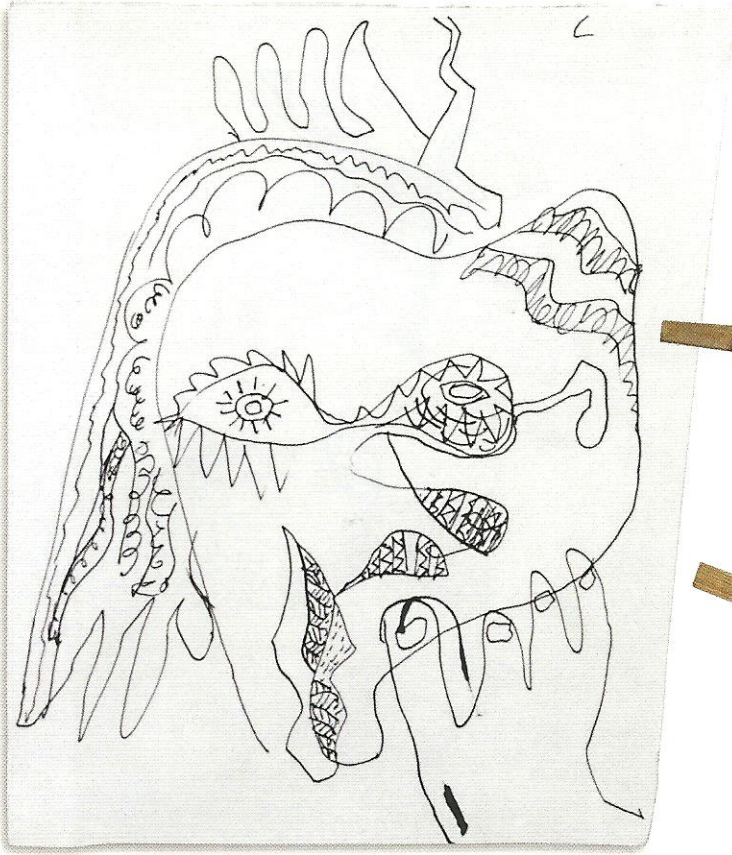
Were Jackson Pollock's drip paintings influenced by the sand art of the Navajo Indians? Certainly, the Abstract Expressionist had been fascinated by Native American tribes from an early age. And, as a new exhibition at Frieze Masters, London, suggests, when Jungian psychology got a grip on the painter's imagination, his practice evolved into a ritualistic search for archetypal symbols. Text: Morgan Falconer ▷



Below left: Navajo artists working on a sand painting during the exhibition *Indian Art of the United States* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Jan-April 1941. Below right: Jackson Pollock, *Untitled*, pen and ink wash on red paper, c1945



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: PRIVATE COLLECTION. COURTESY DONALD ELLIS GALLERY, NEW YORK; PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTHA HOLMES © TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY WASHBURN GALLERY, NEW YORK & THE POLLOCK-KRAVSKY FOUNDATION, INC.; MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ARCHIVES, NEW YORK. IN123.52 © 2013 DIGITAL IMAGE: MOMA, NEW YORK/SCALA, FLORENCE



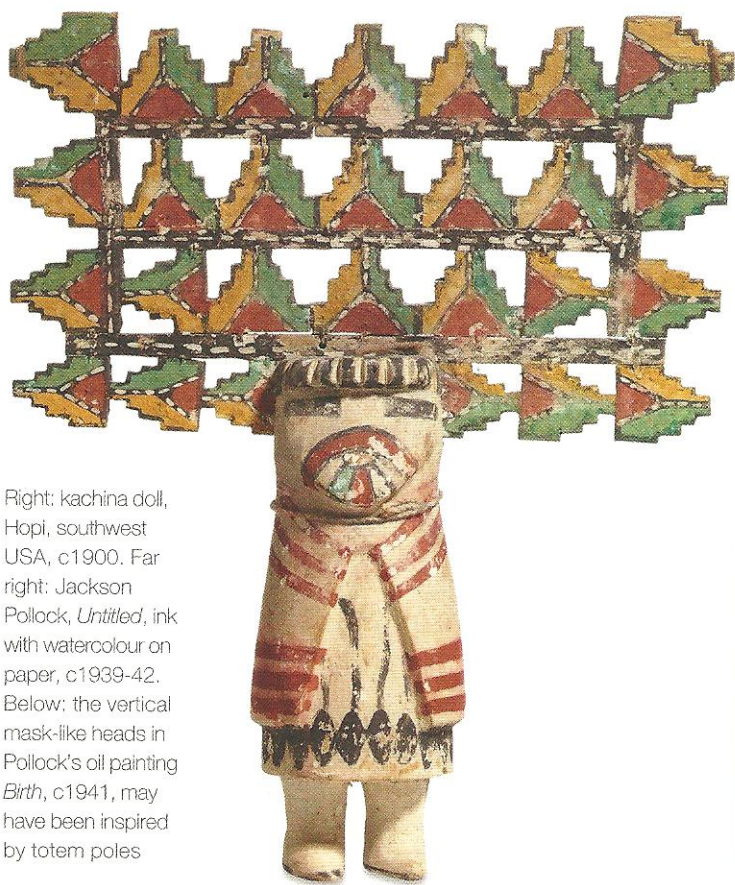
EXACTLY WHY in 1947 Jackson Pollock began pouring and flinging and dripping his paint is a mystery to this day. Critics have offered various explanations, some mundane (he pilfered the idea from Surrealists), some grandly theoretical (he longed to draw lines that would never describe a shape). But the most magical notion is that he was inspired by sand painting. For the Navajo Indians, the practice was as much a ritual as an art form: coloured, powdered rock and earth were spilt from the hands onto a bed of sand in a curing rite supervised by a medicine man. By sundown it had to be destroyed.

Pollock had seen demonstrations of the practice at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1941, where they formed part of an exhibition, *Indian Art of the United States*. The survey probably wasn't such a revelation to him, as he was already an aficionado of Native American art. But for Pollock, this culture was more than a scholarly diversion. 'They were a sparkling people,' Jackson's brother Frank had once said. The Pollock boys – Charles, Marvin, Sande, Frank and Jack, as he was known to them (the youngest) – had many encounters with them while growing up in Arizona and California. On one occasion they had followed a group of men up to ancient burial grounds, where they had watched them chanting in the pine trees; on another, they clambered around old cliff dwellings marked with the handprints of the women who likely built them some 600 years before. Pollock knew better than to romanticise the lives of the Indians – he had seen them reduced to domestic servants and farmhands, and Indian women served as waitresses in his mother's hotel – but the sight of this great people laid low by modernity and defeat no doubt only deepened his fascination.

This month affords the rare opportunity to delve further into Pollock's obsession, with a small display assembled by two New York galleries for Frieze Masters, the ancient-to-modern offshoot of the more contemporary-focused Frieze Art Fair in London's Regent's Park. Washburn Gallery is showing a series of Pollock's drawings from the early 1940s, and pairing these with a ▶

Top left: Native American art isn't the only influence on Pollock's drawings. Echoes of Picasso's *Weeping Woman* (1937) are also present in this untitled pen-and-ink-on-paper work of c1943. Top right: Yupik dance mask, Kuskokwim River, Alaska, 19th century. Right: model totem pole attributed to Haida chief John Robson, Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, c1880

POLLOCK THE SHAMAN



Right: kachina doll, Hopi, southwest USA, c1900. Far right: Jackson Pollock, *Untitled*, ink with watercolour on paper, c1939-42. Below: the vertical mask-like heads in Pollock's oil painting *Birth*, c1941, may have been inspired by totem poles



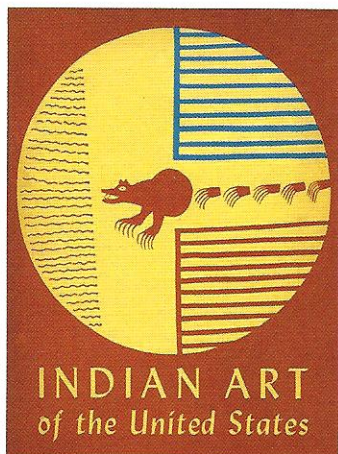
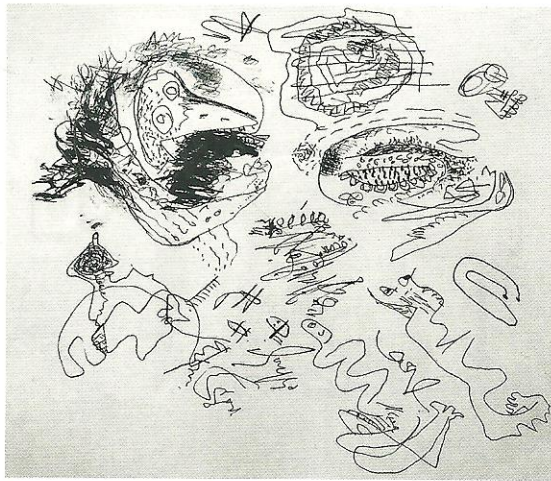
selection of Native American artefacts assembled by the Donald Ellis Gallery. They aren't claiming that the drawings were inspired by the specific artefacts on view, merely by that type of object, but the echoes between the old masks and the toothy faces in Pollock's ink sketches are clear enough despite the artist's abstractions and transformations.

What seems to have attracted Pollock's eye most are masks, and the exhibit contains examples created by Yupik tribes that were bought by a trader passing along the Kuskokwim River in Alaska in the early part of the last century. They represent spirits seen by medicine men, their contorted grimaces sometimes ambiguously suspended between laughter and terror, a spectrum of moods that fascinated the Eskimos. Also on view are kachina dolls, which, for the Pueblo Indians, represented a variety of spirits signifying different phenomena; and a totem pole whose beaked heads also find parallels in the drawings.

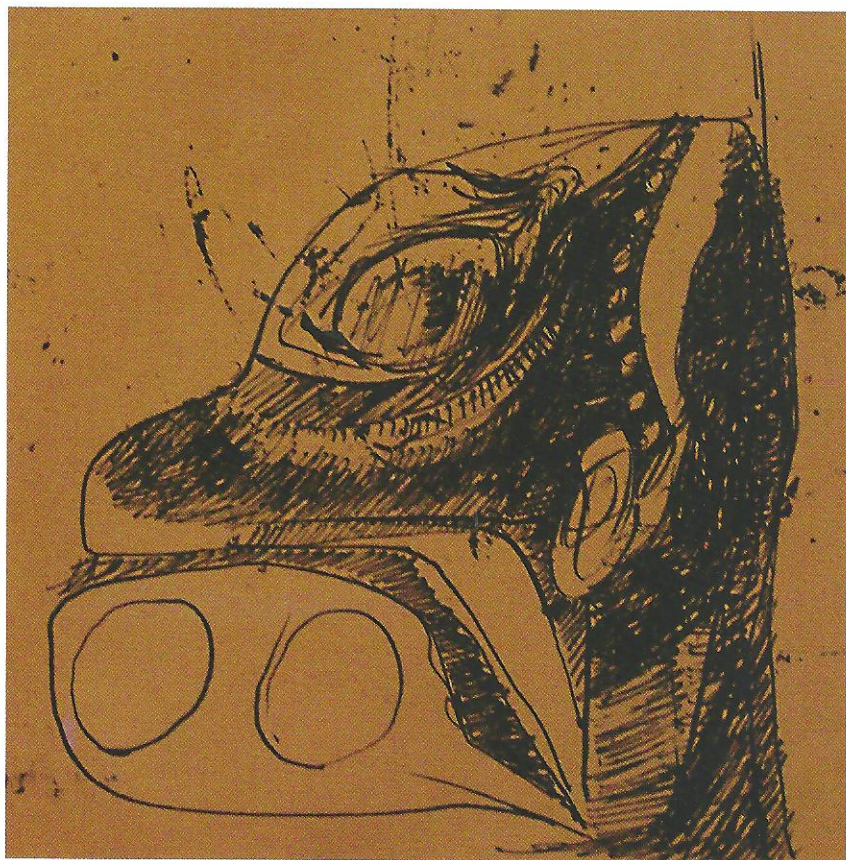
These works mostly show Pollock sorting through the possibilities those wild forms evoked in him. A few of the sketches might be aide-mémoires on particular exhibits, but most are substantially distorted by being filtered through the artist's interests in Surrealism and Cubism. We can trace clear parallels between them and many of his paintings. For example, *Birth*, from 1941, which is in the Tate's collection, contains three or maybe four contorted and tumbling mask-like faces. It is believed that the pictures may have been inspired by the dizzying circular dances of Eskimo shamans through which were 'birthed' new personalities who could communicate with the spirits.

Pollock was at times a prolific draughtsman, and he preserved a remarkable quantity of sketches, even the most cursory. They are very much working documents, having no ambition to be finished exhibition pieces. Yet for him, drawing was never a preliminary to painting: he produced no preparatory sketches. The two practices simply existed in parallel – until, that is, he began dripping his paint, at which point he discovered that he had found a way to make painting do the work of drawing, and he laid pen and ink aside. ▷

POLLOCK THE SHAMAN



From top right:
Jackson Pollock,
Untitled (detail), pen
and ink on paper,
c1943; Yupik dance
mask, Kuskokwim
River, Alaska, 19th
century; Jackson
Pollock, *Untitled*,
pen and ink on
paper, c1943; the
catalogue of the 1941
MoMA exhibition
that Pollock visited



The selection of drawings on show is particularly intriguing, since it derives from a fraught period in Pollock's life. After struggling for many years with alcoholism, in 1939 he had sought help from psychoanalysts. The ideas of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung were then highly popular among New York's therapists, and Jung had taught that artists had special access to the unconscious. They were 'symbol-makers' who could delve into what he believed was a 'collective unconscious', a shared race-memory patterned with archetypal emblems. It was subtly racist nonsense, but it was seductive. Inevitably, Pollock was pushed to create drawings to aid his treatment. Some time after the painter's death in 1956, one of his doctors sold the cache of drawings that was left with him and began pronouncing publically on the artist's mental state. Pollock's widow, Lee Krasner, filed suit, accusing him of breaching patient confidentiality. The case dragged on for some years but she eventually lost.

The drawings on view at Frieze Masters aren't directly associated with those so-called 'psychoanalytic drawings', but Jung's ideas undoubtedly deepened Pollock's fascination with Native American art, and the artist's own therapist soon came to believe that his attitude to his work had become 'shamanistic'. Today, looking back at those sketches, you sense that the artist is searching for something – repeatedly tweaking his motifs to find it. And as much as searching for that perfect form, he seems to have been searching for a memory that he believed he and every American carried within themselves. For Jung had taught that colonisers inherited aspects of the collective unconscious of the groups they displaced. So America, marvellously, could be said to have Indian memories. Pollock, the symbol-maker, could channel them. He could channel his childhood and, as he likely believed, he could channel the childhood of America ■ *Frieze Masters takes place in Regent's Park, London, 17-20 Oct. Visit friezemasters.com for information on tickets and opening times. Washburn Gallery, 20 West 57th Street, Eighth Floor, New York, NY 10019 (001 212 397 6780; washburngallery.com). Donald Ellis Gallery, by appointment in New York (001 212 581 3090; donaldellisgallery.com)*