

Men of Fire: José Clemente Orozco and Jackson Pollock

HOOD
MUSEUM OF ART
www.hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu

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The Hood Museum of Art Explores José Clemente Orozco's Impact on Jackson Pollock's Early Work



This spring, the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, joins in a worldwide celebration of the centenary of Jackson Pollock's birth in 1912. In partnership with the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in East Hampton, New York, the museum presents *Men of Fire: José Clemente Orozco and Jackson Pollock*, an exhibition that explores the crucial importance of Orozco's murals for the American artist. The exhibition also marks the eightieth anniversary of Dartmouth's famous mural *The Epic of American Civilization*, which Orozco began painting for Baker Library's reserve reading room in 1932. *Men of Fire*

will be on view from April 7 through June 17, 2012, with an opening reception on Friday, April 13, at 5:00 PM. The exhibition will then travel to the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center and will be on view there from August 2 until October 27, 2012.

In the summer of 1936, twenty-four-year-old Jackson Pollock made the trip from New York City to Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, to see Orozco's recently completed mural cycle. The mural was a revelation to him, and, in the years following this trip, Pollock engaged with themes found in Orozco's masterpiece, including myth, ritual, sacrifice, and the creative and destructive power of fire. *Men of Fire* assembles the paintings, drawings, and prints that Pollock created following his momentous trip to Dartmouth. Most were made between 1938 and 1941, at a time when Pollock's engagement with Orozco's art was at its most pronounced. The exhibition provides a unique opportunity not only to see many of these works together for the first time but also to compare them with the Orozco mural that inspired them, just a short walk across the Dartmouth Green. The mural will be represented in the exhibition by several rarely seen preparatory studies—drawings in pencil, charcoal, and gouache—that will present the work of these two great modern artists side-by-side. "When most people think of Jackson Pollock, they think of his large-scale abstract 'drip' paintings of the late 1940s," said Hood Museum of Art director Michael Taylor. "*Men of Fire* will, for the first time, focus attention on this lesser-known, transformative period in Pollock's career, a time when he immersed himself in the work of José Clemente Orozco. It is clear that the experience of seeing Orozco's mural at Dartmouth had an enormous impact on Pollock's subsequent work."

"*Men of Fire* is the culmination of our year-long Pollock centenary celebrations," remarked Helen A. Harrison, director of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center. "Our only Pollock painting, known as *Composition with Red Arc and Horses*, strongly reflects Orozco's influence. The exhibition examines that relationship, which was crucial to Pollock's development. By pairing Pollock's art with Orozco's, *Men of Fire* enhances the understanding of both artists' contributions to twentieth-century art of the Americas."

Pollock's painting *Untitled (Bald Woman with Skeleton)*, about 1938–41 (see image), is perhaps the best example of Pollock's fascination with the Dartmouth mural and displays many

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of the elements of Orozco's work that most appealed to him. The painting depicts a skeletal figure with an ambiguous, hybrid anatomy lying across a white, stage-like ledge, as a female figure crouches above. The skeletal figure allowed Pollock to reinvent the sacrificial ritual scenes that are abundant in the Dartmouth mural, particularly the skeleton giving birth to dead knowledge in the section known as "Gods of the Modern World." Other Pollock works from this period, such as the Tate Gallery's magnificent *Naked Man with Knife*, about 1938–40, which returns to the United States for the first time to be part of this exhibition, also depict violent scenes of ritual sacrifice likely inspired by Orozco's Dartmouth mural panels. Orozco's imagery, divorced from any social or political meaning, arguably enabled Pollock to develop a vocabulary with which to express his experience of psychic trauma in visual terms.

The title of the exhibition and catalogue references Orozco's famous fresco *Man of Fire*, painted for the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara from 1937 to 1939. The theme of fire—a powerful instrument of destruction and creation, and a symbol of renewal and rebirth—was frequently used by both Pollock and Orozco. Many of Pollock's works from this period were derived from an understanding of the symbolic use of flame that he drew, in some part, from his study of Orozco's murals. Pollock's *The Flame*, painted about 1934–38, for example, shows a white skeletal figure engulfed in vibrant orange, yellow, and red licks of fire, recalling in turn the fiery background of "Gods of the Modern World." Flames and fire, either referenced in some abstracted form through color or brushstroke, or more directly stated in the subject matter of the work, exist in many of the works assembled in this much-anticipated exhibition. Ultimately, both Orozco and Pollock, as Promethean artists, turned a critical eye to the traumas of the modern world to conjure imagery that would endure as a marker of a period of global economic depression and war.

Men of Fire is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, which includes scholarly essays by art historians and curators, including Mary K. Coffey, Sharon Lorenzo, Lisa Mintz Messinger, and Stephan Polcari.

The exhibition and catalogue were organized by the Hood Museum of Art in partnership with the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center. The catalogue was supported by Judith and Richard Steinberg, Class of 1954, and the exhibition at the Hood was made possible by Jan Seidler Ramirez, Class of 1973, Kate and Yaz Krehbiel, Class of 1991, Thayer 1992, and the William B. Jaffe and Evelyn A. Hall Fund. *Men of Fire* also presents the museum with the opportunity to inaugurate new lighting for the Orozco mural in Baker Library, devised by lighting designer Anita Jorgenson and generously funded by the Manton Foundation, which will give future generations of Dartmouth students and campus visitors the chance to experience the mural under state-of-the-art conditions.

About the Hood Museum of Art

The Hood Museum of Art is dedicated to teaching and promoting visual literacy for all of its visitors. This dynamic educational and cultural facility houses one of the oldest and largest college collections in the country, with more than 65,000 objects acquired since 1772. Among its most important works are six Assyrian stone reliefs that date from around 900 BCE. The

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collection also presents art from other ancient cultures, the Americas, Europe, Africa, Papua New Guinea, and many more regions of the world. The Hood seeks to inspire and educate through direct engagement with works of art and offers access to the rich diversity of its collections through ongoing highlights displays, special exhibitions, an online collections database, and a wide array of programs and events.

Additional images available upon request.

Image caption:

Jackson Pollock, *Untitled (Bald Woman with Skeleton)*, about 1938–41, oil on smooth side of Masonite attached to stretcher. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College: Purchased through the Miriam and Sidney Stoneman Acquisitions Fund; 2006.93. © 2012 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York