

## Overlooked No More: Janet Sobel, Whose Art Influenced Jackson Pollock

With no formal art training, working in her Brooklyn apartment, she took up the drip style of painting that Pollock later made famous.

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Janet Sobel in about 1944. Painting on her stomach on the floor of her Brooklyn apartment

When Janet Sobel created one of the most recognizable artistic styles, drip painting, on scraps of paper, boxes and the backs of envelopes, she was 45 years old, had never taken a single art class and didn't even have her own supplies.

Rather than use a brush, she threw paint onto a surface or used objects like glass pipettes to control the pigment as it fell. Sometimes she used a vacuum cleaner to move

the paint around. The result was an all-over composition not bound to conceptions of form and shape. Though art historians say her spontaneous manner of painting is characteristic of Abstract Expressionism, it is another artist known for drip painting who gained fame as a founder of the movement: Jackson Pollock.

“No one would dare to make drip paintings just like Pollock,” Gary Snyder, an art dealer and expert on Sobel, said by phone, “and the wild thing is, Sobel did it before him.” In part because of his use of drip painting, Pollock is recognized as one of the most important artists of the 20th century. Few people know that he was influenced by Sobel after seeing her work in an exhibit.

And yet, Snyder said, “Sobel is a footnote in Pollock’s story.”

Sobel was born Jennie Olechovsky on May 31, 1893, in Ekaterinoslav, about 300 miles south of Kiev, Ukraine. Her father, Baruch Olechovsky, was a farmer who was killed in a Russian pogrom against Jews when Jennie was young. Her mother, Fannie Kinchuk, was a midwife. Jennie was 14 when she emigrated to the United States with her mother and siblings, changing her name to Janet on arriving at Ellis Island and settling in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn.

Her granddaughter Ashley Shapiro said Janet had wanted to become an actress but never learned to read or write English. When she was 16 she married Max Sobel, who had also immigrated from Ukraine. The couple had five children. How exactly Sobel entered the art world is a bit of folklore. As one story goes, Sobel’s son Sol was an art student who in the late 1930s threatened to quit his studies at the Art Students League, a storied nonprofit school in Manhattan that counts Norman Rockwell, Georgia O’Keeffe and Mark Rothko among its alumni.

According to historians and family members, Sobel criticized one of Sol’s paintings, prompting him to throw down his brush and tell her to take up painting herself instead. By then she had already been experimenting with painting on any surface she could find — mail, cardboard from the dry cleaners, even her granddaughter’s childhood drawings. She used brushes as well as an array of materials like enamel paint and glass pipettes that she obtained from her husband, a manufacturer of costume jewelry.

She was “bursting with a flow of creativity that couldn’t be stopped,” her granddaughter said by phone.



“Milky Way,” 1945.  
Credit The Museum of Modern Art

Sol was impressed with what his mother created, despite her artistic inexperience. In a 2005 paper, “Janet Sobel: Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist,” Gail Levin, an art professor at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center, wrote that Sol sent letters introducing Sobel’s work to prominent artists and philosophers like Max Ernst, Marc Chagall, John Dewey and Sidney Janis.

Her work was well received. “Janet Sobel will probably eventually be known as one of the important surrealist artists in this country,” Janis wrote in 1946 in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.

The art collector Peggy Guggenheim included Sobel’s work in a 1945 group show called “The Women” at her Manhattan gallery Art of This Century. And in 1946 Guggenheim gave her a solo show at her gallery. In a letter, Guggenheim referred to Sobel as “the best woman painter.”

The Guggenheim shows brought Sobel even more attention. The art critic Clement Greenberg, as well as Pollock himself, viewed her work.

“Pollock (and I myself) admired these pictures rather furtively,” Greenberg wrote in his essay “American Type Painting” (1955), adding, “Later on, Pollock admitted that these pictures had made an impression on him.”



“Untitled,” c. 1946  
Credit The Museum of Modern Art

Sobel’s most distinguished painting, “Milky Way” (1945), which is displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was made a year before Jackson Pollock’s first drip painting, “Free Form,” which is also at MoMA.

But Sobel’s fame did not last long. The news media often referred to her as a grandmother and housewife first, then as an artist, said Sandra Zalman, an associate professor of modern and contemporary art at the University of Houston.

“Sobel did not fit into the categories that the art world conceived of her,” Zalman said in a phone interview. “She got attention for being an outsider, but then is quickly forgotten for being an outsider.”

Pollock, for instance, was the quintessential American artist. Dressed all in black, he would crouch or stand over a canvas while athletically flinging paint, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. Sobel, on the other hand, would lie on her stomach on the floor of her apartment in her high heels and stockings, passively watching the paint fall onto her canvas from the bristles of a brush.

“It is not easy to paint,” she told *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. “It is very strenuous. But it’s something you’ve got to do if you have the urge.”

Some art critics dismissed her creations as “untrained” or “primitive.” Sobel’s skills, Zalman said, were not a threat to Pollock; her influence was merely a placeholder for his fame.

Sobel later moved with her family to Plainfield, N.J., far from the glitzy New York art world she had influenced, further contributing to her swift disappearance from the public eye. There she maintained the household while her husband opened a new factory.

She died at 75 on Nov. 11, 1968.

“That notion of vanishing is so strange, because she entered the art world so powerfully,” Snyder, the art dealer, said.

He estimates that Sobel completed more than 1,000 works, many of which are owned by members of her family. Over the years her work has been shown in select galleries, but her name rarely comes up outside the scholarly art world.

“She deserves to be mentioned,” Zalman said. “That she could even play in this field with these men was a major accomplishment.”