

Jackson Pollock

Blue poles



Jackson Pollock *Blue poles* 1952, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra © Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Licensed by ARS/ Copyright Agency.



Introduction

Blue poles by Jackson Pollock is one of the most controversial paintings in the modern world. Created in 1952, to this day it provokes a broad range of responses, from defenders who proclaim it a great masterpiece to detractors who see it as a formless mass of dribbles.

When purchased by the Australian Government in 1973 newspaper headlines and articles reflected outrage — '\$1.3m for dribs and drabs' was one headline.¹ The controversy was still raging in 2016 when Senator James Paterson suggested selling *Blue poles*, whilst Finance Minister Mathias Cormann stated 'it is a national treasure'.²

What is it about this painting that is so challenging? *Blue poles* is imposing in scale: its almost two metres high and five metres wide. At first glance it may seem haphazard and the surface a chaotic mass of paint marks. Yet by spending time in contemplation, the work reveals itself to be far more nuanced. The energy is explosive, the paint marks free and seemingly random yet the longer you look, the more you discover Pollock's considered process and control.

Blue poles is a painting that rewards effort to analyse and understand. Perhaps it is this effort that invites us into the painting, to experience an exciting journey through the medium of paint and the action of painting. As renowned art historian Patrick McCaughey summed up 'never had such a picture moved and disturbed the Australian public' as *Blue poles*.³

Jackson Pollock *Blue poles*

Responding



Look Deeply and Discuss

1. Look closely at *Blue poles* for a few minutes in silence, then take turns describing what you have seen to a friend.
2. Pollock is described as an 'action painter'. Move your body as you imagine the artist did to create this painting. Reflect on what it would feel like to paint like Pollock.
3. Pollock used unusual tools to paint with: cans, sticks, hard dried paint brushes, rags and turkey basters. How would you create paint marks like those in *Blue poles*?
4. *Blue poles* has been described by Art historian Anthony White as '[order wrested out of disorder](#)'. Look at how the paint is distributed across the canvas. Is it random or ordered?
5. Which colours appear dense and which appear thin? Why did Pollock add the poles and what effect do they create?
6. Is there emotion in this work? Choose one emotion to describe what Pollock may have been feeling when he made this work. Explain your selection.



Jackson Pollock *Blue poles* (detail) 1952, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra © Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Licensed by ARS/Copyright Agency.



Dive Deeper

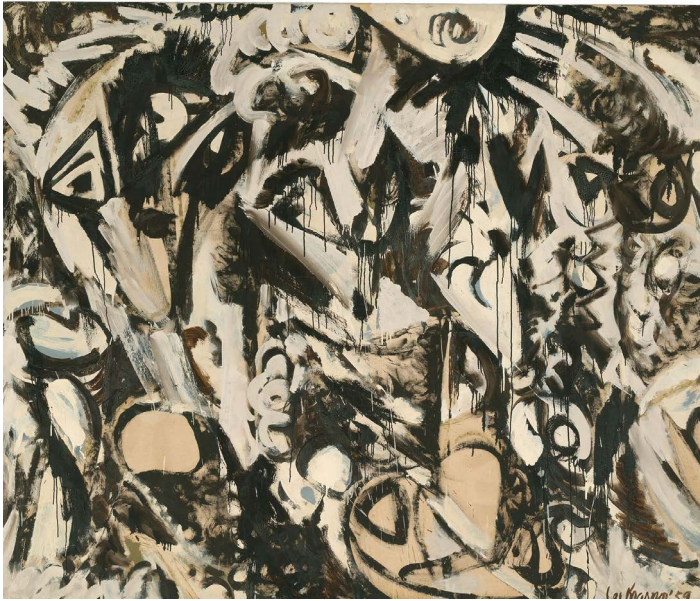
Explore the following links to read further about *Blue poles* and Jackson Pollock.

- A [blog article](#) about how *Blue poles* came to be in the National Gallery of Australia's collection
- Hans Namuth's [10-minute video](#) of Pollock painting and talking about his process

- [Jackson Pollock Action Painting video](#) including still photos showing his painting techniques
- A [discussion of Blue poles](#) and the genesis of the painting
- Step through [an analysis of Blue poles](#) in this article from The Conversation.

After reading, discuss why many disliked the painting at first and how you feel about the painting now. Give an honest response.

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Lee Krasner *Cool white* (detail) 1959 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1978 © Lee Krasner. ARS/Copyright Agency



Gordon Bennett *Panorama (with floating point of identification)* 1993 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1994 © The Estate of Gordon Bennett. John Citizen Arts Pty Ltd/ Copyright Agency

Make Connections

- View [drawings and paintings by Jackson Pollock](#) in the National Gallery of Australia collection. How did Pollock develop these images? What influence did Surrealism have on Pollock? How do the drawings and paintings from the late 1930s and 1940s differ from *Blue poles* which was painted in 1952?
- Look at Lee Krasner's [Cool white](#) 1959 and Mark Rothko's [1957 #20](#) 1957, both Abstract Expressionist paintings. Discuss the similarities and differences between *1957 #20*, *Cool white* and *Blue poles*, focusing on the energies and moods in the paintings. Describe the experience of the viewer.
- Study Gordon Bennett's [Panorama \(with floating point of identification\)](#) 1993. Gordon Bennett had Aboriginal Australian and Anglo-Celtic heritage. Why might Bennett have chosen to mimic the paint marks of the American artist Jackson Pollock's *Blue poles*? What symbols can you identify in Bennett's painting? What are the associated political or social meanings? See the similarities and differences with *Blue poles*.

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Jackson Pollock
Untitled 1939-42,
National Gallery of
Australia, Canberra
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Making



Automatic Drawing

Automatic drawing is an approach used by surrealist artists to stimulate their imaginations. This approach and the surrealists had a major influence on Pollock's painting technique.

You will need: A3 paper and coloured pastels, pencils or crayons.

1. Fold a piece of A3 paper down the middle vertically, then re-open.
2. Use masking tape to attach it to a wall, table, floor or easel.
3. Take two drawing tools- pencils, crayons or pastels, of the same colour and hold one in each hand. Position yourself so that

you face the centre of the paper. Close your eyes and draw with both hands at once, making gestures that feel natural to your body. You may find yourself using your arms freely making large circular movements or you may want to make urgent little slashing marks. Just go with your feelings.

4. Change colours a few times, always keeping the same colour in both hands.
5. Look at the result and think about what the drawing looks like and if it reminds you of anything. Reflect on the process you undertook and make notes about the experience in your visual diary.

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Jackson Pollock painting, Summer 1950. Photograph: Hans Namuth

All-Over Composition

Create an all-over composition that covers a page.

You will need: A3 paper and 3 colours of electrical, painters or paper tape (available at hardware stores).

1. Cut at least 15 pieces of each colour of tape in random lengths.
2. Stick down the pieces of tape on the paper. Feel free to criss-cross them.
3. Try to cover the paper with repetitive shapes.
4. Look at the result and think about the depth and space created.
5. Give your work of art a name.

Unconscious Collaborative Story

Work in a group to devise a narrative that will go in unexpected directions.

You will need: Paper and pens or pencils. You may if you draw like other materials such as watercolour paints or pastels.

1. Each person in the group should write a line of a story or descriptive phrase on a piece of paper.
2. Work together to play with the order of these phrases to create a series of stories.
3. Take turns reading out the different possible stories.
4. Discuss the value of spontaneity and unplanned accidents. How do they stimulate the imagination?
5. Go further by creating drawings based on the stories. You might each create a drawing based on a different story then cut and collage these together into one picture. Be playful and experimental, enjoying the unpredictability of the process.

References

1. Siobhan Heanue, 'Stroke of genius: the legacy of Blue Poles', 28 August 2012, ABC News, viewed 1 June 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-08-28/stroke-of-genius-the-legacy-of-blue-poles/4228672>
2. Sue Rabbit Roff, 'Blue poles 45 years on: asset or overvalued drip painting?', 11 September 2018, The Conversation, viewed 1 June 2020, <https://theconversation.com/blue-poles-45-years-on-asset-or-overvalued-drip-painting-102639>
3. Siobhan Heanue, 'Stroke of genius: the legacy of Blue Poles', 28 August 2012, ABC News, viewed 1 June 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-08-28/stroke-of-genius-the-legacy-of-blue-poles/4228672>