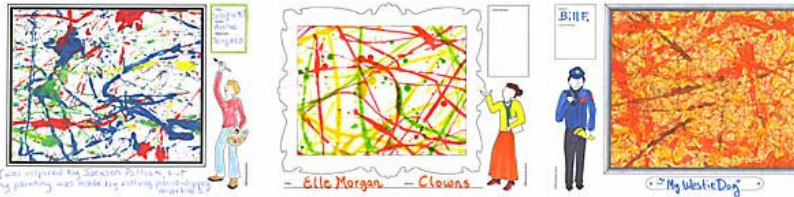




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Marble Action Paintings - a Jackson Pollock inspired lesson plan

Brief Description:

This lesson plan takes inspiration from Jackson Pollock - the artist *Time* magazine once called "Jack the Dripper". Students will be able to define the terms "abstract expressionism" and "action paintings" and differentiate these from other styles and approaches.

Keywords:

Jackson Pollock, abstract expressionism, action paintings.

Materials Needed:

white printer paper,
tempera paints in several bold colors,
marbles, salad bowls, and teaspoons,
cookie sheets, cafeteria trays, or box lids,
ArtHouse is highly recommended for display and class discussion!

Lesson Plan - Motivation:

Famous art critic Harold Rosenberg described "action painters" like Jackson Pollock as modern heroes who transform their canvases into arenas wherein epic struggles between man and material are fought. With grand gestures, action painters create art of confrontation and catharsis.

In this lesson, we teach a fun and easy way to make authentic and original abstract expressionist paintings on a small scale. The technique is appropriate for students age six and up. It's even fun for adults to make "marble action paintings"! One thing that makes art fun is that there are no "wrong answers". This is especially true for abstract expressionism.

Jackson Pollock explained **his** motivation (in a William Wright radio interview) as follows: "...today painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside of themselves. Most modern painters work from a different source. They work from within. The modern artist, it seems to me, is working and expressing an inner world."

Lesson Plan - Background and Historical Information:

Jackson Pollock was an American abstract expressionist painter who was famous for innovative "action paintings". Instead of careful brush strokes, Jackson Pollock dripped, poured, and splattered paint. As Pollock experimented and developed his distinctive techniques, his paintings became ever larger and more dramatic. He would unroll large canvases onto the floor of his studio and work on them from all sides. Occasionally he would have to step carefully onto the canvas, or lean out over it. (Sometimes he even left handprints in the paint!)

Jackson Pollock explained an important aspect of his technique:

"When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of get-acquainted period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well."

How did Jackson Pollock develop his unique and original style? Pollock had studied classical drawing and composition, and also American "regionalist" painting styles, but as he studied he found himself drawn to produce larger murals. In need of a steady paying job through the latter part of the Great Depression and the World War II years, he painted murals for the Works Progress Administration's "Federal Art Project". After eight years of painting murals, he quit to work full time in his own studio. Although he had experimented with dripping paint onto flat canvases as early as 1936, it wasn't until 1947 that this technique took precedence. Pollock described this technique as "direct" painting. He liked to compare it to American Indian "sand paintings", where colored or pigmented sand is methodically arranged on the floor in temporary ritual exhibitions.

Meeting, falling in love with, and marrying exceptional fellow artist Lee Krasner gave Jackson Pollock more stability and happiness. Her support led to his great success, including being discovered and championed by Peggy Guggenheim and her famous gallery "Art of This Century". Jackson Pollock became one of the most famous living painters in America when he was featured in *Life* magazine on August 8, 1949.

In 1951 Jackson Pollock's style shifted in emphasis. He stopped making totally non-representational images, and reintroduced figurative references to human and animal forms. He explained: "When you're working out of your unconscious, figures are bound to emerge." He continued trying new things, like temporarily giving up colors to create a series of striking black paintings on unprimed canvas. When he returned to painting in color, his gestures were richer and imagery was once again veiled elusively behind layers upon layers of paint.



Jackson Pollock
Abstract
Expressionist
(1912-1956)

Example works by
Jackson Pollock



Cathedral

1947

71.5" x 35"



Number 7

1951

56.5" x 66"



Convergence

1952

93.5" x 155"

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Lesson Plan - Activity:

Put paint in bowls, one color per bowl. Put marbles in the paint bowls and roll them around to cover them with paint. Put a little bit of water in a spare bowl and reserve it for "used" marbles. (As long as you keep paint from drying on the marbles, clean-up is easy.)

Put a sheet of blank paper into the tray. Then, use spoons to lift marbles out of the bowls and gently drop them onto the paper. This is usually done one color and two-or-three marbles at a time. It's okay if a few droplets of paint fall from the spoon too.

Make the marbles roll around by tilting the tray. If you're careful, you can largely influence the tracks the marbles leave. With multiple marbles you'll tend to get parallel tracks. Notice how marbles tend to snag and/or change direction when they cross paint trails. As Jackson Pollock would say, "these paintings have a life of their own!"

There are a surprising number of variables at play that students can control and experiment with. Obviously, students can select colors and the sequence of their application. They can choose where to drop marbles onto the paper. By dropping fewer marbles at a time, they can affect more control over the marble's paths. Some students may like to experiment with dripping paint onto the paper (from the spoon) without marbles.

Students should occasionally remove marbles and discard them into the "used marbles" bowl, but having multiple used marbles rolling back and forth over previous tracks does help to create "the Pollock effect", as does building up layer upon layer of color. Students may decide to repeat certain colors on many layers. Students should decide when their paintings are "complete". As in all many artistic styles, "white space" or "that which is left unsaid" can sometimes be particularly compelling. (Note: Jackson Pollock usually used unprimed canvas, and that's why his paintings so often had beige backgrounds.)

Since the process of making rolling marble paintings is relatively quick - each student should make several. By observing each other they'll get ideas for different techniques to experiment with. The value of learning from each other in a collective creative process shouldn't be discounted.

Although we recommend introducing and experimenting with basic techniques first, the following variations have been tested successfully:

- Allow students to select and use colored or textured papers.
- Substitute different kinds of paint.
(Jackson Pollock often used enamel house paints and even rugged outdoor "aluminum paint".)
- Encourage students to mix their own paint colors.
- Show students how paint additives can produce special effects like extra gloss or iridescence.
(Alternatively, thinning paints changes their character interestingly.)
- Add metallic flakes or glitter to the paint, or sprinkle a small amount onto the paintings as a final embellishment.
(Jackson Pollock sometimes used broken glass or sand to add texture.)
- Use balls of different sizes, weights, and textures.

Lesson Plan Connections:

Once students are comfortable with the rolling-marble technique, it's time to discuss the fundamental question: "What are they attempting to accomplish?" As Jackson Pollock was becoming famous, many people argued whether his paintings were really "art", or just paint drips on canvas. What made them art?

Some people came to Jackson Pollock's defense and argued his paintings expressed emotions more sincerely than traditional painting styles. What is art, if not an evocation of feelings? Had photography become so common that literal, representational, artwork had become marginalized or possibly even obsolete?

The next step in **this lesson plan** is to go back to the trays and marbles, and paint **expressively** using the newly learned technique! Challenge students to reflect on a book they've read, a movie they've seen, or a story they've heard. Ask them to think about a setting that scared or thrilled them, or a character they loved or hated. Challenge them to use this new painting technique to communicate their feelings about a setting, a character, or a situation in the story. Looking at the examples above, can you tell which ones were answers to this challenge?

If students are having a hard time concentrating on this part of the lesson plan, make it more specific. Have them start by writing a feeling's name on the back of their paper, like: "Relaxed", "Frightened", "Happy", "Angry", "Sleepy", etc. How can they communicate that feeling? After they try, have them look at each other's work and guess what feelings inspired their friends. Are they happy with their results? What could they improve?