

**Arthur Polonsky**  
**A THIEF OF LIGHT**

By Katherine French

**For the poet is really a thief of fire...**

*Donc le poete est vraiment voleur de feu*  
Rimbaud in a letter to Paul Demeny, 1871



*Self Portrait*, 1947  
(cat. 13)

LEFT  
*A Stream Mystery*, c.1962  
(cat. 20)

Katherine French is the Director of the Danforth Museum of Art where she has curated numerous exhibitions exploring the school of Boston Expressionism. In 2007 she received an award for curatorial excellence from the New England Chapter of the International Association of Art Critics for work on the exhibition *Joan Snyder: A Painting Survey, 1969-2005*.

Arthur Polonsky is a storyteller, in love with words and the ability of language to paint a picture. He speaks eloquently, mixing personal memory with history, philosophy and literature, but ironically rejects the use of language to explain his work. When pressed, he references the unconventional art historian Léo Bronstein, who was more interested in how an artist makes a painting than all the reasons why. For more than seventy years, Arthur Polonsky has ignored conventional narrative, insisting on his right to pursue the idea of making a painting that will surprise him.

To those unacquainted with the unique history of Boston painting, it might be surprising that Polonsky became an artist at all. Born in Lynn, Massachusetts, he was the child of first generation Russian immigrants who worked hard to bring their family out of poverty. But, instead of hardship, Polonsky remembers ample time for reading and drawing, a father who had taught himself to play the violin and then teach his son, and a mother who took her children to the nearby beach and ran back with them laughing – “she was that way.”

His father was a tailor, and the young boy was fascinated by the way he made suit patterns by marking black paper with chalk, creating “descriptive designs that would one day become three dimensional.” Observing his father draw lines that “would later become the contour of a living person,” the boy saw a process that was “interesting and endlessly mysterious to sculptors and artists.”<sup>1</sup> It was natural for him and his sister to also make drawings. Using discarded cardboard from cloth samples, the children switched back and forth between working from photographs and drawing from life. Some work was completely invented, accompanied by stories that Polonsky wrote which served to place imagination at the very center of his work.

He perfected “a magical form of drawing,” by imagining the contours of objects, a practice that

continued after he moved to Roxbury at the age of thirteen.<sup>2</sup> He called upon this magical drawing to make each day’s walk to his part time job at the public library “a renewable adventure.” Anticipating the sight of remembered views, he would “match them with each new perception,”<sup>3</sup> finding wonder in everyday existence and transforming that wonder into marvelous reality.

Like so many of his generation, Polonsky’s real education happened at the public library. During the war years, those quiet rooms “became a refuge from the uncertainty, anxiety, and ultimate tragedy outside.”<sup>4</sup> It was there he found translations of Carl Jung, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann and numerous others. As a scholarship student in high school classes at the Museum of Fine Arts, he pursued his aptitude for drawing. But he also attended Hebrew Teachers College, and it was ultimately necessary for him to choose between the two upon graduation from high school. While his religious teachers would have liked their talented young pupil to continue, they supported his decision to accept a scholarship to the Museum School, telling him “You can be a Jew and an artist – go.”<sup>5</sup>

They could not have known how true their words were. To be an artist working in Boston at the beginning of the 1940’s was to be at the very center of a burgeoning art scene populated by first and second generation Jewish immigrants. Boston artists Hyman Bloom and Jack Levine had achieved national success with bodies of work that drew on their Jewish cultural experience.<sup>6</sup> At the Museum School large numbers of Jewish students found a mentor in Karl Zerbe, a refugee artist who brought European Expressionism to Boston.<sup>7</sup> Like Polonsky, many were the sons and daughters of recent immigrants. Predominantly secular, but culturally Jewish, many struggled to reconcile their religious identities with an arts community that had been previously defined by a Christian elite. Yet, Polonsky never found this struggle necessary. So fluent in Hebrew that he could even dream

in the language, he was equally inspired by his experience of listening to music, reading poetry or looking at the world. Fellow classmate Barbara Swan recognized him as a visionary, a dreamer whose ideas of reality were tempered by “a mystical, mysterious inner life that is unique.”<sup>8</sup>

“In every person’s life is a place where their dreams reside. For Arthur Polonsky, those dreams reside in Paris,”<sup>9</sup> remarked Boston Public Library’s Keeper of Prints Sinclair Hitchings. Like many students at the Museum School, Polonsky was keen to visit Europe. But in his case, desire was fueled by imagination. Viewing the large, black and white lantern slides in art history class, he saw not only the image of Chartres Cathedral, but also a promise that he would someday be there.<sup>10</sup> When awarded a traveling fellowship upon graduation in 1948, this dream became a reality.<sup>11</sup>

Photographs that appeared in a 1948 issue of *Life* magazine paint a romantic portrait of the artist standing by the window of his garret room – incredibly once occupied by Arthur Rimbaud – and walking along the banks of the Seine. Polonsky learned French well enough to read the fifteen volumes of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. He walked past “miles of paintings,” drew every day, and enjoyed “the privilege of unbroken work.” He went to plays and concerts, and after viewing a performance by Marcel Marceau, painted a portrait the next day from memory. He felt inspired by film. “This was not directly, visibly related to anything in my painting, but certainly related. The whole mystery of sitting in the dark and watching this world take place in films, it’s never stopped being mysterious.”<sup>12</sup> For the first time, he was able to see original works by the Symbolist painters. Odilon Redon was important, as was James Ensor, whom he admired for an ability to overthrow classical draftsmanship. “He had it, and he didn’t use it,” observed Polonsky. “In abasing it, it revealed itself in a new way.”<sup>13</sup> This was personally interesting for an artist whose virtuoso skill in drawing never

failed to impress. Yet, perhaps the most profound part of his stay was his experience reading French poetry.

Even at the age of fifteen, he knew that “poets had given us words for horizons, for oceans, and for the celebrations and laments of our lives...”<sup>14</sup> Once in Paris, Polonsky read the works of Paul Valéry and Rainer Maria Rilke. On a visit to the Rodin Museum, he went to the garden, so that he could stand and look back at the house where Rilke worked. “I’ve not yet finished with Rilke,” he has observed, and over the years this continued regard has inspired imaginary portraits. However, in Rimbaud the former rabbinical student recognized a divine power. “Rimbaud believed that poetry fulfills a role that religion assigns to God,” comments Polonsky. “He believed that the universe could be humanized by art.”

Back in Boston, the young artist needed to make a living, and returned to teaching at the Museum School, before moving on to Brandeis and then Boston University. He continued exhibiting with Boris Mirski Gallery, where he had previously worked as a student. In a strange confluence between science and art, he was hired by the Russell Sage Foundation to make drawings of mentally ill patients at the Metropolitan State Hospital outside Dorchester, which were mounted on cardboard, and used by researchers to conduct various tests.<sup>15</sup> But his most consistent source of commissioned work came through portraiture.

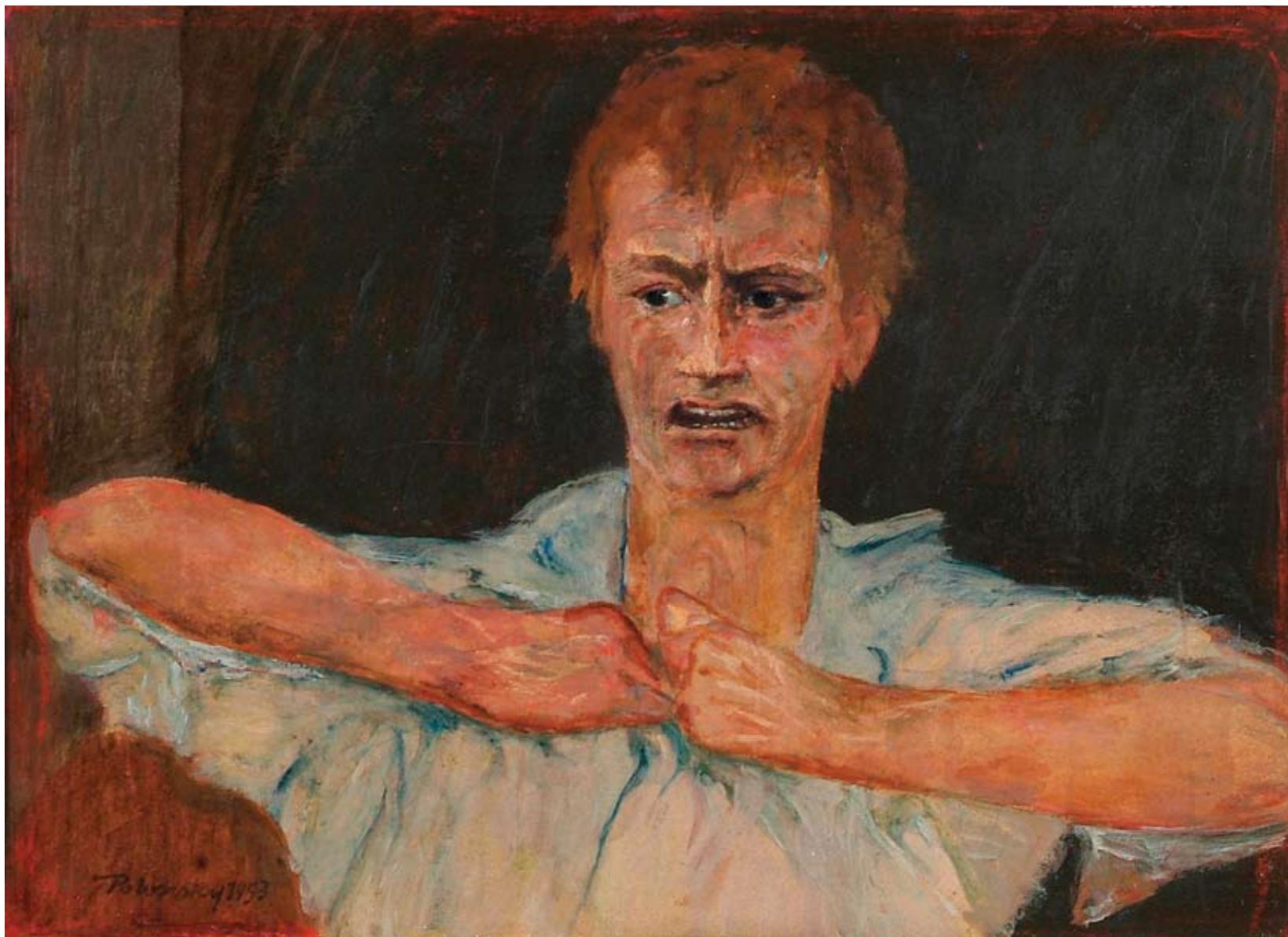
Even as a child, Polonsky’s ability to convey likeness attracted clients. Classmates would give him their lunch tickets for a pencil portrait. At the public library, he was assigned to illustrate displays, and paid one dollar for each pastel made from life. On Sunday afternoons, he performed a similar service for Roxbury neighbors, always “working in the kitchen where the light was good.”<sup>16</sup> But once at the Museum School, he was referred to more affluent clients and his reputation grew. With



*Memory*, 1955  
(cat. 16)

RIGHT  
*Marcel Marceau*, 1948  
(cat. 14)





*Raging*, 1953  
(cat. 15)

some, he developed friendships, as well as working relationships, painting portraits of their sons and daughters growing up, and eventually their grandchildren.

These paintings expressed conventional likeness, but Polonsky liked to introduce a sense of mystery when allowed. In *Portrait of Constance Wallace, Girl with a Pheasant*, a young girl stands before an imaginary village on the Rhine.<sup>17</sup> A young man leans out of the window, a self-portrait of the artist looking down at his subject cradling a male bird. Using a stuffed pheasant that his father had rescued from the trash as a model, Polonsky is reluctant to give the creature any particular meaning. “I was glad for the colors and shapes,” he said. “I looked forward to working with it.” Although the bird had already been incorporated into a previous self-portrait *Man with Pheasant*, there is a small, yet significant, difference. In the drawing the creature squirms uncomfortably, tail extended and wings spread, an object of beauty struggling to evade the painter’s grasp. In the arms of Constance Wallace, the bird rests peacefully.

Polonsky’s metaphorical portrait of his friend the poet Claude Vigée, shows that beauty can triumph.<sup>18</sup> Instead of the Biblical strong man we read about in the Old Testament, we see an effeminate boy sitting “in victory over the slimy, primordial creatures that have crawled up out of the ocean.” The screeching bird, a pincher crab and the roiling sea are reminiscent of a childhood spent playing near the salt marshes in Lynn, but the jawbone of an ass makes the painting truly bizarre. Polonsky’s desire to combine strange and irrational imagery comes as much from his need to escape the mundane requirements of commissioned work as his love of the metaphysical. While he does not set out to illustrate the story of Samson and his unlikely weapon, Polonsky has appropriately chosen a poet to slay the Philistines.

In speaking of Polonsky’s close connection to

Symbolist poets, fellow artist Sidney Hurwitz makes the point that “. . . his most fanciful paintings came close to poetry. In fact, that was what he was trying to do . . .”<sup>19</sup> This poetic sensibility comes as much from his desire to combine strange and from irrational images as the way he applies the paint. Like a talented writer in command of language, Polonsky has great freedom to invent. His emotional palette is full of hot colors set against each other. His brush strokes are broad and spontaneous. In the words of curator Nicholas Capasso, they are “ferocious.”<sup>20</sup>

This ferocity does not prevent him from creating works of great elegance. Both *The Surveyor* and *The Light Thief* depend upon an agitated surface to convey their disturbing tranquility. “My loyalty is to the first sensation of the manual,” he says, insisting that “words are incidental to the painting.” However, a careful viewer can discern Polonsky’s wide-ranging interests by listening to his stories, and then looking closely at his subject matter. In speaking about *The Surveyor*, or perhaps himself, the artist sees “a sort of historical figure, wearing extravagant goggles, coming to earth from another existence. He looks around, and is dismayed.” In *The Light Thief*, he begins by addressing formal contrast, pleased with the muted colors in the parts of the figure behind glass and “the pictorial way that he is outside looking in.” But then he begins speaking about early French cinema and the Prometheus myth, the importance of Rimbaud as a poet and his 1871 letter to Paul Demeny in which Rimbaud says that “the poet is really a thief of fire . . .”

Polonsky was able to create a visual metaphor for this fire. Nearly all of his paintings feature a source of light – perhaps because of the artist’s delight in contrast, perhaps in reference to a creative spark that must be stolen from the gods. He registers desire and caution for this inspiration through a complicated allusion to poetry and myth. Rimbaud wanted to be “the son of the sun,” and Samson’s name means “of the sun.” Both were powerful, but



Untitled, 1951  
(cat. 34)

eventually lose their strength. Rilke describes Narcissus pulled through a watery mirror by his destructive love of self. Prometheus is punished for stealing fire, and Icarus falls into the sea by flying too close to the sun. The lesson which can be inferred is that an artist must carefully nurture inspiration – which is perhaps why Polonsky is so reluctant to name sources, and is similarly cautious when speaking about other artists. Although numerous critics have compared his disembodied spirits to Hyman Bloom’s, Polonsky does not see them as closely connected. “I treasure Bloom’s possibility of shape and color and all that he could do best,” he says when questioned. “*Inspire* is not the right word to use. Instead, I would say that Bloom alerted me to certain possibilities.”



*Man with Pheasant*, c. 1955

(cat. 1)

RIGHT

*The Survivors*, 1959

(cat. 18)

American artists working in the 1950’s were alert to numerous possibilities. The art world had moved from Paris to New York where Abstract Expressionists were beginning to forge a recognizably different style – a style not far removed from Boston’s painterly expressionism.<sup>21</sup> Like many of his contemporaries, Polonsky remained loyal to the idea of representing the natural world. However, his world was filled with dream-like imagery – outwardly descriptive, but touching upon the same kind of intellectual abstraction that fueled New York painting. Called “a recording angel,”<sup>22</sup> for his ability to portray likeness, Polonsky is even better known for his exploration of the unconscious mind.

In a series of drawings made around the time of his mother’s death, he concentrated on the sleeping figures at a Jewish Rehabilitation Center where she spent her last days. Lying back against the twisted sheets, his mother has the look of a dreaming angel, and Polonsky exaggerates lines and shapes to create wings that allow his elderly subject to fly. The same kind of poetic association occurs in his portrait of sleeping Aaron, a Biblical prophet to whom God spoke in a dream. Aware that Aaron is the Hebrew version of his own name, Arthur Polonsky presents

the mystical flowering of Aaron’s rod as metaphor for his own artistic ability. But this is not an ability that he takes for granted.

*Within the Dream*, “a painting that describes me or some other imaginary being,” shows a man teetering on the edge of a cliff. Set against an abstraction of light and dark, the small figure introduces not only formal tension, but also the kind of menace and foreboding found in “dreams where you avoid one danger by escaping into another far greater.” Like Icarus trying to gear up for flight, he is “a man deciding to fall into the abyss, or to be consumed by flames.” Polonsky knows that stealing inspiration from the gods can be dangerous business, but it is a risk he is willing to take.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Arthur Polonsky, interview with Robert Brown, Oral History Interview with Arthur Polonsky, Newton, MA, April 12, 1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
2. Arthur Polonsky, *On Drawing and Childhood’s Prophecy*, December 1, 1996. Heron Press, Boston Public Library, 1996.
3. Arthur Polonsky, “Memories of 1941 and 1942, when I was a high school student, and worked in the Roxbury Memorial Branch of the Boston Public Library...” Unpublished Journal, 1973. Collection of Arthur Polonsky.
4. Ibid.
5. Arthur Polonsky, interview with Judith Bookbinder, March 27, 1997, quoted in Judith Bookbinder, *Boston Modern: Figurative Expressionism As Alternative Modernism* (Lebanon, NH: University of New England for UNH Press, 2005), p. 212.
6. Bloom and Levine presented a threat to the previous generation of Boston painters. When working briefly as a studio assistant for Ives Gammell, Polonsky was given catalogs featuring them and told “Here, Polonsky, take them or put them in the garbage where they belong.” Polonsky, quoted in Bookbinder, *Boston Modern*, p. 211.
7. In addition to Karl Zerbe, Polonsky also studied with Ture Bengz, and was teaching assistant to Ben Shahn in the Museum’s Tanglewood Program in the Berkshires in 1947. Inspired by Shahn’s interest in egg tempera, he purchased an egg a day from a local farmer to complete a self-portrait during that summer, but was disappointed to find that he could not duplicate the results upon returning to Boston due to the lack of available fresh eggs.
8. Barbara Swan, exhibition pamphlet *Arthur Polonsky: Selected Works 1944-1990*, issued by the Fitchburg Museum of Art in 1990.