



Andy Warhol (right), the avatar of Pop Art, with President Jimmy Carter at a reception for inaugural portfolio artists in 1977.

Pop Art

by Joe A. Thomas

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Pop Art is the school of painting and sculpture of the early 1960s that utilized the subjects, techniques, or stylistic conventions of the mass media and popular culture, either separately or in tandem with each other.

First appearing in England in the 1950s, it flourished in the United States during the early 1960s, the moment of Pop's greatest popularity. Although it was an international style--with practitioners in Asia and Latin America, as well as in the Soviet Union and Western Europe--its most famous manifestations were seen in the work of American artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Mel Ramos, James Rosenquist, Andy Warhol, and Tom Wesselmann.

These artists worked in a variety of styles. Lichtenstein enlarged and altered panels from romance and war comics, even copying the small dots that were a result of commercial color separation processes. Rosenquist, a former professional billboard painter, painted enormous canvases with a jarring array of images suggestively juxtaposed from various media sources, primarily advertising.

The most famous of the Pop artists proved to be Warhol. He successfully integrated commercial printing processes into his work, distancing himself from the tortured paint surfaces of the Abstract Expressionists who preceded him. His focus on celebrities and fame in his work proved prophetic, as he himself soon became a media celebrity and Pop Art became co-opted by the very mass media that it plundered for subjects.

The Turn to Popular Culture

Pop Art is among the most important visual arts movements of the twentieth century. The Pop artists turned to popular culture and advertising for sources to create representational works that defied the modernist hierarchy of avant-garde and kitsch, established decades earlier by the influential modernist critic Clement Greenberg.

Breaking with the modernist tradition of abstraction (which by the early 1960s had become institutionalized in the form of Abstract Expressionism), Pop Art seemed to some observers to be frivolous and reactionary. However, it actually represents a turning point in the history of twentieth-century art.

Modernism had long insisted upon a strict hierarchy of taste. Contemporary society's blurring of "high" and "low" culture began simultaneously with Pop's parallel blurring of artistic hierarchies. As one of the hallmarks of postmodernity, this erasure of qualitative distinctions suggests that Pop is among the earliest manifestations of the postmodern.

The Return to Representation

Pop Art's return to representation was made possible by the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg

in the 1950s. In paintings such as *Flag*, from 1955, Johns explored the narrow ground between the real and the depicted. In so doing he re-introduced a conceptual component into art that had initially been explored by French artist Marcel Duchamp earlier in the century.

Rauschenberg's complex multimedia works, such as *Bed* of 1955, combined Abstract Expressionist brushwork with both real and depicted objects, pointing out the constructed nature of both. Significantly, Johns and Rauschenberg were partners both artistically and romantically in the late 1950s during this groundbreaking period.

Pop Art's similar but more radical use of images and techniques from mass media created great consternation in the art world.

Pop Art and Camp

Although only one of the most famous group of Pop artists was gay (Warhol), the new art's connection with the work of earlier gay artists such as Rauschenberg and Johns is clear.

Furthermore, during the early 1960s the straight world was beginning to discover the camp sensibility (exemplified by the 1964 publication of Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp"). Because camp was seen as the triumph of style over substance, when the Pop artists elevated their reviled media images to the arena of "high art," they paralleled the camp celebration of and commitment to the marginal.

Pop's self-consciousness about style in both "low" and "high" art inextricably linked it to camp, and resulted in numerous homophobic attacks on Pop and its practitioners.

Pop's Success and Its Influence

This resistance by the art world establishment did not prevent the public from enjoying and collecting Pop Art. The Pop artists achieved quick financial success (much to the dismay of the staunchly heterosexual Abstract Expressionists) and soon assumed canonical status in art history.

Its affinities with the camp sensibility have always provided Pop with a substantial gay audience. Pop has subsequently had a significant influence on later art and artists, opening the doors for everything from Photorealism in the 1970s to the ironic examination of the mundane that has dominated much contemporary art.

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