

Warhol and Lichtenstein: Their Solo Debuts in 1962

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Abstract

This research will focus on the origins of Pop Art with Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol's first solo exhibitions in 1962. By narrating the biographies of Lichtenstein and Warhol, then comparing the two exhibitions' elements (wide and narrow) and curatorial choices with one another, this study seeks to provide a fresh perspective of possible influences in the artists' lives that resulted in the creation of different artistic representations.

Introduction

Before unveiling the two exhibitions in 1962, it is crucial to comprehend the

background and context during this era of massive feats. In other words, the context of these two art forms will allow a better understanding of the exhibitions' origins, development, and later impact.

With the US engaging in World War II and subsequently dropping into the Cold War period, the mid-twentieth century experienced a great change within the field of arts, creating new forms of expressions.

Prior to Pop Art, Abstract Expressionism was a

dominant influence in America, challenging many previous art practices and "effectively shifting the art world's focus from Europe (specifically Paris) to New York in the postwar years."¹ Most active during the early 1940s to the late 1950s, Abstract Expressionism had emerged as a direct response to the profound impact of World War II and its aftermath. Artists, deeply affected by humanity's capacity for destruction and acutely aware of the fragility of human existence, sought to create a new form of art that could convey the weight of their concerns. In this search, these artists deeply resonated with surrealists who put emphasis on accessing the unconscious minds. Surrealist methods like psychic automatism, which valued

¹ Stella Paul, "Abstract Expressionism," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004,

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/abex/hd_abex.htm.

impromptu movement and gesture, complemented the Abstract Expressionists' desire to convey their emotions and sentiments on the intricate psychological terrain of the post-war world. The "difficult journey inwards to unleash volcanic energies on the canvas" was what Abstract Expressionists were embarking on.² Each stroke and touch of the paintings were improvident, a revelation of the artist's identity. One eminent work of Abstract Expressionism is "Watery Path" by Jackson Pollock from 1947, created by pouring and dripping thinned paint onto a canvas. As Abstract Expressionism grew more prominent over the years, Pop Art rose in response to its dominance.³

In contrast to Expressionism's subjectivity, Pop Art emerged as a significant art movement in the 1960s, drawing inspiration from mass media and popular culture, a form of art that represented the "real world." Initially defined by British artist Richard Hamilton in 1957, Pop Art flourished during the height of the Cold War and reflected America's consumer-driven capitalist culture. The post-war society was heavily driven by consumer culture, where mass-produced goods (Cola, ice cream, soup cans) and media (television, magazines, billboards, etc.) inundated the market. As goods and services increased, more Americans were able to

purchase previously unaffordable items. So, this change allowed Pop artists to mirror many common objects into their pieces, sometimes featuring commercials, or magazines with their own techniques. Pop artists employed various methods (often referencing commercial design and printing techniques) such as airbrush, stenciling, photo transfer, and silkscreen printing to embed their own thoughts or intentions into the pieces, further challenging traditional boundaries of what art could be.⁴ Therefore, unlike Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art's focus on recent "happenings" and "environments," directed viewer to actively engage in connecting their life to artistic experiences, allowing a new understanding that "art can literally be an intensely human affair, not only a thing to be studied and analyzed, but something to be grasped, experienced, and even enjoyed."⁵ Among the many artists that have created works of this change were Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, presenting exhibitions that gradually became iconic representations of the era.

In this essay, the beginning of Pop Art will be closely examined through an analysis of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol and their artistic outcomes. By narrating and comparing the two artists that rose to fame under shared cultural influences and time periods, this essay will try

² "Soup Cans & Superstars: How Pop Art Changed the World," Alexanderstreet.com (Alexander Street, 2015), <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/soup-can-and-superstars-how-pop-art-changed-the-world>.

³ Stella Paul, "Abstract Expressionism," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/abex/hd_abex.htm.

⁴ Jaimey Hamilton Faris, "Pop Art," Grove Art Online, 2003,

<https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/display/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000068691?rskey=rfnBjc&result=1>.

⁵ Carl I Belz, "Pop Art and the American Experience," Chicago Review 17, no. 1 (1964): 104-15, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25293848>.

to address the factors that led to the different interpretations. The narration and comparison will be achieved by the following: biographies that highlight their development in their distinct styles, a comparison between the art pieces and structures of the 1962 exhibition, and lastly a summarizing analysis of all the information given above.

West Side, and in 1939, Lichtenstein shortly studied at the Art Students League in New York and from 1940 to 1943 continued studying at Ohio State University in Columbus. At his university, Lichtenstein was particularly influenced by one of his professors, Hoyt L. Sherman, who taught him about “organized perception,”⁶ where the art of representation is an abstraction and separate from reality. Lichtenstein had to serve in World War II in the middle of his college life, but soon returned from war in 1946 and completed his Master of Fine Arts in 1949.

In the 1950s, Lichtenstein drew influences from a range of subjects and styles.

This was also around the time when he dipped into his Cubist and Abstractionist phase. Cubism is an art style developed in the early 20th century, known to express art through forms of geometric shapes. Moreover, when painting, Lichtenstein would work not from original works but from reproductions. For instance, when Lichtenstein first devised his major theme related to American History and the “Wild West” in 1951, he portrayed treaty

signings, Native Americans, and popular images of American folklore based on images he found on magazines, books, and even paintings depicted by 19th century artists, creating his artwork from referencing copies or images of others’ characterizations.⁷

The Explorer, (fig. 2), in his 1951 “Wild West” exhibition is an important early work in that it features for the first-time advertising copy taken directly from an ad (fig. 1) and shows his adaptation of cubism:

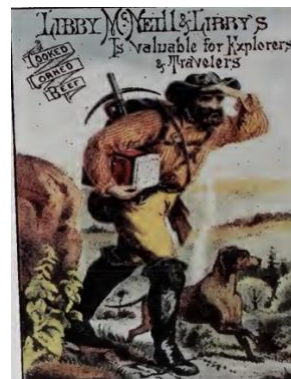


Figure 1.



Figure 2.

While Lichtenstein drew on early American subject matter for most of his work during the

⁶ Diane Waldman, Roy Lichtenstein (1993), Pg.7

⁷ Ibid, Pg. 4-9

1950s, he also visited other art forms beginning with a style reminiscent of 1940s Picasso, moving to ornamental and Rococo motifs in 1956, and finally embracing abstraction in 1958 with a late variation of Action painting. The exploration of different mediums of this period strengthened Lichtenstein's ability to express his ideas, bolstering his future approach of incorporating popular subject matter within an abstract style.

Meanwhile, working as an art instructor at Ohio State University, State University of New York at Oswego, and Douglass College between 1946 to 1963, Lichtenstein was able to meet many artists who encouraged his interest in cartoon imagery, soon leading to his breakthrough in Pop Art. Decisively, he attributed his renewed interest in popular imagery to his exposure to "Happenings"⁸ and performance art. Delving into this field also brought Lichtenstein the knowledge that devices favored by cartoonists were very similar to those employed by painters like Picasso and Klee, who were a few artists that he studied so diligently.

Ultimately, the early 1960s was when Lichtenstein made the final break with his early work. Whereas he had previously translated his source materials into personal variants of Cubism or Constructivism, he now appropriated from comic strips dealing with more controversial topics and collecting references not only the subject-matter but also the style. The essence of Lichtenstein's procedure lies in the enlargement and unification of his source material, whether its original purpose was to tell a story or sell a

consumer product, on the basis of strict artistic principles.⁹

Andy Warhol

Before he became an icon in the Pop Art world, Andy Warhol had a successful career as a commercial illustrator in New York City during the 1950s. Born in Pittsburgh in 1928, Andrew Warhola studied pictorial design at the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University). While at college, Warhol had worked in the display department at the Joseph Horne department store. He had also frequented a local gallery called Outlines where he had been exposed to the work of Joseph Cornell, Marcel Duchamp, John Cage and Buckminster Fuller. He had also taught art classes at the Irene Kaufmann Settlement while still in college. After he graduated college in 1949, Warhol moved to New York and quickly secured himself in the advertising world with his illustration work in leading magazines like Glamour, Vogue, and Harper's Bazaar. His distinctive blotted-line technique won him numerous awards and high-profile clients.¹⁰ During this period, Warhol became well known for his shoe advertisements for I. Miller. in 1955-6, helping him earn awards from the Art Directors Club.¹¹

As he worked to gain a reputation as a commercial artist, Warhol began developing fine art work, gradually transitioning towards the Pop Art style that would come to define his work in later years. His first public display of pop art was featured in a window display at the Bonwit Teller department store in April 1961 (fig. 3). Warhol produced a series of works based

on comic strips and newspaper advertisements including paintings inspired by the "Nancy" comic strip, a "Storm Window" ad, and "Popeye" comics from various New York newspapers.¹²



Figure 3.

Comic strips may sound familiar since Lichtenstein was also, around the same time, working on comic-like artworks, and indeed Warhol's friend mentioned that Warhol's implication was that "Lichtenstein had seen the paintings in the window and gave him the idea to do his paintings. Now, whether this is true or



not, I don't know, but at this time, this is what Andy had felt." Subsequently, Lichtenstein refuted this claim; however, he did admit that he had seen Andy's comic work at Leo Castelli's about the same time he brought his in, around the spring of 1961. There is no solid evidence that Lichtenstein has been influenced by Warhol's work, however, it is also not proven that Lichtenstein was not influenced, therefore,

it continues to be an enigma among researchers.¹³ So instead of displaying his comics in his exhibition, he chose to work with what is now known as "The Campbell Soup Cans."

1962 Exhibitions and Analysis

Delving into the life of Lichtenstein and Warhol, it is inevitable to say that factors such as their backgrounds, relationships, experiences, as well as differences in their intuitive attraction to art influenced their perception of the society. However, what has also greatly influenced these two distinct outcomes come from how the individual artworks connect to one another, forming a face for the audience to understand. This connection can be achieved from the collaboration, the dialogue between the artist and the curator. Curators are the ones who interact with artists, select artworks, and determine their placement within the space. They ensure the works are displayed in a way that honors the artist's vision while maximizing their impact on viewers. In this next section, there will be an analysis of both galleries' individual art pieces and the overall layout.

Lichtenstein

Figure 4

The exhibition displayed a carefully curated selection of Lichtenstein's works, including "The Kiss" (1961), "Washing Machine" (1961), "Turkey" (1961), "The Refrigerator" (1962),



"Blam" (1962), "The Grip" (1962), "The Engagement Ring" (1961), and "Laughing Cat" (1961). These pieces varied significantly in size, with larger works like "The Refrigerator" dominating gallery walls, while smaller pieces created a dynamic interplay with the surrounding white space.

Lichtenstein's subject matter drew from two primary sources: war and romance comic strips and mass-market advertising. Works like "Engagement Ring" and "Blam" were inspired by comic books such as G.I. Combat and Secret Hearts, while "The Refrigerator" and "Laughing Cat" referenced everyday advertisements and product packaging.¹⁴

Contrary to the misconception that Lichtenstein merely copied his sources,¹⁵ he incorporated his unique artistic vision through deliberate alterations and emphasis. For instance, "Engagement Ring," based on a panel from Martin Branner's "Winnie Winkle" comic

strip (fig. 5), is an intense moment where it directly points out to the man's double-sided intentions of giving a female character a ring. Without any contextual information to support his piece, Lichtenstein creates a new dynamic between the characters. Not only does this piece mirror the gender roles in contemporary media, but also reveals Lichtenstein's intentional inputs of his perspective by isolating scenes.¹⁶

Lichtenstein further embellishes his vision by working with primary colors. For "Engagement Ring" (fig. 6) he uses colors red and yellow, and bold black outlines to create shading and texture. It may not seem to be as apparent from comparing the original scene to his recreation, but he zooms into the two characters, filling most of the canvas space with the two people rather than trying to imitate every piece of elements from the original piece.



Figure 5.



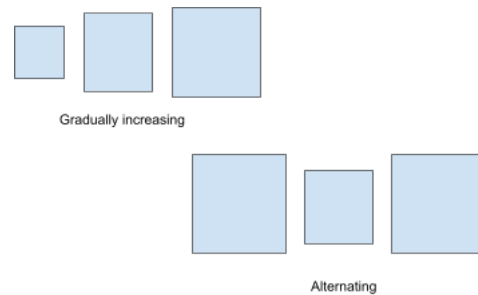
Figure 6.

Structure

The gallery's structure played a crucial role in enhancing the viewer's experience. Although the structure of the gallery in 1962 has not been closely dealt with, I will try to analyze the structure from how the gallery used the space to the underlying reasons as to why his works varied in sizes based on the information I have reasoned above. The structure of the gallery reveals two key aspects: the use of space for placement and the variation in artwork sizes.

The eight artworks were arranged to surround all four sides of the room, which I believe well established a sense of inundation that mirrored society's overload of mass production and media. The alternating sizes of the pieces, from large to small or gradually increasing, further emphasized this effect.

An image to explain what alternating/ gradually increasing means:



The size variation that Ivan Karp, the curator for this exhibition, helped to choose also served to highlight Lichtenstein's intentions. Larger works tend to portray specific incidents and complex ideas, often focusing on themes such as women's roles in society (e.g., *The Kiss*, *The Refrigerator*, *The Engagement Ring*) or intense scenes of conflict (e.g., *Blam*). In contrast, smaller paintings (e.g., *The Turkey*, *The Laughing Cat*) typically depict straightforward advertisements or everyday objects, representing simple commodities. Hence, the size-to-theme correlation implies another surface-level interpretation that scales each piece to reflect the "intensification" of the scene, displaying many facets of mass media and its societal impact. The exhibition's structure thus appears to be a deliberate choice, enhancing the viewer's experience and understanding of Lichtenstein's commentary on contemporary culture.

Warhol



Figure 7.

Andy Warhol's exhibition structure at the Ferus Gallery is a fascinating point to examine. His works consisted of 32 Soup Cans that were identical except for the labels on the cans. The composition of "Campbell's Soup Cans" seems extremely simplistic, even banal, yet incredibly effective. It includes a set of canvases, all of the same size measuring 20 inches (51 cm) in height × 16 inches (41 cm) in width, each of which is covered by a meticulously hand-painted image of a Campbell's Soup can. The only variation from one canvas to the next would be in regard to flavor, as indicated by the label on each can. For example, one can's flavor would be tomato and the other would be clam chowder. Warhol used a combination of projection, tracing, painting, and stamping to attain uniformity and consistency for all canvases. Still, Warhol made them all by hand, so if one looks at each piece manually, they would notice subtle differences between one another.

Structure

In the process of structuring the exhibition, Irving Blum, the curator of the 1962 Campbell Soup Cans exhibition, helped shape the final presentation of Warhol's works. At first, Blum

was having difficulty making the paintings appear level, so he hung each piece and placed a ledge beneath them. Later, when Blum was questioned about this decision, he mentioned that it was an idea that could best represent these paintings not merely as paintings but as a commodity.¹⁷ Blum stated "Cans sit on shelves. Why not?" By placing them on "shelves," which is where actual soup cans sit on, Blum brought these paintings to life, adding another significant point to the overall message of the exhibition.

The structure of the exhibition could also be interpreted in another sense when viewed from the overall layout. When installed in a grid, the canvases can all be seen from a single vantage point. They become a tight unit of seemingly identical images that the eye takes in at once, like wallpaper. Since these 32 pieces of soup cans were the only exhibits in the gallery, the way the gallery arranged the canvases in a single row on a ledge at eye-level, wrapping around the gallery, disperses our sight and makes it seem as if they could extend almost endlessly. This arrangement invites viewers to slowly consider the paintings one by one.¹⁸

Broader Implication & Conclusion

Tracing both Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol's influences and artistic deliberations, both artists "selected some of the media's most formidable stereotypes as subjects for their paintings."¹⁹ Both mirrored contemporary society, but thematically and strategically approached it differently. At the Ferus Gallery,

Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans repetitive pieces in a single file line mirrored the uniformity and ubiquity in consumer goods in the manufacturing process. It pointed out the commercialism of art and how advertising and consumerism had invaded the modern way of life. In contrast, Lichtenstein's exhibition at Leo Castelli Gallery was composed of isolated paintings, focusing their unique identity but retaining the thread of the comic strip theme.

Lichtenstein's show was more on popular culture, as his comic book aesthetics commented on the contemporary scene. Lichtenstein reflected commercialism and gender roles deeply integrated in society.

Overall, how the two artists allowed the audience to interact with their exhibits also differed. Warhol presented a familiar commodity that people can see in their quotidian lives, and Lichtenstein revealed integrated societal norms, something more intangible and more of an abstract idea. In other words, one was by a physical object that influences the audience and the other by a figurative representation of cultural ideas.

Together, Lichtenstein and Warhol blurred the boundaries between popular culture and traditionally regarded art forms, identifying and amplifying a cultural change peculiar to the painting of the early 1960s. Their work opened the door for future generations to create connections between art and popular culture by challenging preconceived notions about what constitutes appropriate subject matter for art.

This analysis of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy

Warhol's artistic outcomes provides insight into the factors that led to their different interpretations of pop art. By examining their biographies, comparing their art pieces and exhibition structures, and summarizing the information presented, we gain a deeper understanding of how these two artists, despite shared cultural influences and time periods, developed distinct styles that would come to define the pop art movement and influence generations of artists to come.

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