

QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

Robert Rauschenberg was a painter, sculptor, printmaker, choreographer, performer and occasionally composer, as well as a key figure in the transition from **Abstract Expressionism** to later movements. Sometimes called a Neo-Dada artist, his experimental approach stretched the boundaries of art, opening possibilities for future artists. While his work often enraged Abstract Expressionists and critics, his imagery and methods profoundly influenced Pop, Conceptual, and other late Modern artists.

Key Ideas

- Rauschenberg was considered the enfant terrible of the art world in the 1950s, a reputation cemented by his symbolic erasure of a drawing by **Willem de Kooning** in 1954. Despite his deep admiration for Abstract Expressionist artists, he disagreed with many of their convictions. His early artwork inspired other artists with the freedom of possibility that they could not find in Abstract Expressionist painting.
- Rauschenberg saw beauty in the everyday, putting objects into his art that others would consider trash. In doing so, he redefined art as the common things that surround people every day, paving the way for movements like Pop and Conceptual Art.
- Like Dada artists before him, Rauschenberg assembled found objects without any apparent order or meaning. His famous Combines, combined painting and found objects, declared his authority as artist to determine what was art, while his lack of commentary on his own work empowered viewers to decide their own interpretation. Many of his later works with *Experiments in Art and Technology* reflect less successful attempts to allow the viewer to "participate in the creation" of the work.

DETAILED VIEW:

Childhood

Robert Rauschenberg was born Milton Ernest Rauschenberg in the small refinery town of Port Arthur, Texas. His father, Ernest, was a strict and serious man who worked for the Gulf State Utilities power company. His mother, Dora, was a devout Christian and a frugal woman. She made the family's clothes from scraps, a practice that embarrassed her son but possibly influenced his later work in assemblages and collages. Rauschenberg drew frequently and copied images from comics, but his talent as a draughtsman went largely unappreciated, except by his younger sister Janet. Until he was 13, he planned to become a minister, a career of high standing in the conservative community. However, Rauschenberg discovered that his church called dancing a sin, and as a skilled dancer himself, he was dissuaded from a career in ministry.

Early Training

Following his parents' wishes, Rauschenberg attended the University of Texas in Austin to study pharmacology, but was expelled freshman year after refusing to dissect a frog. The draft letter that arrived in 1943 saved him from breaking the news to his parents. Refusing to kill on the battlefield, he was posted to a hospital caring for combat survivors in San Diego. While on leave, he saw oil paintings in person for the first time at the East Huntington Library. After the war ended, Rauschenberg drifted, eventually using the G.I. Bill to pay for art classes at Kansas State University in 1947, and a year later, at the Academie Julian in Paris. On his arrival in Kansas City, Rauschenberg decided he would mark his new life with a new first name - Bob.



Rauschenberg met fellow American student Susan Weil in Paris, and the two became inseparable friends. He followed her to Black Mountain College after hearing about the discipline of its famed director, Josef Albers who, upon Rauschenberg's entry into the College, criticized Rauschenberg's work frequently and harshly. Albers' course on materials, in which students investigated the line, texture, color, etc. of everyday materials, profoundly influenced Rauschenberg's later assemblages. Rauschenberg and Weil stayed at Black Mountain for the school year 1948-1949, and then moved to New York City, which Rauschenberg had determined to be the center of the art world. They

arrived as the Abstract Expressionist movement was just reaching maturity. In June 1950 Rauschenberg and Weil were married, and in August 1951 they had a son, Christopher.

In 1951 and 1952, Rauschenberg split his time between the Art Students League in New York, studying with Morris Kantor and Vaclav Vytlacil, and Black Mountain College over the summer. His ambition secured him a prestigious solo show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, exhibiting a series of white paintings with scratched numbers and allegorical symbols. Rauschenberg continued his paintings in white at Black Mountain College, where he rolled white house paint onto canvas with a roller. The flat white canvases were influenced by their surroundings, reflecting shadows of people and the time of day. He was also encouraged by the painter Jack Tworikov to explore black. His black paintings, unlike the white series, were textured with thick paint and incorporated newspaper scraps.

Early Mature Period

On Rauschenberg's return to New York from Black Mountain in fall 1952, Weil filed for divorce and brought Christopher to live with her parents. Rauschenberg left for Europe to travel with Cy Twombly, a fellow student in the Art Students League and later an important Conceptual artist. Abroad, Rauschenberg made his first assemblages from junk he collected in the Italian countryside. When he returned to the States, he continued his experiments in paintings with the *Red* series in 1953, which were as textured as the *Black* series, and also incorporated newsprint. Rauschenberg began to include objects in the surface of his paintings, from parasols to parts of a man's undershirt. Rauschenberg called these assemblages "Combines," because they combined paint and objects (or sculpture) on the canvas.



Rauschenberg met the young painter **Jasper Johns** in 1954 and after several months of friendship, the two became romantic and artistic partners. In 1955, Rauschenberg moved into the same building as Johns, and the two artists saw each other every day, exchanging ideas and encouraging their mutual exploration of the boundaries of art. Though their

styles were too different to form a new movement, the intensity of their artistic partnership has been compared to the partnership between Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. As Rauschenberg said, he and Johns gave each other "permission to do what we wanted." The pair also grew close to minimalist composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham, who had attended Black Mountain College with Rauschenberg. The four artists shared a similar philosophy, rejecting the coded psychology of Abstract Expressionist paintings and embracing the unplanned beauty in everyday life. Rauschenberg's close relationship with Johns did not last, however. Johns was featured on the cover of *Art News* in 1957 and three of his works were bought by The Modern Museum of Art. This explosion of fame caused tension between Johns and Rauschenberg, and they ended their relationship in 1958. Regardless, Rauschenberg remained friend and collaborator to Cage and Cunningham.

Collaboration was a recurring theme in Rauschenberg's career. His interest in dance led to a ten year partnership with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (1954 - 1964), as well as with choreographers Paul Taylor and Trish Brown. He created costumes and sets for Cunningham's dances while Cage composed the music. He also choreographed and planned his own "theater pieces" with fellow artists in the 1960s. Rauschenberg's interest in the promise of technology led him to co-found Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) in 1966 with Billy Kluver of Bell Laboratories, which encouraged collaboration between engineers and artists. Rauschenberg sought collaboration in other media as well: he began to create lithographs in 1962 with Tatyana Grosman, the printmaker and owner of Universal Limited Art Editions. He later collaborated with other printmaking studios, and in 1969, he bought a house on Captiva Island which served as the home of Unlimited Press, a printmaking studio available to emerging and established artists.

Rauschenberg was himself becoming established in the art world. He earned an early retrospective in 1963, at the Jewish Museum in New York, which was received well by critics and viewers alike. His booming popularity in America was followed by an exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in London, and an exhibition of his works at the Venice Biennale, which he visited while on tour with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. At the peak of his career, he was awarded the Biennale's first prize for painting in 1964, marking the first year this prize was awarded to an American.

Late Mature Period



In keeping with his interest in current events and culture, Rauschenberg began to integrate images of space flight into his work in the 1960s. *A Modern Inferno*, an image created for *Life* magazine in celebration of Dante's 700th birthday, pictures Dante as an astronaut. In the series *Stoned Moon*, Rauschenberg incorporated photographs from NASA's records in 33 lithographs. In the 1970s, he transitioned to politics, creating a silkscreen series from grim newspaper headlines, called *Currents* (1970), and the collage *Signs* (1970).

The 1970s also marked a return to assemblage as Rauschenberg embarked on the *Spreads and Scales* series. He used techniques and imagery from his early works, combining silkscreen prints, magazine images, and everyday objects, but with more color and on a larger scale. While several pieces in this series sold to collectors, critics were not impressed by the rehashing of old methods. He continued to work in a large scale in *1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece* (1981-1986), a collaged painting that grew to be longer than its title implies.

In 1984, Rauschenberg combined his interest in traveling with his belief that art could change society, founding the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (R.O.C.I.). He traveled primarily to third world and Communist countries, in defiance of American Cold War policies, learning craft traditions from the host country's artists and artisans. Each of the twelve trips resulted in a major exhibition of Rauschenberg's works inspired by the host country, and from previous host countries. The culminating exhibition was held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. While Rauschenberg built ties with artists abroad, critics at home were unimpressed. Roberta Smith writing for the *New York Times* neatly summarized the project as "at once altruistic and self-aggrandizing, modest and overbearing."

Late Years and Death

In 1990, Rauschenberg was given a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, accompanied by a smaller show at the Corcoran Gallery of his earlier work from the 1950s. The exhibitions cemented Rauschenberg's status as one of the giants of the art

world and especially emphasized the importance his early work had in the development of Modern American art. Rauschenberg won the Commandant de l'Ordre des Lettres from the French government in 1992, followed by the National Medal of the Arts in 1993. In 1996, the artist checked into the Betty Ford clinic to recover from alcoholism, which had grown more severe in his later years. He completed his rehabilitation program in time to celebrate the opening of the 1997/1998 retrospective of 467 works at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, a show that took six years to prepare.

Rauschenberg suffered a series of medical mishaps in 2001, first breaking his hip, which led to an intestinal perforation and then a stroke that paralyzed his right side. With the assistance of his caregiver and friend, Darryl Pottorf, Rauschenberg learned to work with his left hand. He worked until his death on May 12, 2008 from heart failure.

Legacy

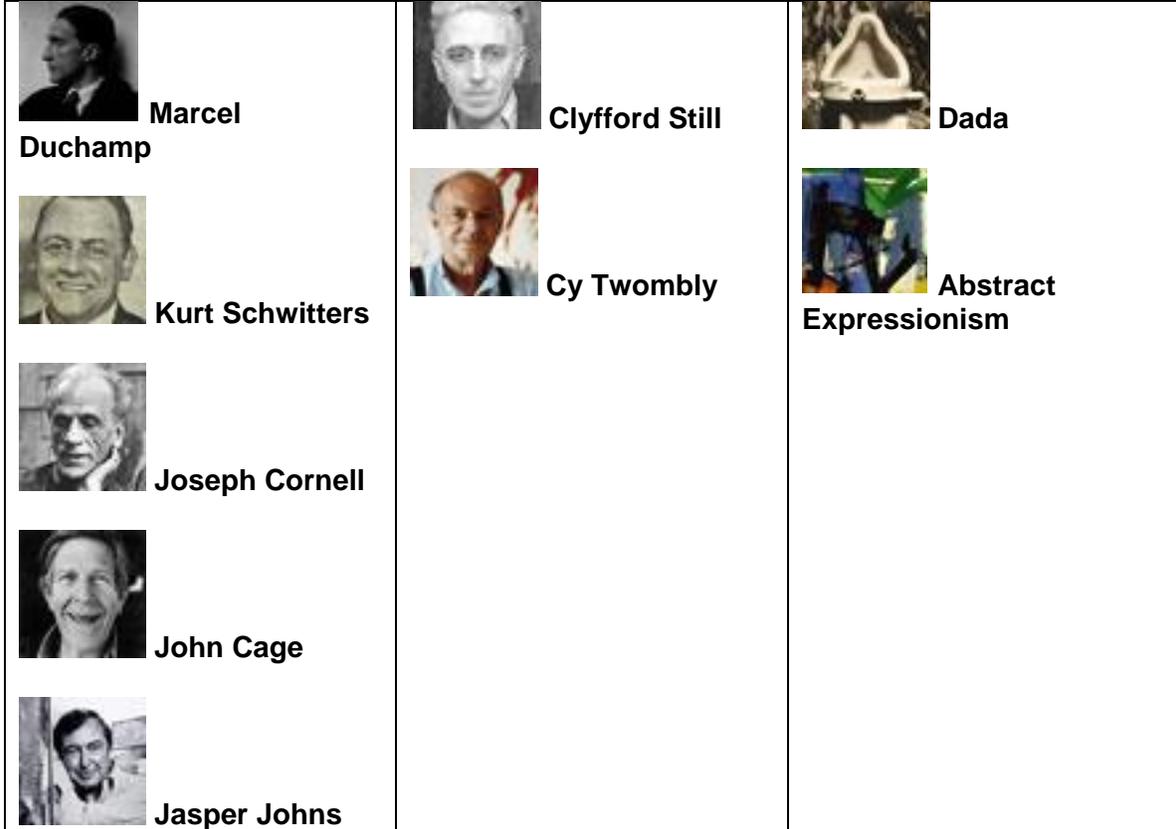
Rauschenberg's work of the 1950s and 1960s influenced the young artists who developed later Modern movements. Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein traced their inspiration for Pop art to Rauschenberg's collages of appropriated media images, and his experiments in silkscreen printing. The foundation for Conceptual art in large measure lay in Rauschenberg's belief that the artist had the authority to determine the definition of art. The most fitting example is his 1961 portrait of Iris Clert for an exhibition at her gallery in Paris, which consisted of a telegram: "This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so/ Robert Rauschenberg". *The happenings* of the 1960s trace their lineage to Rauschenberg's early *Events* in collaboration with John Cage at Black Mountain College as well as his later "theater pieces."

Critics agree that Rauschenberg's later works were not as influential, but his continued commercial success allowed him to support emerging artists. He co-founded Artists Rights Today (ART) to lobby for artists' royalties on re-sales of their work, after observing the gains made by early collectors with the boom in the art market. In 1970, he co-founded Change, Inc., which helped struggling artists pay their medical bills. He became more politically active as he grew older, testifying on behalf of artists for the National Endowment of the Arts in the 1990s. His undying energy is at the root of his success as an artist and as a spokesman for artists.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES:

Below are Robert Rauschenberg's major influences, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
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INFLUENCES ON ARTIST



Jasper Johns

Years Worked: 1954 - present

INFLUENCED BY ARTIST



 Jasper Johns	 Robert Hughes	 Pop Art
 John Cage	 Leo Steinberg	 Conceptual Art
 Andy Warhol	 Leo Castelli	 Happenings
 Roy Lichtenstein		 Process Art
 Allan Kaprow		

Quotes

Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)

I really feel sorry for people who think things like soap dishes or mirrors or Coke bottles are ugly because they're surrounded by things like that all day long, and it must make them miserable.

I usually work in a direction until I know how to do it, then I stop. At the time that I am bored or understand - I use those words interchangeably - another appetite has formed. A lot of people try to think up ideas. I'm not one. I'd rather accept the irresistible possibilities of what I can't ignore.



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