Roy Lichtenstein
Born: 27 October 1923, New York, New York
Died: 29 September 1997, New York, New York

BORN   DIED

1850 '60 '70 '80 '90 '00 '10 '20 '30 '40 '50 '60 '70 '80 '90 '00 2010

■ Years Worked

© Estate of Roy Lichtenstein
Photographed by Robert McKeever in 1994

QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

Roy Lichtenstein was one of the first American Pop artists to achieve widespread renown, and he became a lightning rod for criticism of the movement. His early work ranged widely in style and subject matter, and displayed considerable understanding of modernist painting: Lichtenstein would often maintain that he was as interested in the abstract qualities of his images as he was in their subject matter. However, the mature Pop style he arrived at in 1961, which was inspired by comic strips, was greeted by accusations of banality, lack of originality and, later, even copying. His high-impact, iconic images have since become synonymous with Pop art, and his method of creating images, which blended aspects of mechanical reproduction and drawing by hand, has become central to critics' understanding of the significance of the movement.

Key Ideas

• Art had carried references to popular culture throughout the 20th century, but in Lichtenstein's works the styles, subject matter, and techniques of reproduction, common in popular culture appeared to dominate the art entirely. This marked a major shift away from Abstract Expressionism, whose often tragic themes were though to well up from the souls of the artists: Lichtenstein's inspirations came from the culture at large, and suggested little of the artist's individual feelings.

• Although, in the early 1960s, Lichtenstein was often casually accused of merely copying his pictures from cartoons, his method involved some considerable alteration of the source images. The extent of those changes, and the artist's rationale for introducing them, has long been central to discussions of his work, as it would seem to indicate whether he was interested above all in producing

pleasing, artistic compositions, or in shocking his viewers with the garish impact of popular culture.
• Lichtenstein's emphasis on methods of mechanical reproduction - particularly through his signature use of Ben Day dots - highlighted one of the central lessons of Pop art, that all forms of communication, all messages, are filtered through codes or languages. Arguably, he learned his appreciation of the value of codes from his early work, which drew on an eclectic range of modern painting. This appreciation may also have later encouraged him to make work inspired by masterpieces of modern art: in these works he argued that high art and popular were no different, both rely on code.

DETAILED VIEW:

Childhood

Roy Fox Lichtenstein was born in New York City and grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with his father Milton, a real-estate broker, his mother Beatrice, a homemaker, and his younger sister Renee. As a child, Lichtenstein spent time listening to science fiction radio programs, visiting the American Museum of Natural History, building model airplanes and drawing. As a teenager he nurtured his artistic interests by taking watercolor classes at Parsons School of Design, and in high school he started a jazz band.

Early Training

In 1940, Lichtenstein began taking Reginald Marsh's painting classes at the Art Students League, producing work very similar to Marsh's social realist style. Later that year, Lichtenstein enrolled at Ohio State University (OSU), where he studied drawing and design along with botany, history and literature. He created sculptural animal figures, as well as portraits and still life works influenced by the work of Picasso and Braque. At OSU, Lichtenstein also took a class with Hoyt Leon Sherman, whose theories about the connection between vision and perception, or "organized perception," became important concepts for Lichtenstein as his work evolved.

In 1943, Lichtenstein was drafted into the Army; as part of his tour of duty, he took engineering courses at De Paul University in Chicago. He also served as a clerk and draftsman, enlarging army newspaper cartoons for his commanding officer. He then traveled with the Army to England, France, Belgium and Germany. After receiving an honorable discharge in 1946, the artist returned to OSU to complete his Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. The next year he joined the graduate program at the university and served as an art instructor. His art at this time was inspired by aspects of Abstract Expressionism and biomorphic Surrealism.

In the next several years his work was included in gallery shows, such as a group exhibition at the Ten-Thirty Gallery in Cleveland, where he met his future wife Isabel Wilson, the gallery assistant at Ten-Thirty.. By this stage his paintings featured musicians, street workers and racecar drivers rendered in biomorphic shapes, and in a style that recalled the Surrealist work of Paul Klee. Over the next several years Lichtenstein's paintings featured birds and insects in this same Surrealist style, as well as medieval motifs, particularly imagery of knights and dragons. In addition to strictly two-dimensional paintings, Lichtenstein began nurturing what would become a long-standing interest in using multiple media; in his first solo show in New York, at Carlebach Gallery (1951), he exhibited three-dimensional assemblages of kings and horses made of wood, metal and found objects.

Mature Period

After moving to Cleveland with Isabel, Lichtenstein took on a number of commercial engineering and drafting jobs. His work at this time focused on cowboy and Native American motifs; more significantly, he created a rotating easel to be able to easily paint from all angles. The method of working (the rotation of the canvas) was more compelling to Lichtenstein: "I paint my own pictures upside down or sideways. I often don't even remember what most of them are about... The subjects aren't what hold my interest." In 1952, John Heller Gallery in New York began representing his work. Lichtenstein took an assistant professor position at SUNY Oswego in 1957, where his thickly textured paint and abstracted imagery drew from the Abstract Expressionist style. Unlike the Abstract Expressionists, however, he began to incorporate figures into his canvases; some of his paintings featured characters such as Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse hidden among the other depicted forms. Lichtenstein continued to teach, moving on to Rutgers' Douglass College in 1960 as an assistant professor, where he met Allan Kaprow. Kaprow introduced Lichtenstein to Claes Oldenburg, Lucas Samaras, Robert Watts, George Segal, Robert Whitman and others who were integral members of the happenings art scene of the 1950s and 60s. The group produced unique performative art pieces that differed each time depending on audience involvement, but Lichtenstein was inspired by their interest in cartoon imagery.

In 1961, Lichtenstein created *Look Mickey*, his first cartoon work using Ben-Day dots, a commercial printing style for comic books or illustrations where small, closely spaced, colored dots are combined to create contrasting colors. He later exaggerated these dots in

his paintings, a technique that came to define his style. The technique he developed at this time blended aspects of hand-drawing and mechanical reproduction: by 1963 he had settled on a procedure by which he first reproduced the chosen panel from a cartoon by hand, then projected the drawing using an opaque projector, traced it on to a canvas, then filled in the image with bold colors and stenciled Ben Day dots.

In 1961 gallery owner Leo Castelli began representing Lichtenstein's work, giving him a solo exhibition in 1962 that substantially elevated the artist's renown and revenue. His fame did not come without controversy: his compositions outraged some viewers, and prompted LIFE magazine to call him "one of the worst artists in America", albeit in a tongue-and-cheek fashion. Nevertheless, Lichtenstein soon began to show his work in major national exhibitions. In the 1960s, he continued using the Ben-Day dot technique in images of women and WWII combat scenes, as in *Drowning Girl* (1963), mostly adapted from issues of DC Comics. These cartoon-inspired paintings established Lichtenstein as an extremely prominent and immediately recognizable Pop Art figure, both revered and reviled for his challenges to traditional understandings of "fine art."

By the mid 1960s, Lichtenstein began creating large-scale murals, his first produced in 1964 for the World's Fair in Flushing, Queens. Moving beyond figural depictions, Lichtenstein also broadened his use of Ben-Day dots and bold, solid colors to depict landscapes, as in *Yellow Landscape* (1965). Such works often integrated industrial materials such as Plexiglas, metal, and a shimmery plastic called Rowlux, reflecting the artist's continued interest in using media beyond simply paint and canvas. Lichtenstein also began to create ceramic sculptures and, most iconically, produced a series of paintings of giant, cartoon-like brushstrokes covering the canvas, images which seemed to mock the Abstract Expressionist's use of the brushstroke as a signature and tool of individual expression. The second half of the 1960s also marked Lichtenstein's separation from his wife Isabel, and, a few years later, his marriage to Dorothy Herzka.

Lichtenstein began producing prints in 1962, using the off-set lithograph technique which was more often used in commercial printing; and he began a long-term collaboration with the printmaking studio Gemini G.E.L. in 1969. In the 1970s, he left New York City for

Southampton, where, inspired by Modern masters, he created still lifes and works with diverse textures and materials. Sculpture became an important focus during this time, particularly the use of bronze, which he used to produce large, painted sculptures of everyday objects such as lamps, pitchers and steaming coffee cups. Lichtenstein also created a series of paintings involving mirrors, inspired by historical use of mirror imagery in paintings to create a space beyond the canvas, as well as by the abstract designs used to symbolize mirrors in graphic art.

Late Period

By 1980, Lichtenstein was drawing from a wide variety of influences in his work, taking inspiration from Surrealism, Cubism and German Expressionism, and using many different types of media. He re-established a studio in Manhattan and became more interested in Abstract Expressionism, as well as in Geometric Abstraction. He created a series of home interiors in the 1990s, basing his designs on ads in the Yellow Pages. Additionally, he continued to produce large paintings and sculptures for public spaces. In 1995 he received the National Medal of Arts. After his death in 1997, the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation was established in 1999.

Legacy

Roy Lichtenstein played a critical role in subverting the skeptical view of commercial styles and subjects established by the Abstract Expressionists. By embracing "low" art such as comic books and popular illustration, Lichtenstein became one of the most important figures in the Pop Art movement. While his paintings of cartoons and comics are his most recognizable work, he had a prolific and somewhat eclectic career that drew from Cubism, Surrealism, and Expressionism. But it is his re-imagining of popular culture through the lens of traditional art history that has remained a considerable influence to later generations of artists, as Pop Art went on to significantly inform Postmodernism.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES:

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

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS

Henri Matisse

Pablo Picasso

Jasper Johns

Robert Rauschenberg

Reginald Marsh

Allan Kaprow

Claes Oldenburg

Expressionism

Cubism

Surrealism

Abstract Expressionism

Happenings

INFLUENCES ON ARTIST

Roy Lichtenstein
Years Worked: 1940 - 1997

INFLUENCED BY ARTIST

For more movements, artists and ideas on Modern Art
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ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
Keith Haring	**Andy Warhol**	**Pop Art**
Damien Hirst	**Frederic Tuten**	**Neo Pop Art**
Jeff Koons		
Takashi Murakami		

Quotes

"My use of evenly repeated dots and diagonal lines and uninflected color areas suggest that my work is right where it is, right on the canvas, definitely not a window into the world."

"Visible brushstrokes in a painting convey a sense of grand gesture. But, in my hands, the brushstroke becomes a depiction of grand gesture. So the contradiction between what I'm portraying and how I am portraying it is sharp. The brushstroke became very important for my work."

"I'm never drawing the object itself; I'm only drawing a depiction of the object - a kind of crystallized symbol of it."

"There are certain things that are usable, forceful, and vital about commercial art."

"All abstract artists try to tell you that what they do comes from nature, and I'm always trying to tell you that what I do is completely abstract."

"When I have used cartoon images, I've used them ironically."

Content written by:
Rachel Gershman

Major Works:

Popeye, Roy Lichtenstein, 1961
Oil on canvas, © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

Popeye was one of the very first Pop paintings that Lichtenstein created in the summer of 1961. At a later stage he would begin to focus on the generic human figures that appeared in cartoons of the period, but early on he chose immediately recognizable characters such as Mickey Mouse and Popeye (here Popeye appears with his rival Bluto). The work is also distinct in bring one of the last in which Lichtenstein actually signed his name on the surface of the picture: critic Michael Lobel has pointed out that he seems to have do so with increasing uncertainty in this piece, combining it with a copyright logo, and even echoing the logo in the form of the open tin can above it. Some have suggested that Popeye's punch was intended as a sly response to one of the reigning ideas in contemporary art criticism, that a picture's design should make an immediate visual impact. Whereas most believed this should be achieved with abstract art, Lichtenstein here demonstrated that one could achieve it just as well by borrowing from low culture.

Drowning Girl, Roy Lichtenstein, 1963, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

In the early 1960s Lichtenstein gained renown as a leading Pop Artists for paintings sourced from comic books, specifically DC Comics. Although artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns had previously integrated popular imagery into their works, no one hitherto had focused on cartoon imagery as exclusively as Lichtenstein. His work, along with that of Andy Warhol, heralded the beginning of the Pop Art movement, and, essentially, the end of Abstract Expressionism as the dominant style. Lichtenstein did not simply copy comic pages directly, he employed a complex technique which involved cropping images to create entirely new, dramatic compositions, as in *Drowning Girl*, whose source image included the woman's boyfriend standing on a boat above her. Lichtenstein also condensed the text of the comic book panels, locating language as another, crucial visual element; re-appropriating this emblematic aspect of commercial art for his paintings further challenged existing views about definitions of "high" art.

Yellow Landscape, Roy Lichtenstein, 1965, Kunstmuseum, St. Gallen, Switzerland
Rowlux and oil on paper, © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

Lichtenstein expanded his use of bold colors and Ben-Day dots beyond the figurative imagery of comic book pages, experimenting with a wide variety of materials; his landscape pictures are a particularly strong example of this interest. Lichtenstein made a number of collages and multi-media works that included motors, metal, and often a plastic paper called Rowlux that had a shimmery surface and suggested movement. By re-appropriating the traditional artistic motif of landscape and rendering it in his Pop idiom, Lichtenstein demonstrated his extensive knowledge of the history of art, and suggesting the proximity of high and low art forms. His interest in modern art also led Lichtenstein to create many works that directly referenced artists such as Cezanne, Picasso and Matisse.

Brushstrokes, Roy Lichtenstein, 1967, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Color screenprint on white wove paper, © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

Lichtenstein was a prolific printmaker throughout his career, and his prints played a substantial role in establishing printmaking as a significant art form in the 1960s. *Brushstrokes*, one such print, reflects his interest in the importance of the brushstroke in Abstract Expressionism. Abstract Expressionist artists had made the brushstroke a vehicle to directly communicate feelings; Lichtenstein brushstroke made a mockery of this aspiration, also suggesting that though Abstract Expressionists disdained commercialization, they were not immune to it - after all, many of their pictures were also created in series, using the same motifs again and again. Lichtenstein has said, "The real brushstrokes are just as pre-determined as the cartoon brushstrokes."

Mirror I, Roy Lichtenstein, 1977, San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, CA
Painted bronze, © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

Lichtenstein was particularly fascinated by the abstract way in which cartoonists drew mirrors, using diagonal lines to denote a reflective surface. He once remarked, "Now, you see those lines and you know it means 'mirror,' even though there are obviously no such lines in reality. It's a convention that we unconsciously accept." The mirror was a reoccurring leitmotif for Lichtenstein during the 1970s, but the artist had experimented with the graphic representation of reflection in earlier works, driven in part by an interest in the relationship between women and mirrors - both in historical artworks and in contemporary culture. Although the series might have been inspired by the appearance of mirrors in cartoons, Lichtenstein clearly also wanted to engage with themes - of reproduction and reflection - which have interested artists at least as far back as the Renaissance.

House II, Roy Lichtenstein, Model 1966, fabricated 1997, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Fabricated and painted aluminum, © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

Public and outdoor artworks, both painting and sculpture, constitute a significant portion of Lichtenstein's work, starting with a mural painted for the 1964 World's Fair in Queens, New York. The large-scale sculpture *House I* plays with perspective and illusion: depending on where the viewer stands, he or she will see the building's corner appear to move forward or back within space. Despite Lichtenstein's typical use of flat colors and the fact that this sculpture is really a flat piece of metal, the structure's design lends a sense of volume. He produced several *House* sculptures, and all of them can be connected to Lichtenstein's interest in the interiors of buildings, a subject he visited most explicitly in his later work.