Lichtenstein, Roy, 1923–1997

US painter, sculptor, and graphic artist. Lichtenstein experimented with abstract expressionism, but is now regarded as a leading exponent of pop art. Among his best-known paintings are *Whaam!* (1963) and *Good Morning, Darling* (1964).


Roy Lichtenstein was born in New York City in 1923. He attended school there, and in 1939 studied with Reginald Marsh at the Art Students League. The following year he entered Ohio State University. However, in 1943 his education was interrupted; he served in the U.S. Army for three years. He received his bachelor of fine arts degree from Ohio State University in 1946 and a master of fine arts in 1949. He taught at Ohio State until 1951, then went to Cleveland to work. In 1957 he started teaching at Oswego State College in New York; in 1960 he moved to Rutgers University. Three years later he gave up teaching to paint full time.

From 1951 to about 1957 Lichtenstein's paintings interpret themes of the American West—cowboys, Indians, and the like—in a style broadly imitative of modern European painters. Next, he began hiding images of comic strip figures including Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Bugs Bunny in his paintings. By 1961 he had evolved the imagery for which he became known. Broadly, he uses four types of images. The first three are advertisement illustrations—commonplace objects such as string, golf balls, kitchen curtains, slices of pie, or a hot dog. He also used commercialized variants of other artists’ works, such as *Woman with Flowered Hat* (1963), based on a coarse, supermarket reproduction of a Picasso, and adaptations of paintings by Piet Mondrian, of Gilbert Stuart’s portrait of George Washington, and of Claude Monet’s haystacks and cathedral facades.

The fourth type of Lichtenstein imagery appears in paintings based on comic strips, with their themes of passion, romance, science fiction, violence, and war. In these, Lichtenstein employs the techniques of commercial art: projectors magnify and spray-gun stencils create dots to make the pictures look like newspaper cartoons seen through a magnifying glass.

Lichtenstein’s art is irreverent, at times antiseptic, yet the impact is usually brutal. He is fascinated with converting the banal into art and debasing fine art through commercialization. In the late 1960s he turned to design elements found in Art-Deco and the commercial art of the 1930s, as if to explore pop art’s forerunners. In 1966 his work was included in the Venice Biennale. In 1969 New York’s Guggenheim Museum gave him a large retrospective exhibition.

The 1970s saw Lichtenstein continuing to experiment with new styles. His “mirror” paintings consist of spherical canvases with areas of color and dots. One of these, *Self-Portrait* (1978), follows Magritte in its playful placement of a mirror where a human head should be. During this decade, Lichtenstein also...
created a series of still life works in different styles.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Lichtenstein began to mix and match styles, often augmenting his cartoony images with ideas derived from abstract expressionism. Often his works relied on optical tricks or illusions, drawing his viewers into a debate over the nature of “reality.” Always the works were marked by Lichtenstein’s trademark sense of humor and the absurd.

Lichtenstein's longevity and prolific output brought him appreciation as one of America’s greatest living artists. His reputation as a gray eminence was solidified by his 1994 commission to design a painting to adorn the hull of the United State's entry in the America's Cup yacht race. A series of maritime-themed works followed. In 1995, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art launched a traveling exhibition, “The Prints of Roy Lichtenstein,” which covered more than two decades of his work in this medium.

The following year marked a major departure for Lichtenstein. In an exhibition at New York's Leo Castelli gallery, he unveiled a series of paintings, “Landscapes in the Chinese Style,” which eschewed irony in favor of delicate, wispy “impressions” of traditional Chinese landscape paintings. The series was praised for its subtlety and restraint, as recognizable Lichtenstein techniques--the use of modulated dots to represent mass for example--were used to support the compositions rather than to declare an individual style.

Lichtenstein died on September 29, 1997, at the age of 73. His status as an American artist endured long after his death. A major retrospective of Lichtenstein's work debuted May 16, 2012, at the Art Institute of Chicago, where it remained until September 3. The exhibition traveled to the National Gallery of Art through mid-January of 2013, then on to the Tate Modern in London. More than 100 of the artist's works, including paintings as well as drawings and sculptures, were included in the exhibit.

Two museum catalogs are *Roy Lichtenstein: Exhibition Held at the Tate Gallery, 6 January-4 February 1968* (1968), with an essay on the artist and an interview with him, and


written for the 1969 Guggenheim exhibition. Further material on Lichtenstein and pop art is in

    Lippard, Lucy R., Pop Art (1966), and

Books focused exclusively on the artist include

    Alloway, Lawrence, Roy Lichtenstein (1983),
    Walker, Lou Ann, Roy Lichtenstein: The Artist at Work (1994), and

“Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective,” National Gallery of Art,


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