

A Look at Andy Warhol

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Art Review: The Warhol Look/Glamour, Style, Fashion, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, February 21 to May 3, 1998.

The Art Gallery of Ontario is currently featuring an exhibit of the works of artist Andy Warhol. This provides the occasion for at least a preliminary consideration of one of the more controversial figures of postwar American culture.

Running until May 3, the show, entitled *The Warhol Look/Glamour, Style, Fashion*, is a comprehensive exhibit organized by the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. The AGO show documents the artist's life and career with contributions from family members, friends and associates. It includes paintings, photographs, film, sculpture, audio tape and other media in a retrospective devoted not only to Warhol, but also to his collaborators.

There are widely conflicting views about the significance of Warhol's work. He has been dubbed the most influential artist of the second half of the twentieth century and denounced as a thoroughgoing charlatan. Unfortunately, both views may contain grains of truth. He has had a significant influence on several generations of artists and on fashion trends and commercial art production since the 1950s. The question inevitably arises: what enduring value, if any, does his work possess?

Born Andrew Warhola in Forest City, Pennsylvania in 1928, Warhol was the youngest son of Czech immigrants, his father a laborer and coal miner. Growing up in the difficult conditions of the Depression years, the young Warhol was attracted to and collected glamorous images of Hollywood's movie stars and lifestyle. Influenced by his mother, who sold handcrafted decorations, he took to drawing and painting, reproducing the images of his idols and of current fashions. Graduating from the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh in 1949, he moved to New York City and launched a successful career in fashion and book illustration.

After making a name for himself with chic and often satiric store window displays, Warhol went on to gain

notoriety for his book covers and illustrations in publications such as Amy Vanderbilt's *Complete Book of Etiquette*. Involving himself in ventures as diverse as book publishing, set design and fashion illustration, he became attuned to trends in popular culture. With exhibits of his fashion drawings culminating in his participation in a group show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1956, Warhol emerged as a prominent figure in the New York art scene.

To understand the trajectory of Pop Art in the 1960s, in whose development Warhol played a central role, it is necessary to place this phenomenon historically.

In postwar America, Abstract Expressionism, identified with figures such as Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning and Mark Rothko, developed as the dominant trend in painting, and the one that attracted the most talented artists. The coming together of abstraction, with its desire to probe beneath the surface of day-to-day life to a more essential reality, and expressionism, with its aim of representing emotional states quite directly, could seem a natural progression. But is there such a thing in the art of the convulsive twentieth century as a "natural progression?"

The serious American artists of the postwar period faced a very difficult situation. Politically and intellectually, they were increasingly hemmed in. The American Century had begun, and with it the Cold War. How could anyone (except for the small number of genuine Marxists) consciously oppose such an apparently successful society? Opposition was largely forced, by the very state of political and social affairs, onto the unconscious plane. The existence of psychoanalysis, which seemed to offer a new universe of insights, and the discrediting of Marxism, thanks to the crimes of Stalinism, contributed to the particular form taken by art in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Whatever the intentions of the artists, the difficulties of the postwar situation became worked into an intellectual argument, encouraged by critics such as Clement Greenberg, that transformed inaccessibility into a virtue.

Cut off, not through its own fault, from the full spectrum of social life and unable to exercise its true social role, art became more and more about art. The passion and outrage of the postwar painters became muffled, or became itself a commodity. The US government even held up the works of the abstract expressionists as proof of the superiority of the “Free World” in its conflict with the Soviet bureaucracy. With their aims thus subverted, some of the painters eventually abandoned their work and a number found their way to an early grave.

This contradictory and somewhat tortured legacy formed the point of departure for the following generation of artists. Their outlook, in contrast to that of their predecessors, was shaped by the postwar boom which saw the emergence of the US as the dominant economic, political and, arguably, cultural force in the world. This encouraged the growth of a burgeoning market for fine art.

With the marginalization of what could be called the more thoughtful abstract expressionists, a demand for more lighthearted and self-approving artistic expression developed in the art market. It was in this environment that “pop” culture was nurtured.

In the late 1950s, with the waning of the nonrepresentational art of the abstract expressionists, artists such as Jasper Johns and James Rosenquist gained favor with painted images taken from everyday life, including such as items as the US flag and billboard advertisements. These were the early expressions of Pop Art that intersected with the kind of mirror imagery that Warhol had begun to develop in his own work.

Even within the “pop” movement there were those who spoke against the social polarization in America, against US involvement in Vietnam, and who identified with the civil rights movement. However, in distinction from those artists who used images of popular culture to comment critically or semicritically on American society, Warhol passively reflected that culture, and tailored his work to the growing market of art consumers. He mass produced several series of photographs, enhanced with simple silk screening, of movie stars, political figures and other celebrities. In addition he produced works with camp references to marketing and advertising, using food labels, such as his famous Campbell’s Soup series. (A sampling of this work can be found in this exhibit.)

By the mid-1960s Warhol was a wealthy man and had himself become a celebrity of the counterculture in America. His glittery loft known as The Factory became a center for social and creative activity of both the New

York bohemia and cultural elite. He was now making experimental films, often drawn-out works of little popular appeal, but which fanned his reputation as an innovator. In 1965 he stopped painting altogether and didn’t resume this work until 1972. Around this time he began his association with Lou Reed and John Cale and their rock band, The Velvet Underground. Together they launched the acclaimed multimedia show “The Exploding Plastic Inevitable,” an extravaganza of visual and musical bacchanalia.

A great many of the photographs and works in the Art Gallery of Ontario exhibit deal with this period. Much of this work depicts the artists who belonged to Warhol’s clique, in what could be described as a kind of incestuous glamorization. There is no question that a great number of highly talented and skilled individuals were drawn into this circle; photographers such as Francesco Scavulla and Nat Finkelstein. Whatever the intention, however, this work strikes one as cold and even nihilistic.

In 1969 Warhol began publication of the hip magazine *Interview*, which featured unexpurgated interviews with celebrities by celebrities. This publication epitomized the elitism and cynicism which had come to characterize Warhol’s work. Ultimately Warhol turned his own person into a commercial icon, selling himself as a model to pose in store windows and his image for use in advertising. In the last years of his life he was very active, dealing with a range of subjects from Renaissance imagery, a series of “camouflage” paintings, self-portraits and advertisements. Andy Warhol died of a heart attack in February 1987.

It is possible, and it is universally the case with serious figures, for an artist to transcend his limited view of the world in his work, but this must find expression in the elaboration of a more profound truth. If one is to judge an artist by how deeply he has felt the time in which he lived and worked, or by how he confronted its essential intellectual and artistic challenges, one would have to say that Warhol’s art does not pierce the surface. Despite the clever techniques and innovative design, the superficial substance of his work casts doubt on his seriousness as an artist. The body of his art captures essentially ephemeral features of a period of great social and artistic turmoil in a fashion that obscures as much as it illuminates.



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