

Roy lichtenstein – a true artist essay



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Many people debate whether the art of Roy Lichtenstein can actually be considered art.

A critic of the New York Times identified Roy Lichtenstein as “ one of the worst artists in America. ” (Tomkins/Adelman) Others insist that he is not an artist at all, that his paintings of blown-up comic strips, cheap ads and reproductions are dull copies of tasteless material. But an equally emphatic group of critics, museum officials and collectors find Lichtenstein’s pop art fascinating and beautiful. Lichtenstein, like many other artists during the fifties and sixties, painted in a style identified as Abstract Expressionism. (Livingstone 63) Together with artists such as Warhol, Rosenquist and Oldenburg he invented what is today referred to as “ Pop art”.

(Waldman 3) These artists find inspiration not in the blank canvas, action, or in the unconscious mind, but in the world around them. By taking symbols from popular culture, (hence the name pop art) they were trying to create something exactly the opposite of the extremely abstract paintings that were popular at the time. Lichtenstein, using both images and techniques that were thought upon as crude and inartistic, wanted to challenge fine art principles. He differed from other Abstract Expressionists because he always painted single-image paintings, instead of having many objects drawn on the same painting. Roy knew that Abstract Expressionism was the genre in which he wanted to paint, but he found that the masters of that style had already worked out most of its problems. Besides, he felt that it was too unrealistic and too inward.

He wanted people to appreciate the simple things in life and learn to notice the beauty in everyday objects. A simple brushstroke on a white canvas, for instance, became one of Lichtenstein's trademarks. Although Lichtenstein made many different types of paintings during his lifetime, the paintings most people associate the controversial artist with are his comic strips paintings. However, the comic-strip phase of his work was quite brief, lasting from 1961 to 1965, after which he moved on to other subjects and themes, such as landscapes, mirrors, interiors and, in the end, sculptures. (Waldman 21) When making his comic strip paintings, Lichtenstein started by finding a scene from a science fiction comic book that he liked and made a small sketch of the composition.

He then used a machine to project the sketch to the desired size and traced it onto his canvas. To simulate photoengraver's dots, another feature Lichtenstein added to his paintings to make them more special, he laid a metal screen on the canvas, spread oil paint over the screen with a roller and rubbed the paint through the holes with a small scrub brush. (Waldman 57) Undotted parts of the picture were masked with paper. Lichtenstein then painted in the letters and black outlines. This technique is called "the Benday-dot screen technique and is often used in advertising. (Waldman 23) The balloons are filled with text, not always straight from the original comic strip, but sometimes with words that Lichtenstein thought were better, words that often had some underlying meaning to them.

This use of both drawings and text in his paintings are features that makes Lichtenstein truly unique. He did not just include the balloons because he wanted the paintings to be as similar to their sources as possible. He did it

because he wanted to add another dimension to the paintings. The text in the balloon could lead the spectator into a fantasy about the past and the future of the lives of the characters in the painting. Critics sometimes argue that Lichtenstein's type of paintings freed him from having to make any decisions about such traditional matters as composition, proportion, drawing, color or style. Also, critics who did not know much about comics were sure that Roy's paintings were identical to their sources, and for this reason refused to call his works art.

Yet, a comparison of a Lichtenstein painting with its source reveals the complex ways in which he made the painting, beginning with the selection of a particular image, which he carefully chose among hundreds of comic strips, and extending to the clever modification of the original comic. " I reject a hundred images for every one I pick", Roy says. (Walker 9) Of course, a Lichtenstein painting of a spray can does not require the same drawing skills as, for example Monet's water lilies. However, his paintings do require careful choice of color, proportion, and style. Since Lichtenstein constantly had to convince people that his paintings ought to be recognized as art, these decisions became even more important to him than to any other artist.

He was obliged to choose something original, something new to paint, or else people would not think of him not as a true artist, but as someone who reproduced existing images, especially as his drawing technique did not require high-developed drawing skills. In answer to the accusations of merely reproducing pictures, Lichtenstein once said, " I don't draw a picture in order to reproduce it – I do it in order to recompose it. Nor am I trying to change it as much as possible. I try to make the minimum amount of change, although

sometimes I work from two or three different original cartoons and combine them. I go all the way from having my drawing almost like the original, to making it up altogether; it depends on what it is.

" (Madoff 198) The debate whether Roy Lichtenstein's work is art or not, is a debate that should not even exist. Lichtenstein never thought that what he was doing was anti-art. Anti-Europe, maybe, in the sense of making something that looked industrial and not like art, but in his mind it always was art. Roy once said, " I think you should approach art as something you really love to do. " (Walker 34) E. M.

Forester wrote in his paper " Not Looking at Pictures" that pictures are difficult to look at. It was never an easy thing for him, to find the structural significance of the paintings that graced the walls of the art galleries, him and his friend Roger Fry often frequented. It is the same for me, and many other people for that matter. Art is not easy to look at. However, it should not be defined by art critics, collectors, or museum officials; should be defined by us - the laymen of art who buy paintings we can relate to, and that we like, not paintings with excellent compositions.

Art is beauty, and beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Being able to find beauty in simple things is what makes artists truly special, and that is exactly what Lichtenstein did.