

# Impact of pop art and design on british culture of the 1960s



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Pop Art is a 20th century art movement and style that had its origins in England in the 1950s and spread across the globe (most notably the US) in the 60s. Pop artists often utilised the techniques and imagery of pop culture, incorporating everyday objects such as comic strips, billboards, supermarket products, pictures of celebrities and magazine advertisements into their work. The most well-known and influential artists were Richard Hamilton and David Hockney (British) and Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg (American). This paper will examine the impact of Pop Art on British culture of the 1960s, with a special emphasis on the movement's leading figure, David Hockney.

While Pop Art in its earliest incarnation in late 50s Britain had a nostalgic flavour, as it spread, it was consistently linked more to the wealth and prosperity of the post World War II era (Biddington, 2007). The term was first coined by the English critic Lawrence Alloway in a 1958 issue of *Architectural Digest* to describe the paintings that celebrated post-war consumerism, defied the attributes of Abstract Expressionism, and worshiped at the alter of materialism (Pioch, 2002). Practitioners of Pop Art replaced the epic with the everyday and the unique with the mass-produced, eroding the fixed divide between "high" and "low" art, "good" and "bad" taste and fine art and commercial art (ibid). Advertising and the media were some of Pop Art's favourite subjects, and the artists seemed to simultaneously celebrate and critique consumer society:

" Oftentimes the work itself suggested the depersonalized processes of mass production in areas of popular taste and kitsch previously considered outside the limits of fine art. It rejected the attributes associated with art as an

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expression of personality. Works were close enough to reality and at the same time it was clear that they were not ready-mades but artificial recreations of real things” (Damjanovic, 2006).

Considered by many to be the first Pop Art piece is Richard Hamilton’s “ Just What Is It that Makes Today’s Home so Different, so Appealing?”, which incorporated numerous references to popular culture and materialism (Biddington, 2007). Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg followed his lead and used popular imagery such as the American flag and beer cans in their paintings, collages and prints, while Andy Warhol favoured the use of famous people and everyday objects in his silkscreens (ibid). Alternatively, Roy Lichtenstein utilised a comic strip style in his paintings. However, perhaps the most important artist of them all (and certainly the most famous and highly publicised British artist of his generation) was David Hockney.

By age eleven he had already decided that he wanted to be an artist, and years later he attended the royal College of Art in London, where, in his own words, he

“ realised that there were two groups of students there: a traditional group, who carried on as they had done in art school, doing still life, life painting and figure compositions; and then what I thought of as the more adventurous, lively students, the brightest ones, who were involved in the art of their time. They were doing big Abstract Expressionist paintings on hardboard” (Lucie-Smith, 1999).

Hockney, in turn, tried his hand at abstraction, but found it too bleak. In search of his own style, he rejected figure-painting as “ anti-modern” and <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-pop-art-and-design-on-british-culture-of-the-1960s/>

experimented by including words in his paintings in order to humanise them; these, however, were soon joined by “ figures painted in a deliberately rough and rudimentary style which owed a great deal to Jean Dubuffet” (ibid).

After a prize-winning career at the Royal College of Art, Hockney achieved international success by the time he reached his mid-20s with a show at the Young Contemporaries Exhibition in January, 1961 (Pioch, 2002). This show marked the public emergence of Pop Art in the UK, with Hockney as one of the movement’s leaders. His paintings of this period were often playful and witty (very much in the vein of Pop Art), although he was also adept at more serious and traditionally representational portraiture, such as Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy (Tate, London, 1970) (ibid). Hockney was also a skilled draftsman and graphic artist, and his work in this field including etched illustrations to Cavafy’s Poems (1967) and Six Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm (1969).

Hockney’s success was so rapid that after leaving school he did not have to rely on teaching to make a living, like the majority of his contemporaries (Lucie-Smith, 1999). In the early sixties he travelled to Egypt, Italy, Germany and the United States. He fell in love with Los Angeles, where, in his own words:

“ Within a week of arriving there in this strange big city, not knowing a soul, I’d passed the driving test, bought a car, driven to Las Vegas and won some money, got myself a studio, started painting, all within a week. And I thought, it’s just how I imagined it would be” (ibid).

Upon his return to England he began to make a series of prints which were an updated version of Hogarth's *Rake's Progress*, and which reflected his American experiences (Gurewitsch, 2006). He also began using acrylics rather than oil paint, which led to five one-man shows in 1966 throughout Europe, and later his first major retrospective exhibition, at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London (Lucie-Smith, 1999).

By this time, Pop Art, with Hockney as its patron and star, was widely popular in Britain, and

“coincided with the youth and pop music phenomenon of the 1950s and 60s, and became very much a part of the image of fashionable, ‘swinging’ London. Peter Blake, for example, designed album covers for Elvis Presley and the Beatles and placed film stars such as Brigitte Bardot in his pictures in the same way that Warhol was immortalizing Marilyn Monroe in the USA” (West, 1996).

It could be argued that while Hockney's work was the impetus for the growing acceptance and influence of the movement, in many ways he himself was the reason for its success. For Hockney wasn't simply a talented artist; he was a personality. With his bleached hair, his outward homosexuality (the subtext of which was also found in his work), his vocal admiration of Whitman and Cavafy, his eccentricity and gregariousness made him instantly likeable (Lucie-Smith, 1999). There was even a film about him, his life and his work (Jack Hazan's *A Bigger Splash*) that was widely popular.

People saw in Hockney the embodiment of the freedom and “newness” of the 60s, the tearing down and humanising of the sacred and the revered, along with a newfound openness to sexuality, and it is difficult to say where the work stopped and the person began; that is, was Pop Art the influencer, or was it Hockney himself? Were the widespread effects attributed to the movement (“low” art rising to the status of “high” and vice-versa; the past’s powerful icons suddenly relegated to mere “products” and everyday objects achieving the level of works of art; pop culture supplanting tired, traditional culture; the old art world establishment being turned on its head; etc.) because of his paintings or his personality? Furthermore, was Hockney himself the catalyst for this, or was he merely following the zeitgeist? While it is difficult to say, two things are certain: Hockney was an important figure during this time, and 60s Britain was forever changed.

Hockney eventually turned away from Pop Art painting, and branched out into other forms, including photography, set design, costumes, lithographs and even work made using colour photocopiers. As for Pop Art, while it still survived in Britain, thanks to artists such as Hamilton, R. B. Kitaj, Allen Jones, Eduardo Paolozzi and Peter Blake, for the most part it became more associated with its American counterparts, ending up the territory of Warhol and the like. But the movement’s effects on the artwork and cultural climate lingered for a long time, virtually transforming television, advertising and packaging, not to mention photography (David Bailey, John Cowan, Robert Whitaker) and architecture (Cedric Price, Alison and Peter Smithson).

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