

Andy warhol: consumerism, mass production and pop art

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New Type of Culture

Born in 1928, most of Andy Warhol's adult life was spent during the years of an economic boom and the growing cultural of mass production and consumerism. After World War II, the way production was conducted changed forever with faster and more efficient machines being built. With that, a new type of culture developed, which relished in the cheap, fast, unsustainable and idealization of products, food, and high society. Working in advertising before transitioning to art, Warhol understood how to manipulate public opinion and thought, a technique he used tremendously in his artwork. However, his growing separation with his artwork, with the hiring of assistants to actually make the artwork, begged the question "What is Art?", challenging the way of creating art in a society that is so distant to human reaction. His embracement of popular culture and techniques that mimicked commercial production created an anti-aesthetic to his pieces.

Boredom and Removal

However, much debate arises on what position and purpose Warhol was attempting to convey in his artwork. Were his iconic screen prints an expressed concern for the loss of individuality or rather an expression of "compassion fatigue" - the way the public loses the ability to sympathize - due to the feeling of removal from the individual and the event? Warhol's depiction of mass production and idealization of celebrities says more about himself and his own opinions than it does as a reflection of society. His images reiterate a feeling of boredom and removal, a trait of popular culture

during the 60s, creating an anti-aesthetic with his simplistic, superficial, and general subjects.

The Culture of Consumerism and Mass Production

Andy Warhol's history of working in commercial advertising and marketing is strongly consistent in his artwork later on in his career. An artist is marked and influenced by his or her decade by "embodying expression through his or her artwork". Andy Warhol technique of screen printing was a very mechanical, repetitive and almost lifeless way of creating art compared to the previous art movement, Abstract Expressionism. With the economic boom of the 1960s, Andy Warhol's subjects were products that embodied consumerism, commercialism and mass production, and with that, a push his idea that commercialism of the 60s was draining people of their individuality. The technique of screen printing allowed Warhol to create a large number of originals with almost no effort, mimicking the growing mass production and desire to get the cheapest and newest objects. Andy technique changes the way art can be created, embodies the period of the 60s, and reveals Andy Warhol's position with consumerism. All this information begs the question To what extent did Andy Warhol's technique of screen printing and subject matters is meant to create an anti-aesthetic to the growing culture of consumerism and mass production of the 60s?

Warhol's Early Career

To understand what Warhol pieces are trying to convey, it is crucial to analyze his background in advertisement, his early artwork, referring to mass production and celebrities, and his own vision of himself and how that

trickled down into his artwork. Understanding the meaning behind Warhol's pieces gives an insight into how consumer obsessed society manifests in an individual. In order to understand how Andy Warhol's technique channels the period of the early 60s while also expressing his own opinion of society in his own respective life, one must further investigate his background, the economic and social behavior of Americans during the 60s, and analyze the artistic techniques employed in his art pieces. His early life and career helped Warhol develop the techniques to make a spotless internalization of the growing culture of consumerism in the 60s, while also evoking his own criticism of the way Americans relished in consumerism and lavish spending in the 50s and 60s.

Andy Warhol first began his career working in advertisement, creating commercial artwork for major advertising firms such as Glamour Magazine, Vogue and The New Yorker. His early career and education at the Carnegie Institute of Technology (attended in 1945) played a monumental role in developing his artistic skills and techniques. Commercial art is masked as an art form focused on influencing public opinion and promotion, which played a tremendous role in the subject matter of Warhols. His background in consumer culture translated into his early artwork in the early 60s such as Campbell's Soup Cans and Dollar Bill paintings, in which the subject is consumerism and advertising.

Consumerism and Pop Art

Andy Warhol's freelance artistic career emerged in the early 60s, a period marked by great economic boom similar to that of the 1920s. However, the

60s did not experience inflation or a recession, leaving its markets to flourish and confidence in consumers to spend their money more and more on novelties and themselves with growing income in the middle class. Major shifts also developed following the second world war within American business. Pre-existing corporations began to shift the way they operated and merged to become “larger, more powerful conglomerates”. Technological advancements in the agricultural field and production of products made it possible for machines to take the place of a worker. Business searched for cheaper labor and cheaper production costs, leading to more discount chain stores and inexpensive fast-food restaurant booming during the 60s. Consumers shopping methods changed with it, as consumers were increasingly buying at these discount stores, buying in larger quantities. People were no longer purchasing items out of need but rather for the luxury of being able to buy new products. People continually feed into the advertisement to purchase often and in large bulks, leading to historians characterizing the 60s as the era and height of consumerism.

With new changes in American society, a new type of art genre emerged: Pop Art. Pop Art manifested out of the full-blown American culture of consumerism of the 50s and 60s. The art form is recognized for its use of “popular culture, as it was transmitted by the media; they [artists] showed a preference for stereotypes, clichés, and common places connected to the American way of life”. British artist Richard Hamilton explained Pop Art as ‘popular, transient, expendable, low cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, big business.’ Andy Warhol’s technique of screen

printing, a process of creating and using (a) stencil(s) to create an image, in his artwork and subject matters umbrellas Hamilton's definition of Pop art. Warhol's was known for his "deadpan riffs" on contemporary mass culture. Warhol's technique of screen printing itself has been alluded to mimic the production techniques of mass production. The almost effortless process allows the artist to repeatedly print the same artwork over and over again, allowing a design to be consistently produced without actually painting or creating a the copied work. The very robotic technique of screen printing removed the artists from the painting and made it mechanical, like as if a factory had made it.

Warhol's early paintings were centered around common, household products, 'all the great modern things that Abstract Expressionists tried to avoid', stated Ostworld, 2007. The reason for this was so that the audience could understand a relation to the subject, something that was more difficult to conceive in the previous art genre, Abstract Expressionism. He wasn't just painting mass production, he was embodying it. Campbell's Soup Cans, 1962 One of the most famous artworks that clearly related to consumer culture was Campbell's Soup Cans made in 1962. When Warhol first exhibited the art piece, he displayed them together in rows, almost like products on the shelves of a grocery store. At that time, Campbell sold only 32 flavors of soup, each one corresponding to the 32 cans screen printed. The repetition and uniformity of the cans by carefully reproducing the image 32 times, only changing the labels. The only thing that distinguishes the cans are its label, distinguishing them by variety. Some have analyzed the concept behind the

Campbell's Soup Cans as Warhol's way of mimicking pop culture and “reproduction of a critical truth about society: the truth. . . of an alienated society that denies the individuality of its members.” (Walker, pg 4).

However, one examining Warhol's own comments on the soup, which he says “ I used to drink it. I used to have the same lunch every day, for 20 years, I guess, the same thing over and over again.”