

# Post war developments of pop art and consumerism



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

**What were the most significant changes in consumer behaviour in America after 1945? In what ways did these changes have an impact on the production of art?**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this essay is to outline the ways in which consumer behaviour changed in the United States after 1945, and the ways in which the production, and the content, of art reflected these times. These were the years following the Second World War, and advances in technology made during the war were now being used to change the ordinary way of life of American citizens during the new time of peace. National wealth had increased, and the population was very much looking to the future, which seemed more affluent, easier and more convenient than ever before.

Buying and spending quickly became the main cultural preoccupation as corporations made use of war-time technology to bring consumers the products of the future today: television, processed food, vacuum cleaners, synthetic fabrics, and Tupperware. ([www. ucalgary. ca](http://www.ucalgary.ca))

In this essay I will show how Pop Art developed in America, and how these newly fashionable artists drew on the consumerist culture of the time to create a kind of art that had not been seen before.

## **CONSUMERISM IN POST-WAR AMERICA**

In postwar America, the public became more brand-conscious - advertising became much more advanced and was seen as crucial to business, and branding and company logos were part of the everyday landscape. There were technical developments in photography, broadcasting and the

invention of television. Sociology in the US was now more concerned with the masses, and pop art identified with this. (Alloway: 1974: 5)

In 1960 the General Motors Corporation spent \$66.3 million on advertising, the most of any corporation in that year, but in 1968 Proctor & Gamble took the lead at \$196.3 million – a 200% increase in the top advertising budget in only eight years. Likewise, the advertising revenues for magazines between 1958 and 1968 increased 150%, while the advertising revenues for television in the same period rose nearly 250%. (www. ucalgary. ca)

Lifestyle advertising was conceived – instead of pre-war adverts which would have simply described the product and what it literally did, now advertisers wanted to make people think that if they bought a certain product it would be central in changing their life, making them better, happier, more successful.

Advertisements promise such abstract desires as beauty, success at work, success in relationships, or the ability to be a better person physically, mentally, and socially.

Social historian Christin Mamiya has argued that the changes brought about in America by the increased industrialisation and urbanisation were those that made the public more susceptible to the media's influence:

In the alienation and non-communal world of urban society it became increasingly important to rely on outward appearances to define self-worth and success, the tools of which advertising provided. (www. ucalgary. ca)

John F. Kennedy, elected as President in 1960, fully endorsed the new consumerist ethic through his policy. Kennedy's government followed the work of British economist John Maynard Keynes, who in earlier decades had written that the key to a nation's collective wealth lay in the individual spending of individuals.

The more money citizens spent, the greater the national wealth would be. The Kennedy government was the first to implement this theory into both domestic and foreign economic policies, thereby officially endorsing and promoting mass production, mass distribution, advertising, and inadvertently, the idea of "keeping up with the Joneses". (www. ucalgary. ca)

As a result of the war, America felt a new patriotism which was reflected in the all-Americanness of branding products and celebrities. As the wealth of the country increased, and people were inclined to celebrate their status (personal status reflecting the greatness of the country - the American dream) and also to celebrate having life easy in comparison to the hardship and compromises of the war years, products were designed to save time and effort.

Advertising was particularly aimed at women in the home - household products, food, housekeeping, clothes, also things that made bored housewives feel more glamorous. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, Hollywood had also taken the idea of the movie star to another level. Celebrity-watching therefore became a more significant part of the public's lives, and the faces of celebrities were ubiquitous. The most frequently depicted face in art

during this time was that of Kennedy, as he, more than anyone, had realised early on the importance of media marketing and image-creation.

The consumerist ideology was therefore perpetuated by the mass media, in radio, television, cinema and print media.

## **POPULAR ART IN THE US**

This was reflected in art both in terms of the content, and the methods of production and distribution of art. Pop Art originated in New York in the late 1950's/early '60s, and intentionally subverted critical ideas of what constituted 'art.' Household objects and celebrities faces were the subjects:

Suddenly, T. V. dinners and canned spaghetti, department store dresses and blue suede shoes, tailfins and tires were the subject of paintings and sculptures gracing the window fronts of art galleries. ([www. ucalgary. ca](http://www.ucalgary.ca))

Claes Oldenburg, Tom Wesselmann, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and, most famously Andy Warhol were among the leading names of Pop Art. Most of the Pop Artists had previously worked in commercial advertising and printing.

Printing presses were used to quickly produce hundreds of standardised images which could then be mass-distributed. Andy Warhol was one of the first to do this; instead of selling unique pieces of work for a high price, he preferred to produce multiple silk-screened copies which were sold for a low price but which together made up large profits. The ideas of mass and standardisation would be seen therefore both in the fact that one piece of art

work contained dozens of cola bottles, and also that that piece was itself reproduced again and again.

Therefore art became visible to greater sections of the population and to lower classes, because of its positioning - images were seen in conjunction with advertising and printed on clothing and accessories, instead of hidden away in galleries - and its content - where as traditional fine or 'high' art requires some academic learning for the viewer to know the correct ways of appreciating it, tins of baked beans were recognisable to all and needed little interpretation.

Americanness had been expressed differently in the late 40s and 50s:

Abstract Expressionism is characterised by splashes and rhythms of colours across the canvas, often with no subject other than the emotion that the finished image creates in the viewer. It celebrated the individual because it was highly personal. ([www. ucalgary. ca](http://www.ucalgary.ca))

This art was critically acclaimed, but unapproachable to much of the general public, who found it difficult to understand and doubted its artistic credibility. Pop artists reacted directly against the assumptions made by the Abstract Expressionists; they believed that art should be 'for the people,' and so they celebrated every-day objects in a style of art that was easily approachable.

Pop Art was first seen in a particular school of thought in Britain in the mid-50's, invented by the Independent Group. This was a group of artists and intellectuals who were fascinated by the effect that post-war American consumerism was having on British culture. Therefore they focused on the

trappings of a materialist, brand-conscious culture. The objects depicted in their art were often cheap and defied traditional notions of good taste.

British artist Richard Hamilton is regarded as the first to expressly define Pop Art. He characterised it as:

Popular (designed for a mass audience) Transient (short-term solution)  
Expendable (easily-forgotten) Low Cost Mass produced Young (aimed at youth) Witty Sexy Gimmicky Glamorous Big business. (www. ucalgary. ca)

It has been argued that the work of the Independent Group probably did not influence the American Pop Artists as they started creating work later in the decade. American artists would likely be unaware of this small and avant-garde movement in Britain. If this is the case, it is evidence of the widespread influence of post-war consumerism and advertising, that people on both sides of the Atlantic began to develop similar ideas about art.

Critics were deeply offended Pop Art, believing that it was of no real artistic merit. No progress was made, they argued, in the use of colour or materials, and the subject matter was frequently in bad taste or simply banal. Unlike Folk Art, pop culture is created on a huge scale to please the mainstream. It is those emblems and messages that we all understand, meaning that we have one shared culture that obliterates other more local or personal cultures. (Alloway: 1974: 4)

But Pop Art was light-hearted, quirky and tongue-in-cheek, even blasé, which appealed to a nation of people who after years of war and economic depression, did not want to be too reflective or melancholy. Thus, it was oddly ambivalent. Pop Artists played to these popular needs/desires, and yet <https://assignbuster.com/post-war-developments-of-pop-art-and-consumerism/>

bitterly criticised them at the same time. The tone of Pop Art in general was humorous, but artists seemed to be satirising a culture that had 'dumbed down,' becoming obsessed with convenience, speed, instantly recognisable iconic images and brand names. For instance Rosenquist painted images of rockets alongside plates of spaghetti, to draw attention to what he saw as the absurdness of modern concerns. Lichtenstein painted huge versions of cartoon strips, using the stock themes of romance and violence, and the style of using hundreds of coloured dots to make up the impression of an area of block colour, in order to show how formulaic and non-individual this popular form of art was.

Warhol criticised the mass media in his work, such as his prints of Marilyn Monroe's face, made after she committed suicide in 1962, which echoed what Steven Madorff describes as the "repeated, endless manufacture" of the celebrity. Similarly, Warhol created a print of repeated images of a crashed car and mangled corpses, in criticism of the way he believed news reports could reduce a terrible tragedy to a single throwaway image. He produced the painting '129 Die In Jet,' after an article about 129 American tourists who were killed in a plane crash over Paris-Orlis. The book draws on Susan Sonag in saying that the more you see pictures, the less real the actual event is. (Museum Ludwig Cologne: 1996: 474)

## **CONCLUSION**

The Pop Artists made their art out of drawing attention to the consumerist nature of American culture. To Art critics' dismay, household objects such as tinned food, icons of the mass media and such 'low art' conventions such as comic book drawing now became the subjects of 'high art.' Pop Artists had <https://assignbuster.com/post-war-developments-of-pop-art-and-consumerism/>



correctly identified the things that were important to the average American citizen, and the content, means of production, and location of their art all reflected this.

In many ways Pop Art seemed satirical, wry and at times outright critical. The images made at this time have immortalised an image of post-war America as superficial, image-obsessed and unconcerned with any real depth or subtlety. However the means of production meant that artists were reaping the benefits of this culture. Instead of labouring over an oil painting for months, artists now could print a simple image hundreds of times - money could be made for every print sold, and also galleries would now accept paying high prices for a piece of work that had taken very little time to complete. It was as though artists were portraying Americans as ignorant and lazy, but celebrating and taking advantage of just that.

## References

Alloway, Lawrence (1974) *American Pop Art* , New York: Collier.

Lippard, Lucy (1966) *Pop Art* , London: Thames & Hudson

Museum Ludwig Cologne (1996) *20th Century Art* , Taschen.

[http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied\\_history/tutor/popculture/PfourT.html](http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/popculture/PfourT.html)