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## Obituary: Roy Lichtenstein

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[Roy Lichtenstein](#)

Roy Lichtenstein, artist: born New York 27 October 1923; married 1949 Isabel Wilson (two sons; marriage dissolved), 1968 Dorothy Herzka; died New York 29 September 1997.

The veteran Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein built his very considerable fame and fortune on the unlikely foundations of irony and decoration. He was, par excellence, an artist with attitude, trading in an unabashedly chic nihilism.

At the outset of his career he was able to shock a highbrow art scene with brazen, seemingly unmediated and uncritical appropriations of the visual detritus of mass culture. Look Mickey (1961) was one of the defining images of the new Pop style: Donald Duck out fishing with his friend exclaims "Look, Mickey, I've hooked a big one" in a frame of Disney cartoon exploded on to canvas.

By the time his art matured - if one can use this word in relation to Lichtenstein - the shock turned to bemusement that an artist could continue to produce work within such slight visual and intellectual confines as he had set for himself. Till his dying day, his trademark style remained the cartoon writ large.

In a 1963 interview Lichtenstein established his credentials as a career nihilist with a series of answers as suave, nonchalant and savvy as his art and style always remained. Asked if he was anti-experimental, he replied: "I think so, and anti-contemplative, anti-nuance, anti - getting - away - from - the-tyranny-of-the-rectangle, anti-movement-and-light, anti-mystery, anti - paint - quality, anti-Zen, and anti all of those brilliant ideas of preceding movements which everyone understands so thoroughly.

Lichtenstein really was Mr Cool. He had none of the complexity and tragic element of Andy Warhol, nor the implicitly critical attitude of Claes Oldenburg or Allen Kaprow (an early mentor). His 1960s work was read by some as an indictment of consumer culture, but as his career proceeded it became clear that his was far more of a celebration of pop culture than a critique. Actually, though, even to talk of celebration is to over-interpret. Lichtenstein always maintained a stiff upper lip of diffident neutrality. Whether he was parodying old masters or appropriating romance and action comic strips he would go gentle on the originals, as keen to exploit the visual effectiveness of his source material as to debunk it.

Roy Lichtenstein was born in New York City in 1923 and took classes with the great Realist painter Reginald Marsh at the Art Students League in 1940. He completed his studies in the Mid-West, however, staying on to teach at Ohio State University after military service in Europe. He once joked that there didn't seem much going on in New York at the time.

He was quite candid about his desire to cut an image in an art scene dominated by Abstract Expressionism which left little room for a newcomer to do anything shocking. "It was hard to get a painting that was despicable enough so that no one would hang it. . . The one thing everyone hated was commercial art; apparently they didn't hate that enough either."

In his use and adaptation of graphic design within a fine-art context Lichtenstein was supremely skilful; part of his brilliance, in fact, was to make it look as if his appropriation was unmediated. Initially he answered the charge that he did not transform his source material by arguing - shrewdly - that no art transforms: "It doesn't. It just plain forms."

But, apart from the transformation that occurs through dislocation of scale, giving new aesthetic meaning to the expediences of printing technology - the Ben Day dots, the bold, simplified curves - within its new context, Lichtenstein did, as it happens, modify his sources, splicing together various images to form the ready-made he actually wanted, simplifying captions, idealising features. This was especially the case with his women of the mid-1960s: all-American square-jawed cinematic blondes. And his choice of materials by this stage was already nostalgic for a golden age of mass culture at least a decade anterior.

Lichtenstein's appropriations may have started raw, but they soon became, if not cooked, at least cured. However indignant one is at their banality, his classic works have an undoubted presence, if not aura.

When Lichtenstein finally moved on from the ready-made images to originate his own compositions he retained as his signature style the Ben Day dot and other accoutrements of the comic strip. With this language, at once super-impersonal and unmistakably his own, he was equipped with all the means necessary for endless cycles of pastiche. Where Cezanne set out to redo Poussin after nature, Lichtenstein could redo Picasso, Leger, Matisse, Monet haystacks, Chinese scroll painting, Mondrian, even Herge (Tintin) after Ben Day.

His most pertinent parody - his best art-world cartoon - was his depictions of beefy, dripping, slapdash abstract expressionist "brushstrokes", meticulously achieved in black outline and pure colour over a "canvas" made up of the inevitable dots.

Because he generally worked in primary colours and his adopted technique entailed bright, clean, emphatic shapes, Lichtenstein had fortuitously - or ingeniously - hit upon a style which blended well with the very high modernism he was at work debunking. His scale, colour and facture actually harmonised with all the strictures of pure abstraction, profoundly ill at ease though Pop Art and painterly abstraction were with one another. Lichtenstein himself believed that "the formalist statement in my work will become clearer in time".

Represented from 1962 by the redoubtable dealer Leo Castelli, Lichtenstein settled down to enjoy a career of uninterrupted, seemingly untroubled commercial and institutional success. By the end, he seemed almost to be beyond irony, his reworkings of classical images or his still-lives and interiors were content with their own masterful slickness. (On the other hand, his late works can be seen to be ironic about his own irony!) A "straight" work like Interior with Built-In Bar, 1991, exhibited so effectively in a room by itself at the Royal Academy's Pop Art exhibition that year, achieves a classical poise and stasis that belies the insolence of its banal and reductive means.

By this stage, this comic-strip style was more famous for being Lichtenstein's than for being Benjamin Day's or the mass media's. In a peculiar twist, the ubiquitous had become particular.