

Why is Pop Art so important?

Pop Art is an art movement that emerged in the 1950s and still affects art today. At its core, it has a key philosophical idea of challenging and subverting hundreds of years of tradition and of fine art, deriving works from mass-manufactured and mundane objects that surround us every day, be it advertisements, packaging or magazines. Picasso and Braque had already introduced items such as drinks labels and cut-outs from newspapers into their collages. With the invention and arrival of plastics, contemporary consumer culture was made possible and artists were surrounded by new materials that they could work with. Pop artists adapted and assimilated ideas from previous movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism. The movement emerged alongside the consumerism boom once the short-term effects and paranoia of the World Wars were over, aiming to incorporate optimistic ideals. On a grand scale, pop art sought to promote the utopian elements of capitalism and let the negative ones fall away, impacting the lives of people beyond the art world.

Art is a very broad spectrum which is hard to define comprehensively. What people expect of art, however, is much a much narrower, more opinionated topic. Pop art, as an overarching idea, questioned our expectations of art, be they visual, material or societal. It was the first time that advertisements were considered as a form of art, for example. It considered art as a way of presenting ideas in a form that can be understood by anyone, unlike a niche thesis or paper. A work of art ought to be open and subject to all ideas and opinions.



Several highly influential artists from the movement became some of the most well-known names of the 20th century, such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Some of the first artists to gain fame in Pop Art, however, include Richard Hamilton, with his work *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* which reached iconic status, ironically parodying the notion that the future would be dominated by consumerism. Through his work, he emphasised that the collage he made (although thoroughly thought-through and planned) was made from commonplace materials, challenging years of painterly tradition. On the other hand, the depicted subject of his was not overly striking, suggesting a seventeenth-century Dutch painting of a couple at home.

Pop art was much more than just an art movement, it was a philosophical idea. Even though – chronologically – the movement follows Abstract Expressionism, it was the polar opposite, with a completely different aim. Many pop artists followed ideas initialised by the Dadaists, in particular of Marcel Duchamp, with his work “The Fountain” – a mass-manufactured urinal that obviously and radically undermined what could be considered as a work of art. Instead of making art an elitist subject, with esoteric themes of morality and spirituality, pop art celebrated images drawn from popular culture.

Artists incorporated the world around them because of the fundamental idea that art is grounded in one's experience and perception of the world. This approach suggested that art is for everyone since everyone participates in the shaping of our culture, merging together both “high” and “low” art. Art critics in the early 60s saw pop art as a threat to art, in particular to “high” art.

If there was one artist who personified Pop Art that would have to be Andy Warhol. He embodied the spirit of already existing pop culture and brought up its imagery to the status of museum art, using second-hand images of celebrities which he believed had an inherent banality that made them more interesting. He felt that through the mass-reproduction and mass-exposure of these images and their overuse in many areas they had been stripped of their meaning. He used such images specifically and made the viewer look at them in new ways. His very particular style involved an emotional detachment and a detachment of himself from the role of an artist. and in this he detaches himself from the role of an artist.

It can be argued that the figurehead of Pop Art is his work *Marilyn Diptych* (1962). It was produced just after the actress' death – a prominent example of how this movement aimed to incorporate the world surrounding the artist. This work is a silkscreen print, with fifty images of Marilyn Monroe, appropriated from the 1953 film *Niagara* and immortalised as art. The film star represented beauty; she was an idol and a goddess, an exemplar of perfection and femininity, representing American ideals and culture, with massive exposure throughout the world. By producing this work, the artist tapped into the cult of celebrity. Even though Warhol could have produced his own drawing of Monroe, he desired this critical distance to show that art indeed was for everyone and not only for the upper class, as Monroe was a significant part of culture and would have featured in magazines, advertisements and packaging. The word “diptych” signifies a painting with two sides, especially



in reference to an altarpiece, inviting us to worship the legendary icon. The left-hand side of the print asks many questions about the application of colour, with its bright, crude, big blocks of synthetic, exaggerated, unnatural colours used in a primitive way. The other side, however, is in grayscale. The black and white tones remind the viewer of colour and draw attention to its absence. Warhol's repetition of the image, each one not much different from the others, gives it the mass-manufactured feeling that pop art aimed for. The individual photograph loses its meaning and in physical terms, it loses its clarity and definition. Warhol explained:

"In August 62 I started doing silkscreens. I wanted something stronger that gave more of an assembly line effect. With silkscreening you pick a photograph, blow it up, transfer it in glue onto silk, and then roll ink across it so the ink goes through the silk but not through the glue. That way you get the same image, slightly different each time. It was all so simple quick and chancy. I was thrilled with it. When Marilyn Monroe happened to die that month, I got the idea to make screens of her beautiful face, the first Marilyns." - Warhol



Soon after Warhol's experimentation with silkscreens, he moved on to paintings and wooden "replicas" of common household items, with works such as *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) and *Brillo Soap Pads Boxes* (1964). Warhol himself provocatively stated that "The reason I'm painting this way is because I want to be a machine." Unlike the original Brillo boxes, which were made of cardboard, Warhol's work is an acrylic-painted cube of wood. By taking the function and purpose out of the boxes that people daily take for granted, by placing them out of their usual household context,



Warhol forces the viewer to look at them with fresh eyes. These works firmly declare that commercial packaging is a form of art, transforming a banal and mundane everyday item into a glamorous and desirable work of art.



Roy Lichtenstein developed an art style that resembled that of a comic strip. In order to make the viewer consider the comic in a new light, his paintings were greatly increased in size from the original comic strip. Initially, these large-scale paintings were not considered by art galleries due to how unusual and different they were to previous art, but they were soon embraced as the term "Pop Art" was officially coined in December 1962. In the early 60s Lichtenstein was accused of simply copying content from cartoons, however, his way of working required significant thought, such as his stylistic feature of using Ben-Day dots. "I take a cliché and try to organize its forms to make it monumental. The difference is often not great, but it is crucial," he once said when discussing his work. Irony and cliché were a significant underlying part of his work.

Many agree that Pop art is a very influential movement because to this day it has an effect on contemporary art. Even though one can argue that art now has somewhat less of an effect on our everyday lives than in the middle of the 20th century, contemporary artists frequently use and incorporate images of mass-production, celebrities and prominent media figures. Over the years, pop art has evolved but stays relevant, influential and inspirational, remaining a style that artists continue to embrace. Johannes Albers is a German conceptual artist, who in his exhibition *Songs of Nothing* reproduces items of everyday domesticity, presenting a series of much larger than life sculptures of pens scattered on the floor of the exhibition hall. He calls it a "pseudo-political questioning element". Jeff Koons is an American artist who is known for working with popular culture subjects in his sculptures of banal objects; his metal balloon bunny sculpture recently sold for \$91 million, which is an indicator of pop art's relevance and potential to excite people's minds.



In conclusion, pop art was characterised by imagery of popular culture and consumerism. It coincided with the boom in the globalisation of pop music and popular culture, influenced by many previous movements, seeking to make art accessible to everyone. This was what made pop art so important.

