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THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE EXHIBITION EVER DEVOTED TO ROY LICHTENSTEIN
PROVES THE PRESCIENT POWER OF POP

Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective Features More than 160 Works by the Influential American Artist
Premieres at the Art Institute of Chicago May 16, 2012
Travels to Washington, D.C., London, and Paris

Whaam! Bratatat! Varoom! The Art Institute of Chicago explodes this summer with the energy of Roy Lichtenstein in the largest exhibition of the seminal Pop artist to date. More than 160 of Lichtenstein's works, from the familiar to the completely unexpected, will be on view in the first of only two American venues for Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective. Bringing together never-before-seen drawings, paintings, and sculpture, this exhibition presents the deepest exploration of Lichtenstein's signature style and its myriad applications across one of the most prolific careers in 20th-century art. The result is a dazzling array of color and dynamism, traversing art historical movements, magazine advertisements and comics, nudes and heroes, sea and sky. Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective is slated to be a monumental exhibition that captures the power of Pop with works of art as fresh and revolutionary as they were 50 years ago. Bank of America is the Global Sponsor of the exhibition.

Following its presentation at the Art Institute, from May 16 to September 3, 2012, Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective will travel to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (October 14, 2012–January 13, 2013); the Tate Modern, London (February 21–May 27, 2013); and the Centre Pompidou in Paris (July 3–November 4, 2013).
“The Art Institute of Chicago has several important works by Roy Lichtenstein in its permanent collection, including *Brushstroke with Spatter* (1966) and *Mirror #3 (Six Panels)* (1971),” said James Rondeau, Frances and Thomas Dittmer Chair and Curator, Department of Contemporary Art at the Art Institute. “But it has long been an ambition of mine to present these works in the context of Lichtenstein’s rich and impressive career. Lichtenstein is rightly recognized for being a foundational Pop artist who created some of the most iconic works of the 20th century. But these works—the comic strips, the war imagery—represent only part of Lichtenstein’s decades-long career. Our aim with this exhibition is to explore the full range of absorbing contradictions at the heart of Lichtenstein’s work—starting with the paradox that Lichtenstein systematically dismantled the history of modern art while becoming a fixture in that canon. Lichtenstein, we hope to show, was a profoundly radical artist with a lasting impact on the history of 20th-century art.”

With Bank of America’s global sponsorship of *Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective*, the exhibition is poised to be one of the defining presentations of the artist’s work both in the United States and abroad. “Bank of America is pleased to be the Global Sponsor of *Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective*, which features a unique perspective into the creative imagery of an artist that has truly influenced pop culture,” said Rena DeSisto, Bank of America global arts and culture executive. “Bank of America supports more than 5,000 arts institutions around the world each year. Our support of the arts engages individuals, organizations, and cultures in creative ways to build mutual respect and insight. When we invest in the arts, we strengthen institutions that in turn contribute to local economies and we expand access to experiences that challenge, educate, inspire, and motivate.”

Roy Lichtenstein (1923–1997) was born in New York City and grew up immersed in the heady cultural life of that metropolis, showing an early interest in art, design, and music. But the long arc of Lichtenstein’s artistic career did not begin until his formal training at Ohio State University continuing through his graduate years following his service in World War II. His early art hewed closely to a playful figurative style that included Cubist-inspired renderings of fairytales and medieval subjects along with subjects from American history to engineer parts. He briefly turned to the gestural style of the Abstract Expressionist in the late 1950s and continued in that vein while teaching in New York and at Douglass College, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. During that era he came into contact with ambitious artists and teachers—including Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, and Claes Oldenburg—who
advocated art rooted in everyday life. Beginning in 1961, while still teaching design courses at Douglass, he made a major departure from his previous Cubist and Abstract Expressionist styles by channeling the seemingly “artless” medium of cartoons. His painting Look Mickey (1961) and similar works—rendered in the lines and colors of flat-looking cartoons or comics—posed a new challenge to the world of fine art and won the artist attention for his groundbreaking new genus of Pop art.

But, as this exhibition makes clear, the mass media imagery with which he was engaged during this time would prove to be only a vehicle for Lichtenstein’s deeper exploration of the processes of painting, the question of “style,” and a fluid approach to subject matter that he would retain until his death. His immediately recognizable signature—the hand-painted Ben-Day “dots” derived from commercial printing processes—was critical to his act of blurring the boundaries between “low art” and traditional artistic genres. His seemingly mechanical technique also masked the effort and preparation he put into each painting—drawing, transposition, enlargement, editing, and meticulous labor. It was a technique that he would use to explore a wide variety of subjects from the eminently art historical (Picasso and Matisse) to the commercial (comic books, newspaper advertisements). Ranging so variously through such source material, Lichtenstein’s work emerges as fundamentally concerned with compositional order and the integrity of the two-dimensional image, or, as he described it in 1952, “My purpose in painting is to create an integrated organization of visual elements.”

Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective traces this “integrated organization” throughout all periods of the artist’s career, grouping together nearly all of his series with rarely seen preparatory studies. The exhibition begins with his early (1950s) and late (1990s) explorations of brushstrokes, perhaps no better introduction to his lifelong inquiry into technique and the paradox of the artist’s hand in an age of commercial printing. From this introductory section, viewers then immerse themselves in the treatments of various domestic subjects such as spray cans, washing machines, and engagement rings that Lichtenstein was using to develop his signature style, most fully fleshed out in Look Mickey from 1961. During this same period, Lichtenstein was experimenting with his palette, rendering images in a stark graphic style in a series of black and white paintings produced in the early 1960s. “War and Romance” and the following “Explosions and Brushstrokes” feature some of Lichtenstein’s most iconic works, including many of his cartoon panels and his broad, expansive depictions of explosions with titles such as Varoom! (1963).
From the mid 1960s onward, Lichtenstein began working more abstractly and engaging directly with art historical pictorial traditions, starting with “Landscapes” and moving into reworkings of recognizable themes and subjects such as Haystack (after Monet) and Cubist Still Life. He also devoted himself, at the same time, to the representation of mirrors—emphatically flat and conceptually enigmatic. Many of these strains came together in his series of “Artist’s Studio” paintings, which drew upon his own oeuvre as well as landmark paintings such as The Dance by Henri Matisse and further references to pop culture. The 1980s and 1990s found Lichtenstein creating his “Perfect/Imperfect” abstractions, a series of nudes, and, near the end of his life, luminous Chinese landscapes.

A major catalogue published by the Art Institute and distributed by Yale University Press will accompany the exhibition. Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective features exciting new scholarship by an international team of distinguished curators, critics, and art historians. Essays by Yve-Alain Bois, Chrissie Iles, and Stephen Little, among others, give special consideration to Lichtenstein's historical influences, from Picasso and Cubism through Surrealism, Futurism, and British Pop. Contributions by James Rondeau (Frances and Thomas Dittmer Chair and Curator, Department of Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago) and Sheena Wagstaff (Chief Curator at Tate Modern, London) evaluate the artist's abstract work and late nudes. Complemented by photographs of the artist and his exhibitions, the essays examine the various styles and subjects featured in paintings created throughout his lifetime. The inclusion of a complete chronology of Lichtenstein’s life and work—compiled by Clare Bell of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation—makes this catalogue the most authoritative publication on the artist since his death in 1997. Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective will be available at the Art Institute’s Museum Shop beginning June 4, 2012.
Images:


Roy Lichtenstein, American (1923-1997). *Ohhh…Alright,* 1964. Oil and Magna on canvas. 91.4 x 96.5 cm (36 x 38 in). © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Private Collection.

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