SUMMARY OF POP ART

Pop art started with the New York artists Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Claes Oldenburg, all of whom drew on popular imagery and were actually part of an international phenomenon. Following the popularity of the Abstract Expressionists, Pop's reintroduction of identifiable imagery (drawn from mass media and popular culture) was a major shift for the direction of modernism. The subject matter became far from traditional "high art" themes of morality, mythology, and classic history; rather, Pop artists celebrated commonplace objects and people of everyday life, in this way seeking to elevate popular culture to the level of fine art. Perhaps owing to the incorporation of commercial images, Pop art has become one of the most recognizable styles of modern art.

KEY IDEAS

By creating paintings or sculptures of mass culture objects and media stars, the Pop art movement aimed to blur the boundaries between "high" art and "low" culture. The concept that there is no hierarchy of culture and that art may borrow from any source has been one of the most influential characteristics of Pop art.

It could be argued that the Abstract Expressionists searched for trauma in the soul, while Pop artists searched for traces of the same trauma in the mediated world of advertising, cartoons, and popular imagery at large. But it is perhaps more precise to say that Pop artists were the first to recognize that there is no unmediated access to anything, be it the soul, the natural world, or the built environment. Pop artists believed everything is interconnected, and therefore sought to make those connections literal in their artwork.
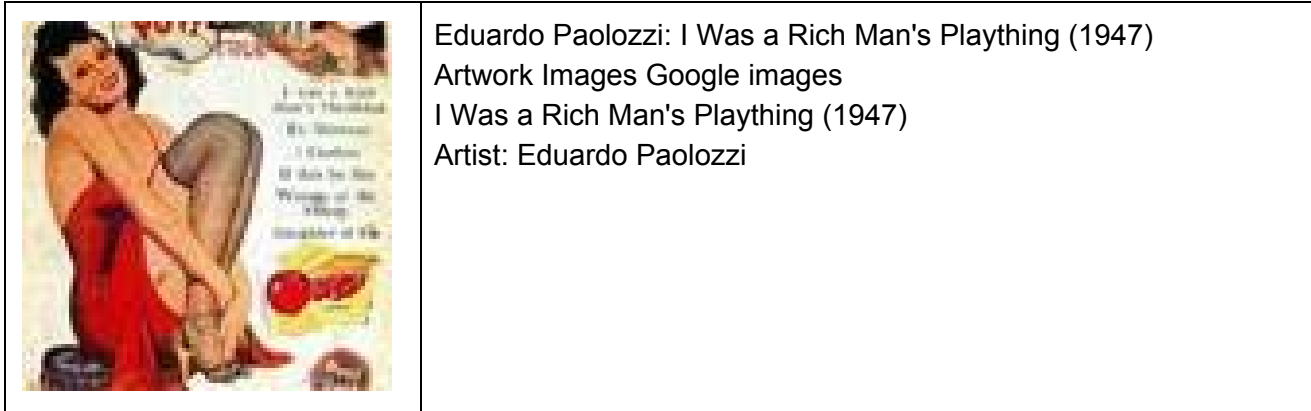
Although Pop art encompasses a wide variety of work with very different attitudes and postures, much of it is somewhat emotionally removed. In contrast to the "hot" expression of the gestural abstraction that preceded it, Pop art is generally "coolly" ambivalent. Whether this suggests an acceptance of the popular world or a shocked withdrawal, has been the subject of much debate.

Pop artists seemingly embraced the post-World War II manufacturing and media boom. Some critics have cited the Pop art choice of imagery as an enthusiastic endorsement of the capitalist market and the goods it circulated, while others have noted an element of cultural critique in the Pop artists' elevation of the everyday to high art: tying the commodity status of the goods represented to the status of the art object itself, emphasizing art's place as, at base, a commodity.

The majority of Pop artists began their careers in commercial art: Andy Warhol was a highly successful magazine illustrator and graphic designer; Ed Ruscha was also a graphic designer, and James Rosenquist started his career as a billboard painter. Their background in the commercial art world trained them in the visual vocabulary of mass culture as well as the techniques to seamlessly merge the realms of high art and popular culture.
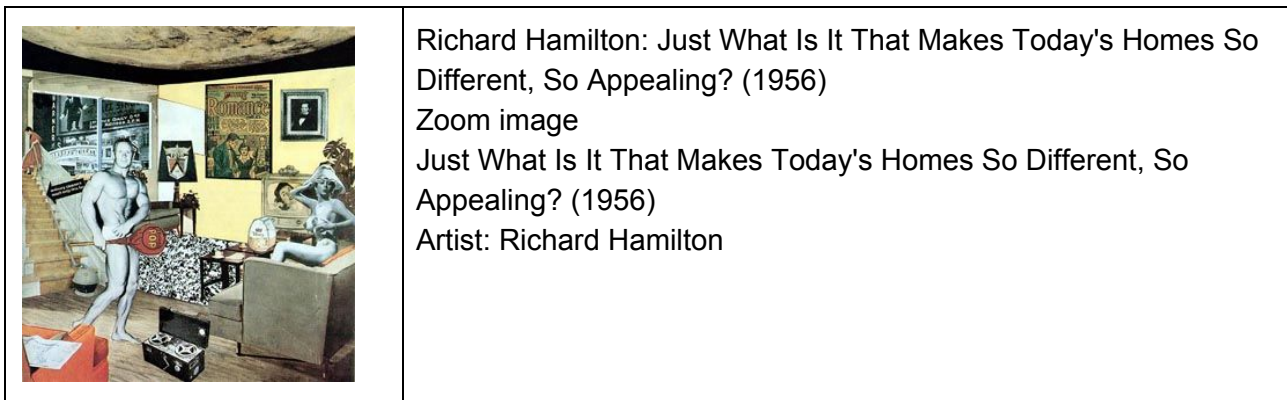
IMPORTANT ART AND ARTISTS OF POP ART

The below artworks are the most important in Pop Art - that both overview the major ideas of the movement, and highlight the greatest achievements by each artist in Pop Art. Don't forget to visit the artist overview pages of the artists that interest you.

Eduardo Paolozzi: I Was a Rich Man's Plaything (1947)
Artwork Images Google images
I Was a Rich Man's Plaything (1947)
Artist: Eduardo Paolozzi

Artwork description & Analysis: Paolozzi, a Scottish sculptor and artist, was a key member of the British post-war avant-garde. His collage I Was a Rich Man's Plaything proved an important foundational work for the Pop art movement, combining pop culture documents like a pulp fiction novel cover, a Coca-Cola advertisement, and a military recruitment advertisement. The work exemplifies the slightly darker tone of British Pop art, which reflected more upon the gap between the glamour and affluence present in American popular culture and the economic and political hardship of British reality. As a member of the loosely associated Independent Group, Paolozzi emphasized the impact of technology and mass culture on high art. His use of collage demonstrates the influence of Surrealist and Dadaist photomontage, which Paolozzi implemented to recreate the barrage of mass media images experienced in everyday life.
Collage - Tate Modern, London

Richard Hamilton: Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing? (1956)
Zoom image
Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing? (1956)
Artist: Richard Hamilton

Artwork description & Analysis: Hamilton's collage was a seminal piece for the evolution of Pop art and is often cited as the very first work of Pop art. Created for the exhibition This is Tomorrow at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 1956, Hamilton's image was used both in the catalogue for the exhibition and on posters advertising it. The collage presents viewers with an updated Adam and Eve (a body-builder and a burlesque dancer) surrounded by all the conveniences modern life provided, including a vacuum cleaner, canned ham, and a television. Constructed using a variety of cutouts from magazine advertisements, Hamilton created a domestic interior scene that both lauded consumerism and critiqued the decadence that was emblematic of the American post-war economic boom years.
Collage - Kunsthalle Tubingen, Germany

IMPORTANT ART AND ARTISTS OF POP ART, Cont.

James Rosenquist: President Elect (1960-61)
Zoom image
President Elect (1960-61)
Artist: James Rosenquist

Artwork description & Analysis: Like many Pop artists, Rosenquist was fascinated by the popularization of political and cultural figures in mass media. In his painting President Elect, the artist depicts John F. Kennedy's face amidst an amalgamation of consumer items, including a yellow Chevrolet and a piece of cake. Rosenquist created a collage with the three elements cut from their original mass media context, and then photo-realistically recreated them on a monumental scale. As Rosenquist explains, "The face was from Kennedy's campaign poster. I was very interested at that time in people who advertised themselves. Why did they put up an advertisement of themselves? So that was his face. And his promise was half a Chevrolet and a piece of stale cake." The large-scale work exemplifies Rosenquist's technique of combining discrete images through techniques of blending, interlocking, and juxtaposition, as well as his skill at including political and social commentary using popular imagery.