ROY LICHTENSTEIN

American Indian Encounters

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The name Roy Lichtenstein inevitably brings to mind comic strip-inspired paintings that are among the most iconic images of the Pop Art movement. Pop Art, which emerged in the United States in the 1960s, is characterized by an embrace of consumer culture, an aesthetic associated with commercial art and the use of imagery from everyday life, as seen in Andy Warhol's Coke™ bottles and Campbell's™ soup cans; Jasper Johns' flags, numbers, and targets; or Claes Oldenburg's larger-than-life slices of cake or ice packs.

The traveling exhibition Roy Lichtenstein: American Indian Encounters focuses on a lesser-known aspect of the Pop artist's work: Native American themes and design motifs. The exhibition, which originated at the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey, opens at the Museum of Fine Arts February 3, 2006, and examines two periods in Lichtenstein's career when he turned his attention to Native history and culture.

ABOVE

Roy Lichtenstein, *Little Landscape*, 1979, oil and Magna on linen, 36 x 48 in. Private Collection.

1950s AMERICANA

Lichtenstein's first foray into the historical themes of Native America was in the 1950s when he was completing his graduate work at Ohio State University, then working as an instructor, commercial artist, and window-display designer.

During this period, the artist worked in a cubist vein, his style indebted primarily to Picasso and Klee and his themes concentrating on American history paintings and the clichéd imagery of the American frontier. Lichtenstein himself characterized the paintings of this era as "reinterpretations of those artists concerned with the opening of the West…with a subject matter of cowboys, Indians, treaty signings, a sort of Western official art in a style broadly influenced by modern European paintings."[1]

In a painting such as *The Last of the Buffalo II*, Lichtenstein depicted feathers, face paint, a teepee, and buffalos; the figures are difficult to decipher and appear static, as if frozen in the past, unchanging and enduring. Other paintings from this period address moments of human drama as Native and Euro-American cultures met and clashed, as well as depictions of Native Americans as "living monuments of a noble race."[2] Lichtenstein's primary source materials for these 1950s paintings were nineteenth-century paintings of the American West, by such artists as George Catlin and Albert Bierstadt.

Roy Lichtenstein, *The Last of the Buffalo II*, 1952, oil on canvas, 50 x 42 in. Collection of Lee Turner, P.A. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Photo by Geoffrey Wheeler.

Roy Lichtenstein, *Variant Study for 'The End of the Trail'*, 1951, charcoal, gouache, watercolor, crayon, and black ink on paper, 15 3/8 x 19 7/8 in. Private collection. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Photographer unknown.

THE "AMERIND" SERIES

In the 1960s, Lichtenstein began to employ his signature style, consisting of flat areas of primary colors, bold graphic lines, dialogue balloons, and the benday dots typical of mechanical printing processes. In was not until the late 1970s that he revisited Native American culture, this time appropriating design motifs and replicating them in his more familiar Pop-style paintings. Borrowing from a broad variety of source materials, such as textiles, beadwork, quillwork, ceramics, and baskets from both North and South American Indian cultures that he saw in books, private collections, and exhibitions, Lichtenstein created his "Amerind" series from 1979 to 1981 while living in Southampton, Long Island. In the large-scale painting *Indian Composition*, one can identify influences as diverse as Southwest pottery designs, Northwest Coast totem and eye motifs, and patterns from Peruvian textiles and ceramics. As in his 1950s works, Lichtenstein was interested in "the cliché of the Indian."[3]

A MASTER OF APPROPRIATION

Precise duplication of Native designs was not Lichtenstein's concern, nor was cultural specificity an important aspect of his appropriation. He borrowed imagery from multiple sources and reworked it to make it

Roy Lichtenstein, *Indian Composition*, 1979, oil and Magna on linen, 84 x 120 in. Private Collection. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Photo by Robert McKeever.

his own. Consider, for example, *Little Landscape*, with a stereotypical saguaro cactus at the center of the composition. The accompanying canoe and water imagery are inconsistent with Southwestern geography. This painting demonstrates that Lichtenstein was more interested in depicting a generalized "Indian look" that he synthesized from multiple sources and multiple cultures.

Lichtenstein was, quite simply, a master of appropriation. His borrowing of Native imagery is just one example of his uninhibited adaptations of other artists, styles, cultures, and products. Over the years, Lichtenstein paraphrased from advertising and comic strips; the artists Cézanne, Matisse, Mondrian, Picasso, and Léger; and artistic styles such as cubism, constructivism, futurism, surrealism, abstract expressionism, and German expressionism. He was aware of the clichés and stereotypes he reproduced. The characters from his comic-strip paintings, for example, were often lovelorn, melodramatic women from romances or determined, square-jawed heroes. The flat, one-dimensional style in which they were painted mimicked the characters' flat, one-dimensional personalities. ■

Stereotypes of Native Americans are not benign

[1]Cited in Gail Stavitsky and Twig Johnson, *Roy Lichtenstein: American Indian Encounters* (Montclair, N.J., Montclair Art Museum, 2005), p. 22.

[2]Cited in ibid., p. 10. The citation refers to George Catlin's depictions of Native American subjects. Catlin was one of Lichtenstein's primary influences for his 1950s paintings; Lichtenstein began painting Native themes after borrowing a Catlin book from the scholar Roy Harvey Pearce. Ibid.

[3]Cited in ibid., p. 30.

Exhibit Note: The traveling exhibition Roy Lichtenstein: American Indian Encounters, from the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey, is on view at the Museum of Fine Arts through April 23, 2006. The concurrent exhibition, Native Pop, includes work by Marcus Amerman, Keri Ataumbi, David Bradley, Kelly Byars, Jason Garcia, Teri Greeves, James Luna, America Meredith, Douglas Miles, Diego Romero, Fritz Scholder, and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue, *Roy Lichtenstein: American Indian Encounters* (Montclair Art Museum, 2005).

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NATIVE POP!

Contemporary Native Identity

James Luna, *End of the Frail*, gelatin silver print over reproduction, 36 x 40 in., 1991, courtesy of the artist. Black-and-white photo by Richard Lou.

Appropriation becomes the central idea of the Lichtenstein exhibition when placed in dialogue with Native Pop, a concurrent exhibition addressing how contemporary Native American artists use appropriation in their art. By quoting masterpieces of Western art history icons and borrowing objects from popular culture, these artists explore contemporary Native identity. Lichtenstein, with his love of irony and mastery of appropriation, would appreciate the juxtaposition of these two shows.

The adaptation of instantly recognizable, iconic masterworks often brings instant laughter. Humor as a strategy allows viewers to rethink their assumptions and to become aware of not-so-humorous issues such as stereotyping, discrimination, or the challenges faced by cultures to maintain their traditions. Perhaps the best example of this is James Luna's rendition of *The End of the Trail*. Originally a sculpture from 1894 by James Earle Fraser that was widely disseminated as an illustration on belt buckles, calendars, and so on, *The End of the Trail* is, from a Native American perspective, an image of terrible degradation. It represents a defeated Indian, his posture slouched and his spear held limply in his hand, a symbol of progress signaling the end of the frontier period, when the U.S. Government had extended its reach from coast-to-coast.

Lichtenstein tackled Fraser's subject in a watercolor study (see p. 25) and an oil painting from the 1950s, both featured in the American Indian Encounters exhibit. The image fit into his Americana and frontier themes and provided an opportunity for a formal exercise in painting: how would he interpret the subject in terms of areas of color, line, and geometry? How would he depict the horse and slumped-over rider? And the broken spear? How would he flatten the space and balance representation with abstraction?

For a Native artist, reinterpretation of *The End of the Trail* has quite different objectives: to challenge, to parody, and to make the viewer recognize that stereotypes of Native Americans are not benign. To this end, James Luna's rendition of this iconic image superimposes a photograph of himself on a makeshift sawhorse over a mass-produced illustration of *The End of the Trail*. Fraser's original work represented progress at the expense of Native American communities. By mid-century, Lichtenstein used this theme to explore the "discredited" images of American culture and repaint them through the lens of a painter's formal pursuits. A half-century later, Luna's interpretation disrupts the power of the original artwork and reinterprets a moment in history from a Native perspective. With a work such as this, one recognizes that art has the power to shape beliefs and endorse a particular historical perspective. ■