Pop Art—Reflections of the Mass Media

Curriculum Unit 81.02.01
by Patricia Flynn

Many of the young people that I work with responded enthusiastically to the comic book unit that I organized last year (Comic Books: Superheroes/heroines, Domestic Scenes, and Animal Images). Their interest in and knowledgeable contributions to a form of art that can be called “popular” encouraged me to think further about the area called popular culture. Since I teach art at the Middle School level (grades six through eight), the phenomenon known as Pop Art is an appropriate movement to investigate.

Review your perceptions of a day with your senses. Think about the many images you have received through mass-media communications. Quite possibly you were awakened by an A.M./F.M. clock radio that gave you a summary of the world’s news, followed by a currently popular musical recording. Spaced between were commercials advising you of the superiority of a product or a service. As you proceeded to prepare for the day you observed the variety of labels that describe the products you include in your breakfast. A reading of the morning newspaper affirmed the radio newscast, announced the evening television schedule, advertised a profusion of products and services, and informed you of the current movies playing locally. Continue this process in order to be aware of the multitude of visual and auditory images that confront contemporary man.

A distinction can be made between the terms popular culture and Pop culture. This distinction is important to the understanding of the discussion that follows describing Pop Art and Pop Music. Both terms are of working class origin. Popular culture refers to the understanding or taste of the people in an unselfconscious manner. Pop culture came about as a conscious deliberate exploration for objects, music, clothes, heroes and attitudes which can help to define a working class situation. Its position took the form of protest by British urban working class adolescents. Pop is based upon indifference to standards and earlier historical terms of references, a reflection of a rapidly changing society. Dedication to pleasure is Pop’s intention: pleasure in the present for young people, before they are independent, and have to assume adult responsibilities. ¹

The growth of mass communications, since the late 1940’s, influences us in many ways both consciously and subconsciously. The visual images found in advertising and television assault us. These images are printed, painted, photographed and stencilled in an animated or still form. The parallel development of sounds as words and/or music evolved during this time to be designated with the name of Pop music. Considered as shared by many these visual and auditory images have become a set of common signs or symbols to which we can readily relate. Their power derives from materialistic and commercial purposes. We can ponder the effect these symbols have upon our lives. Do we believe in these symbols and base our choices upon them, or can these symbols offer us the opportunity to evaluate their intention, and as a result make more intelligent
choices?

Pop images can be assumed to be modern ones that are new and youthful as compared to old and out-of-date. Investigation beyond the superficial appearances of these symbols can show that human history is rich in images. The human mind records what it sees in pictures. These images can be found in cultures as their icons, an image formed in three dimensions. Throughout history these icons expressed a culture’s inner needs and values. They also can be objects connected with the culture’s myths and religions. Rather than being found in places of religious worship, the icons of Pop Art are found in supermarkets, in the lots of car dealers, and on magazine covers, billboards and television screens. They are the result of modern man’s need to create a new environment, one which can be said to be open and changing constantly.  

The objects that can be seen in Pop Art are many and diverse. For teaching purposes two categories of objects are suitable: food and automobiles. These objects give us much information about our culture: our needs for nourishment, pleasure, and the conquering of time and distance that gives us the freedom of movement.

The most obvious example of a food object recognized throughout most of the world is Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola is a carbonated soft drink made with extracts from coca leaves, kola nuts, sugar, carmel, along with acid and aromatic substances. Originally Coca-Cola is generally related to cocaine. Combined with marketing and advertising techniques the image of Coca Cola is one of a refreshing drink that allows us to escape reality and enter a dream world. The sensuous shape of the Coca-Cola bottle has remained much the same since 1915. It is suggested that Coca-Cola and other soft drinks can offer people an opportunity to reward themselves.

The automobile has greatly influenced mass communication by adding pleasure to the necessity of carrying goods and people over large distances. It has affected love and courtship customs as well as attitudes about travel and recreation. Within a short distance by car one can satisfy ones needs for mobility. For some the automobile can serve as a status symbol, a means of relieving tensions or an excuse to show off. Carried to an extreme there are cults that almost venerate the automobile with special paint jobs and decorative charms. Today the Pop icon as automobile is accused of being a polluter and destroyer of the environment, in addition to using up large amounts of energy in the form of gasoline.

In 1952 a group of young artists, writers and architects formed a discussion group in London which met at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. This group called themselves the Independent Group. They gathered together to discuss a wide variety of topics that they felt were influencing the creative person in a mass media society. With the expansion of the field of communications the Independent Group discussed such issues as: communications, mass media, pop music, fashion, automobile styling, Hollywood films and science fiction. At the first meeting of the Independent Group a lecture entitled Bunk was presented by the visual artist, Eduardo Paolozzi. As part of his lecture Paolozzi projected a number of his collages along with images of so-called pulp magazines. Included were covers from Amazing Science Fiction, a page of drawings from the Walt Disney film Mother Goose Goes to Hollywood, sheets of U.S. Army aircraft insignia and advertisements for Cadillac. One may say that these images are very similar to the art known as Dada which consisted of assembling readymade objects. The difference is that the image of the object took on a different quality when it was projected on a screen. It was larger than actual size.

An exhibition presented by the Independent Group in 1953 furthered their ideas. ‘Parallel of Art and Life’ consisted of blown-up photographs that were hung not only from the walls, but suspended from the ceiling. The intention of the exhibit was to present a world in which art and life have equal importance. The photographic images combined paintings by Dubuffet, Klee, Kandinsky, and Picasso with aerial views, car
crashes, Pompeii victims, primitive settlements, and technological processes.  

A member of the Independent Group, John McHale, brought a trunk full of American magazines back to England in 1955 from a trip to the United States. Copies of Esquire, Mad, and Playboy added a new sources of Pop inspiration. American commercial culture was being viewed by Europe, thanks to the Independent Group in London, where previous to the war, the United States looked to Europe for much of its artistic direction.

The exhibit ‘This is Tomorrow’ (London, 1956) was intended to explore the possibilities of integrating the visual arts. Teams that included a painter, a sculpture and an architect worked together to create environments. The team of Richard Hamilton, John McHale and John Voelcker produced an environment that presents images from magazines, film publicity and comics, combined with a sixteen foot robot used to advertise a science fiction movie, and a large movie photograph of Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch*. Music was provided by a juke box.

Richard Hamilton designed a collage that was used as the exhibition’s poster. It came to be recognized as one of the earliest genuine pieces of Pop Art, entitled *Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?* The collage contained a physically overdeveloped hero and a female stripper set in the living room of a home. Photo montages described the home with a wall painting being a cover from the comic book ‘Young Romance’. A lampshade in the living room is decorated with the symbol of the Ford Motor Company. In the foreground is a tape recorder, and a television set is in the background. When one looks out through the living room window, a movie theater can be seen playing *The Al Jolson Story*. Interestingly the muscle-bound hero holds a large lollipop labeled ‘Tootsie Pop’! The word ‘Pop’ dominates the lollipop; even though Hamilton and other artists of the time did not use the word ‘Pop’ to refer to their art.

Richard Hamilton’s interest in consumer goods, and their role in society, led him to write a letter to his fellow artists. In this letter Hamilton made a list of qualities that came to be known as Pop Art, art based on commercial art sources:

‘Popular (designed for mass audience)
Transient (short term solution)
Expendable (easily forgotten)
Low Cost
Mass Produced
Young (aimed at Youth)
Witty
Sexy
Gimmicky
Glamorous
Big Business.’
Hamilton’s collage, *Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?* contains many of the qualities that he refers to in his letter. The romance comic book is a low cost, mass produced publication that conveys sexual attitudes to the mass audience. Advertising often uses the glamorous female in order to sell its product. Television and tape recorders among other mass produced items are big business to the communications industry.

While Hamilton was developing his art that drew from commercial art sources, Peter Blake was painting with Pop ideas derived from an entirely different source: nostalgia. Peter Blake’s interest in nostalgia is connected to his childhood world of toy shops, badges, comics, penny arcades and post cards. The fairground and its personalities appealed to him as well as popular entertainers and film stars. He paints images of Pop music heroes: Elvis Presley, Cliff Richard, Bo Diddley and the Beatles. Peter Blake is recognized for his ability to play on the difference between illusion and reality in his style of painting. He combines paint and collage techniques in such a way that is is difficult to decide what is paint and what is collage. An example of this approach is Blake’s painting entitled *On the Balcony* (1955-1957). By 1960 Peter Blake was working on solid pieces of board rather than on canvas. He would often divide the surface of the board into compartments that resembled doors or walls. He made *Love Wall* in 1961 as an organization of images of love that included romance comics, movie photos, wedding pictures, valentines and birthday cards. He seems to combine the past and present in an interest in his subject matter and materials.

An acquaintance with the differences between British and American Pop Art can be beneficial. The development of Pop Art in Great Britain grew out of the younger generation’s rejection of upper-class culture. The protest carried itself into the art education system of British art colleges where traditional art training was the accepted norm. The art education system generally ignored the ‘modern’ art of the continent; feeling that the art of such people as Matisse and Picasso was not significant.

In the United States, particularly in New York, the influence of advertising and mass communications is extremely powerful. Numerous television and radio stations operate continuously, along with many newspapers published daily that contain a profusion of advertisements. Large numbers of magazines are available. Movie theaters provide a variety of films at any hour of the day or night. Mammoth billboards besiege the eye with a mass of objects and services. This is the urban environment that inspired some of the American artists during the 1950’s. New York had become the art capital of the Western world, where previously Europe had dominated ‘modern’ art. Abstract Expressionism had given the American artist respect and recognition from the European art world. By the late 1950’s, artists searching for new possibilities questioned Abstract Expressionism. The problem to them was that art had become too inward and unrealistic. They were looking for a kind of art that reflected the contemporary world of the mid-twentieth century city.

In 1951 Roy Lichtenstein began to paint pictures that he considered reinterpretations of themes of the American West. From 1957 to 1960 he painted as an Abstract Expressionist. His interest in the Pop object can be seen in his painting *Ten Dollar Bill* (1956). In 1960 Lichtenstein began to introduce comic book figures in his painting; ideas that generated from bubble gum wrappers and comic books he had grown up with. *Look Mickey* was one result. Many of his works from this time are taken from advertising as well: *Roto Broil* (1961), and *Chop* (1962). He would take a common object and alter it with comic book design elements that include: flatness of form, thick black lines that encircle the forms, use of primary colors (red, yellow, blue), and the Ben Day dot technique. The Ben Day dot technique is a screen of minute dots which make up the shading used in comic books, newspapers and magazines. Another important feature of Lichtenstein’s use of the comic book is change in scale. Scale is blown up in a very meticulous way. Between 1963 and 1965 he produced paintings based upon romance and war comics that deal with the dramas of human life. Verbal statements became part
of the visual elements. Sweet Dreams, Baby is an icon of aggression with its predominant clenched fist. Blonde Waiting (1964) depicts an attractive girl waiting in front of an alarm clock. His images can be called stereotypes of the American culture. In 1966 Lichtenstein created a series of paintings for Lincoln Center. Their theme was the architecture and design of the 1930’s. Lichtenstein’s work also includes: landscape paintings composed of multi-lens plastic sheeting that appears to move as the observer moves, enamels on steel, ceramics, and sculpture constructed with brass, aluminum, marble, glass and mirror. 

One aspect of Pop Art that is considered American is an obsession with food. Mass produced supermarket food is often the subject matter of its art: hamburgers, french fries, sandwiches, soup cans, soda and beer cans, cakes, sundaes and popsicles. Some psychologists claim that the emphasis given to food has something to do with bottle feeding versus breast feeding by American mothers. Sociologists suggest that food as an American infatuation relates to the amount of leisure time and interest given to eating in the United States, while economists see food production as a stable element in American spending.

Born in Sweden, Claes Oldenberg came to the United States as a small child. As an artist, he moved to New York in 1956. The urban environment, especially its streets, inspired him so that common packages and refuse become sculptures for him. In 1959 and 1960, he produced two exhibitions of his work. The second exhibit was called ‘The Street’. It consisted of signs, objects and figures constructed from cardboard, paper, fabric and string. Included in the exhibit were many objects that Oldenberg named Ray Guns, which resembled the ray gun of space comic books. To him they symbolized the city, particularly New York. If one spells ray gun backwards, it becomes Nug Yar, which Oldenberg felt sounded like the words New York. His studio became ‘The Store’ in 1961. It contained sculptures of food, clothing and other objects created with chicken wire that was draped with plaster-soaked objects. His ideas for ‘The Store’ became an exhibit in 1962. The exhibit contained sculptural objects that had the urban store as a reference point: a stove, food and clothing. These works entitled: Giant Blue Pants, Breakfast Table, Kitchen Stove, and White Shirt and Blue Tie are considered by Oldenberg to be abstract shapes that are plastered and painted in vivid colors meant to stimulate the imagination.

His second ‘Store’ exhibit combined more objects which are enlarged beyond real life, and he introduced an innovation in sculpture, “soft sculpture”: objects that are soft, constructed in fabric that permits them to change form. Floorburger, a giant hamburger, is one of Oldenberg’s soft sculptures made from canvas that is filled with foam and cardboard and painted. The Giant Soft Swedish Light Switch (1966) is another of his soft sculptures that upon exhibition changes with the effects of gravity. From the mid 1960’s, Oldenberg creates giant sculptural monuments that he intends to be metaphors of life. Oldenberg states in his writing that art emulates the human condition; it is political, erotic, mystical, everyday: comic and violent.

Andy Warhol worked in New York during the 1950’s as a commercial artist successfully winning the Art Directors’ Club Medal for Shoe Advertisements in 1957. Independently from Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenberg, he began in 1960 to make paintings whose themes were derived from comic books and advertisements. Dick Tracy is one of his earliest paintings that combines the techniques of both Abstract Expressionism (loosely brushed and dripping paint) and Pop Art (hardedge and comic strip outline). From that time Warhol selected some of the obvious commercial and well known images in America: Campbell’s Soup tins, Coca-Cola bottles; famous people like Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and Elizabeth Taylor. He also selected images from the mass media that might not be considered as familiar: car crashes, electric chairs, race riots and bomb explosions. Death could be viewed very impersonally and unemotionally through mass media vehicles such as television, newspapers, and magazines. Warhol took those violent images and repeated them across the surface of his paintings. The emotional response is left to the spectator.
intends that his work appear not to have any personal involvement by the artist in its making. In order to give this impersonal appearance Warhol began in 1962 to make his paintings with the silk screen printing process. The silk screen process is a form of stencil-making used by artists for the purpose of producing multiple prints. Silk screen printing is a development from commercial art. Warhol used the photo mechanical method to apply his images to a screen. Even though he intends his paintings to be meaningless, they portray representation of fame, glamour, money, violence, disaster and death.

200 Campbell’s Soup, Marilyn Diptych, Green Coca-Cola Bottles, Green Disaster, Cow Wallpaper and Self-portrait are all silk screened paintings based on the mass produced. These images are often presented in a series by which Warhol repeats the picture a large number of times on the same canvas or on separate canvases. Each image in the series is slightly different from the next one. Warhol utilizes a wide range of color from the monochrome to the vivid and vibrant. In the late 1960’s Andy Warhol moved from painting to film making. Throughout his work he refuses to make a personal connection to it. 18

Robert Indiana, a pseudonym, came to New York in the late 1950’s. He uses words to convey visual slogans or messages to the viewer. These words are stencilled and combined within the hard edged shapes of circles, squares, rectangles and diamonds. He uses the myth of the American Dream as part of his work, with a cynical approach. He questions the myth that the United States is the land of plenty for everyone, in his 1961 painting entitled The American Dream and Demuth Five (1963). He takes his hard edge painting from the pinball machine. Not wanting to be a machine, as he considers Andy Warhol to be, Indiana uses a brush to stencil his words, shapes and colors carefully. His use of words (such as eat and die) are intended for the association of feelings. The Black Yield Brother 3 done in 1963, is not only designed, but specifically meant to make associations to the notions of brotherly love, the Bible or big brother. In 1967, Robert Indiana created his famous painting and sculpture, Love. 19

Pop culture as a phenomenon during the 1950-1960’s in Britain and America is not exclusive to the visual arts. Parallel to the visual arts of Pop culture is the development of its music. Rock and Roll music of the 1950’s in the United States borrowed from the blues to create a musical style that appeals to the sexuality of teenagers. It gave youth the opportunity to express themselves with a freedom that up until this time had been taken only by adults. Such performers as Fats Domino, Little Richard, Bill Haley and Elvis Presley rose to popularity with young people much to the annoyance of their parents. The protests of young people also meant financial profits for musical entrepreneurs. The manipulation of the teenager’s sexual and social development is carefully controlled by the promoters of rock and roll hero(es). Even with a talented performer and his/her capable agent or manager, a certain so-called ‘charisma’ is necessary for success.

During this period one Rock and Roll group was to emerge and rise to international accomplishment: The Beatles. The Beatles originated as a group in the 1950’s in the clubs of Liverpool. John Lennon, Paul McCartney and George Harrison first played together as a group called the Quarrymen. They were a school group in 1959 and needed a bassist. Stuart Sutcliffe, a friend of John Lennon joined the group. Peter Best became the drummer. All five became known as the Silver Beatles, and went to Hamburg, Germany to play. They were asked to leave Germany, not only because they were under age (18) to perform there, but John and Peter had set fire to the wallpaper where they were staying. Stuart Sutcliffe left the group. Upon their return to Liverpool they were ‘discovered’ by the successful record salesman Brian Epstein, who was to become their manager. Their drummer, Peter Best, was ousted from the group and replaced by Ringo Starr (Richard Starkey). George Harrison had argued for Best’s removal from the group for reasons of so-called ‘policy’. In September, 1962 the Beatles made their first recording, Love Me Do. The following January, 1963 they recorded Please Please Me which was to become the first of a long series of chart-toppers. 20 The term Beatlemania arose from their
success. The mass communications industry fed it and vice versa. The Beatles music was innovative, and teenagers responded favorably. Their film, *A Hard Day’s Night*, released in 1964, described the struggles of successful Pop stars. The Beatles’ long survival depended, not so much upon their talent and so-called ‘charisma’, as on their ability to exploit their cleverness. 21

Pop culture belongs to the young. Its process is part of the revolt of a generation based upon the need to become independent from the family. Mass communications is the catalyst that conveys the message. The sense of aggression and rebellion present in Pop relates to the adolescent; thus, it can be selectively utilized in art classes.

**Pop Activities**

This unit is intended to be utilized at the middle school level in a classroom situation that can incorporate the historical aspects of Pop Art as well as provide actual working opportunities for students. Included as a vital part of this unit is a set of slides that can serve as visual reference points in discussion of particular artists. The above narrative chronologically explores particular artists who were selected as being more appropriate and understandable to middle school students. Some Pop artists’ work was purposely excluded, because it was considered either, too sexually motivated or, beyond the developmental level of middle school students.

Following a discussion of Pop Art that makes use of the slides is a series of suggested problems that students can participate in. The problems presented are ones which make use of Pop Art’s design elements, subject matter and materials. The teacher can best select one, a few, or all of the problems that are adaptable to his/her teaching circumstance. Individual artists are mentioned whose work presents examples of particular Pop Art characteristics.

**Enlargement (Lichtenstein)**

To select a common object or a face, and draw or paint it on a flat surface making it larger than real life.

**Repetition (Warhol)**

To choose a common object or simple scene and repeat it horizontally or vertically as defined rows. The printing process is suitable as a means of easily creating repeated patterns.

**Comic Book Approach (Lichtenstein)**

To create a flat, two dimensional drawing or painting in the manner of the comic book. Forms can be outlined in black. Color values can be conveyed with the use of the Ben Day dot. (A round pencil eraser dipped in paint is a helpful tool).

**Food and Drink (Warhol, Oldenberg)**

To draw, paint, print or construct a favorite food or drink.

**Automobile (Warhol)**

To draw, paint and/or make a collage with assorted papers that describes the automobile. (The bicycle, motorcycle, moped etc. can also be used as subject matter.)

**Words as Images (Indiana)**

To decide up a word or group of words that can be drawn, painted or glued using paper. The choice of word(s) can have an emotional impact for the student.

**Montage (Hamilton, Blake)**
To create a super-imposed design based up photographs taken from magazines or newspapers.

**Advertisement (Blake, Indiana)**
To compose a poster, or a newspaper advertisement, or a tape/record album cover for a favorite musical performer/group.

**Soft Sculpture (Oldenberg)**
To construct a sewn sculpture of a personally chosen object.

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Notes
6. Wilson, p. 35.
8. Wilson, pp. 36-37.
12. Wilson, p. 34.
19. Amaya, pp. 80-85.
Bibliography for Teachers


Discusses ‘popular culture’ as a valuable objective in the education of young people.


A series of essays that examines the arts of the 1960’s: visual, theater, television and musical.


Essays that explore popular culture from both American and European viewpoints.


A complex dissuasion of Pop Art with historical and aesthetic references.


A critical and historical account of many man-made objects that the author describes as Kitsch.


A collection of essays that describes and discusses the symbols that are considered representative of popular culture.


A comparative discussion of what is valuable in popular culture as it relates to social classes.


A chronological discussion of the Beatles with an emphasis upon their musical sources and techniques.


An informative discussion of the development of the Pop Arts in Great Britain: visual, musical and fashion.


A source book for teachers of art written by a British teacher.


A study of the historical development of Pop Art that includes film making.

Andy Warhol writes his personal views of life.


A collection of essays that are critiques of Pop Art. Included is John Canady's criticism.

**Reading List for Students**


A readable historical survey of Pop Art that is available to New Haven teachers at the Art Office in Davis Street School.


A written and pictorial survey of the Beatles that appeals to young people.


A written and visual presentation of the art of Andy Warhol.


An account of the Beatles written in slang dialogue by Richard DiLello who worked closely with the Beatles.


A survey of the work of Roy Lichtenstein that contains many visual references.


A compact historical view of Pop Art that includes color examples of Pop artist's work in paperback.

**List of Materials for Classroom Use**

1. *Slide Set* —Includes examples of Pop artist’s work discussed in this unit.
2. *Yale Art Gallery School/Museum Program*
   
   1111 Chapel Street
   
   New Haven, Connecticut 06520
Persons to Contact:

Janet S. Dickson, Curator of Education 436-2490
Janet Gordon, Assistant Curator of Education 436-2490

Filmstrip for Free Loan

Five Artists View the Contemporary Scene —Contains paintings by and interview with Roy Lichtenstein.
3. The Museum of Modern Art
   11 West 53rd Street
   New York, New York 10019
   212-956-6100

Color Slides $.75 Each

#9848 Oldenberg, Claes, Two Cheeseburgers, with Everything, 1962.

4. Nasco
   901 Janesville Avenue
   Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin 53538
   1-800-558-9595

Universal Slide Sets - Sets of twenty slides for each artist $7.95

#21-463 (F) Blake