Warhol, Andy (as artist) (1928-1987)

by Peter J. Holliday

Andy Warhol (left) and Tennesse Williams (right) talking on the S.S. France in 1967. Photograph by James Kavallines for the *World Journal Tribune.* Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Andy Warhol is best remembered as the avatar of Pop Art. A child of the advertising age, he began his career as a commercial illustrator in the late 1950s. Even his first major appearance as an artist in 1961 was commercial: five paintings as backdrop in a display window at New York's Bonwit Teller department store.

Born Andrew Warhola, Jr. on August 6, 1928 into a working-class family in Forest City, Pennsylvania, Warhol attended art school at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. He moved to New York in 1949, where he changed his named to Andy Warhol and made friendships with Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

Warhol's work needs to be seen as part of the contentious pluralism in the arts that characterized the early 1960s, as artists joined the assault on conventional pieties and prejudices.

In 1966 *Time* magazine warned the public that Pop Art threatened "normal" masculinity because it insisted on reducing art to the "trivial," by which *Time* meant camp. As Susan Sontag had reported in her seminal 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" camp embraced extravagance, effeminacy, and an obsession with surface appearances.

Indeed, the gayness that Warhol projected in both his art and his public persona contrasted sharply with the macho posturing that had dominated the art world in the 1950s. But such openness carried a price.

When Warhol asked why his idols, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, avoided him, a mutual friend, filmmaker Emil de Antonio, answered, "Okay, Andy, if you really want to hear it straight, I'll lay it out for you. You're too swish, and that upsets them." In defiance, Warhol emphasized his effeminacy even more.

Like Johns and Rauschenberg, Warhol was influenced by the ideas of Marcel Duchamp, manifested particularly in the recycling of imagery that both celebrates and subverts modern mass culture.

Warhol's silk-screened repetitions of such mundane objects as soup cans and Brillo boxes, and similarly mass-produced icons such as film stars, made them chic. His appropriations comment, coolly and ironically, on the collapse of the distinction between high and popular art, and on modern obsessions with consumer goods and media-manipulated celebrity.

From childhood Warhol embraced the myth of stardom. His attraction to the young and famous motivated some of his first silkscreen paintings, which were based on images of Troy Donahue and Elvis Presley and date from 1962. Warhol's identification with these celebrities is two-fold, both as objects of desire and as role models.

But he also screened images of death and disasters taken from the tabloids. When the theme of tragedy coincided with his fascination with stardom, Warhol found the subjects of his best-known groups of

celebrity portraits: Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and Jacqueline Kennedy.

In his "gold Marilyn" series, initiated shortly after her suicide in August 1962, Warhol contrived the effect of a gilded Byzantine icon, but substituted for the Virgin Mary an image whose face is suffused with eroticism. It stunningly evokes the need to love and to be loved.

With his increasing success, Warhol became a celebrity himself. Hailed as "court painter to the 70s," he amassed a fortune. Critics debate whether his later silkscreen portraits celebrate or satirize the worlds of money, glamour, and style that he himself increasingly inhabited. Warhol's characteristic attitude remained deadpan; he insisted that his work had no meaning.

Despite his persona of decadent artist, Warhol clung to what might seem, in the context of the jet-set glamour of his public image, an archaic piety. He maintained a quiet, surreptitious devotion to the Catholic Church.

He was never political, and more a voyeuristic dandy than an engaged homosexual. Nevertheless he supported the careers of gay artists such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

He died on February 22, 1987, soon after gall bladder surgery. His will established a foundation to help young artists.

Today Warhol has entered the canon of significant American artists, his importance signaled by the fact that Pittsburgh has named a museum in his honor and retrospectives of his career attract large crowds. As Robert Summers points out, however, even supposedly comprehensive exhibits distort his achievement by white-washing him as "asexual" and divesting his work of its queer content and connections.

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