# ROY LICHTENSTEIN: IMPERSONAL PAINTING

**Gunhild Bauer**

In the 1960s, in the wake of Abstract Expressionism, Roy Lichtenstein embarked on a path of simple, impersonal visual language, drawing on the existing imagery of everyday and popular culture. Because of his artistic exploration of a mediatized reality, he is considered today to be the most important forerunner of the appropriation art of the 1970s and 1980s and the fusion of high and low culture in contemporary art. Together with Andy Warhol, he is one of the two best-known founding fathers of Pop Art and, along with Jackson Pollock and Warhol, one of the three greatest American artists of the twentieth century.

During the international triumph of Abstract Expressionism, various artists in Great Britain and the United States returned to a banal, figurative, self-reflexive art. Later subsumed under the term Pop Art, they ironically demolished the traditional boundaries between high art and consumer culture in the years of the postwar economic boom and assumed a leading role in the visual arts. Roy Lichtenstein's groundbreaking invention at the time, which not only helped him but also American Pop Art to achieve its breakthrough in 1961, was to appropriate for his painting the new, aggressive flood of images that dominated everyday American culture in those years. After the dominant years of Abstract Expressionism, he turned not to actual reality but to the secondhand reality of consumer society: the advertisements in the telephone book and the cartoons of that "Golden Age of Comics." In the relatively short span of just five years, from 1961 to about 1965, Lichtenstein stylized images from popular culture into iconic paintings that made him one of the most successful practitioners of Pop Art.

He was the first to adopt the powerful vocabulary of commercial artists and cartoonists, which is designed for profit or to catch the fleeting glance of passersby. They appeal to the masses with flat stereotypes. Roy Lichtenstein not only adopted the same patterns of the ever-attractive young women, their exuberant gestures, and the speech balloons of the comics, but also imitated the industrial printing technique, the black contours filled with Ben Day dots and fields of primary colors. In doing so, he radically challenged the Abstract Expressionists' idiosyncratic demonstration of the artistic individual.

These loud, commercial graphic images, controversial at the time, became ubiquitous in the United States during the economic boom of the Kennedy era. They graced gum wrappers and lined highways, flooded movie theaters, children's rooms, television, and newsstands. But it was Roy Lichtenstein who first discovered them as a major subject for painting and was the first to make them visible in this field. He explored the aggressive imagery of the postwar period in an ironic and provocative way, analogous to the protests of the women's movement and protests against the Vietnam War that were emerging at the time: "America was hit by industrialism and capitalism harder and sooner and its values seem more askew.… I think the meaning of my work is that it's industrial, it's what all the world will soon become."[1]

Lichtenstein was the first to copy the images of advertising and commercial art—and not the Old Masters or plaster casts of antique statues—seemingly one-to-one, and the first to seemingly
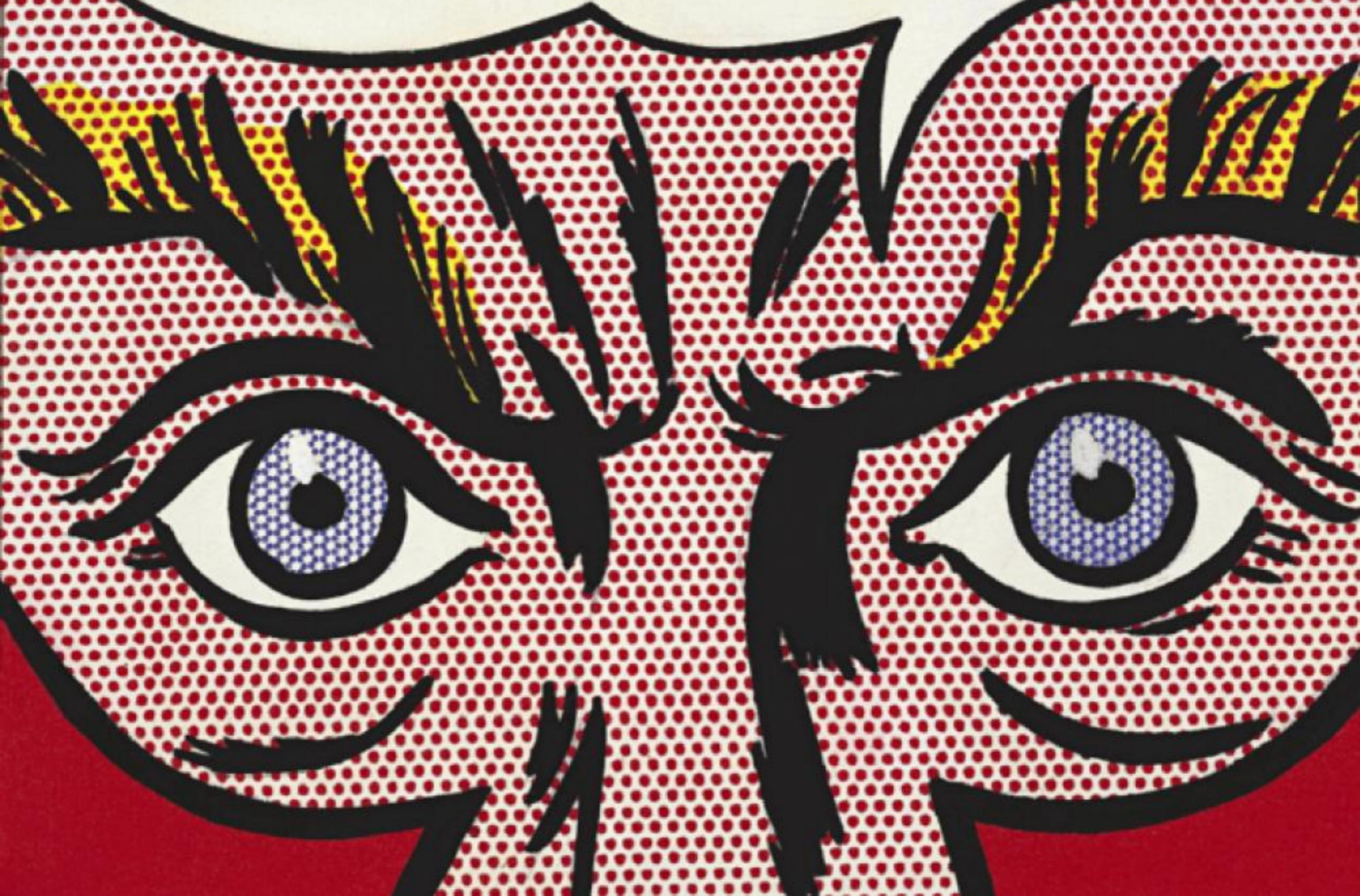
"I did some paintings for my kids. They asked me if I could paint a cartoon if I had to. And I said I probably could. So I did this giant, oversize cartoon. And they were impressed by it."

# LICHTENSTEIN SCULPTURE: MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES

## A Quick Survey of Five Decades

**Jack Cowart**

Roy Lichtenstein made sculptural, three-dimensional objects throughout his extensive artistic career, from as early as the mid-1940s to the last works still in progress at his death in 1997. This artist was, of course, a profoundly talented painter, but he was also a painter who created a remarkable and unusual sculptural oeuvre. It is unfortunate that the standard reference works on the artist have tended to minimize and isolate his sculptural appraisal relative to his paintings.[1] Rather, all Lichtenstein's media should be treated and enjoyed as simultaneous interchanges of related creative inspirations.[2]

In the 1940s, Lichtenstein began by direct "primitive" scoring into, or upon, cast stone, clay, and wood. In the early 1950s, he made quasi-surrealistic mixed-media assemblages or totemic wooden forms (fig. 1).[3] By the mid-1950s, he created a number of colorful abstract wood, string, cardboard, and canvas constructions.[4] His unique pieces of early sculpture had a consciously archaic, folk, or archeological character. As sculptor, he belongs more to the traditions of the assembler, since he was neither a modeler (building up form on an armature) or a carver (aggressively cutting forms down). Lichtenstein's works come instead from found objects, subsequently painted, recrafted, or rebuilt.

The history of the found, appropriated, and reworked object in twentieth-century European and American painting and sculpture is long and complex. Its many paths lead from early Cubists to Constructivists, Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists, as well as 1950s California Funk, happenings, and performances, pre- and post-Pop, and dozens of movements before, during, and since. As he collected and collaged elements into his earliest work, Lichtenstein's sculpture derived positive benefit from this rich history. Having previously studied math, science, engineering, and mechanical draftsmanship, the artist surely knew his early antique-looking, quirky, and handmade objects were in obvious opposition to the pervasive American popular style of "Atomic Age Modern"—the elegant, machined, and sleek formality reflecting the country's postwar industrial ego of superiority and emerging cultural ambition.

For the next thirty-plus years, this artist would create over 150 sculptures, which appear to be inevitable outgrowths of his painted



Fig. 1 Roy Lichtenstein, *King*, ca. 1951, painted wood, 49 × 9.2 × 3 cm, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, and Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas. Gift of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation

Fig. 2 Roy Lichtenstein, *Head with Black Shadow*, 1966, glazed ceramic, 38.1 × 21 × 20.3 cm, Private collection

*Peanut Butter Cup*, 1962
The Sonnabend Homem Collection

*Magnifying Glass*, 1963
Private collection/Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz