

ANDY WARHOL

& SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS: Another Side of Pop Art

Andy Warhol is one of the best known artists of the 20th century. Indeed, he is one of the few artists in history whose name has become a household word. He is best known for his images of cultural "icons" such as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Campbell Soup cans, and Brillo boxes. But there was another side to his work. He was one of the few members of the Pop Art generation who demonstrated social consciousness.

One of the most remarkable aspects of modern art is how little attention was paid to the realities of political action, social injustice, individual and collective suffering, the exploitation of humans and animals, and the omnipresent face of death. Warhol made these realities part of his work as a painter and printmaker. This is the first exhibition to present a general survey of this overlooked aspect of Warhol's work as a printmaker.

In addition to being associated with the "glitz and glamour" of the 1960s & '70s, Warhol was secretly a regular churchgoer, and one who anonymously helped to feed the homeless of New York City on weekends. He also devoted his

last years to a series of remarkable religious images based on the "Last Supper" by Leonardo da Vinci. Being religious was not fashionable in the Pop Art crowd of the 1960s, so Warhol kept this part of himself quiet. This other Andy Warhol was a person of deep social consciousness.

He happily celebrated what he liked about our prosperous, fun-loving, consumer-oriented culture, but he also put before us images of what posed as dangers, both from the inside and the outside, to the American way of life. He insisted that we look at injustice, murder, legalized killing, mindless car-crashes, and national political choices, as well as Mao and Lenin.

The exhibition begins with "Birmingham Race Riot" (1964) which shows a police dog about to attack a black demonstrator.

Race riots were ripping apart the social fabric of the United States in the mid 1960s. Few artists paid any attention. Warhol did.



The next group comes from a series of paintings and prints he devoted to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the events surrounding this national tragedy. Of the many images in this series, two of the most moving are "Jackie II" and "Jackie III" (1966). The nobility with which our First Lady endured her suffering helped the entire nation endure its suffering at the loss of a hero. Warhol captured that spirit.



"Electric Chair" (1971), on loan from the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, is a famous suite of 10 prints that presents us with a non-judgmental but moving image of the instrument Americans use to kill people society has decided should die. Whether or not one is in favor of capital punishment, this image offers food for thought.

"Vote McGovern" (1972) features a less than flattering image of Richard Nixon, and begins a series of prints Warhol made to help presidential candidates. His efforts continued with

Carter's campaign later in the decade. No other artist of the era took political sides and helped to raise funds this way. He also made prints to raise funds for Israel and the United Nations.

The exhibition concludes with a little known suite of 10 screenprints called "Endangered Species" (1983). It features "portraits" of ten animals on the endangered species list at that time. With his cropping, coloring, and animated brushwork, Warhol managed to give our fellow creatures an almost monumental nobility. Ecological consciousness was growing among artists by this time, but Warhol gave direct help by donating these prints to foundations who were saving these animals. He took no money for himself. Why? Because there was another side to Andy Warhol.

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Electric Chair 1971, Courtesy: Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
Birmingham Race Riot 1964, Courtesy: Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Jackie III 1966, Courtesy: Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
Endangered Species 1983, Courtesy: Eastern Washington University