
International Pop
Philadelphia Museum Of Art

"Ice Cream" by Evelyne Axell, 1964. Collection of Serge Goisse, Belgium. ©Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ ADAGP, Paris.

By James D. Balestrieri

PHILADELPHIA, PENN. — From the inside, through its inception in the 1950s and its explosion in the 1960s, Pop Art must have seemed like exactly that — an explosion, breaking the boundaries between high and low culture, drawing on imagery from advertising, comic books, fashion, photography and other forms of mass media and transforming them into brash, visceral klaxons. From Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans and Marilyns to Lichtenstein's blown-up comic book panels, Pop was the external to Modernism's internal, especially as Modernism resolved itself into Abstract Expressionism. Pop was the public to Modernism's private, the communal to Modernism's personal, the sensual to Modernism's cerebral, the commercial to Modernism's elitism.

"International Pop," at the Philadelphia Museum of Art through May 15, describes Pop as a phenomenon born in post-World War II Britain, as British artists

simultaneously celebrated, decried and sought to express their anxiety about the influence of American popular culture. Pop quickly spread back to the United States and was broadcast elsewhere in Europe, Asia and South America.

"Hers is a Lush Situation" by Richard Hamilton, 1958. Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, UK, ©R. Hamilton. All rights reserved DACS, London/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Two works by the British artist Richard Hamilton confirm the vertiginous trajectory of Pop Art. A 1958 work, "Hers Is A Lush Situation," hearkens back to Dada and Surrealism, demonstrating Hamilton's interest in Marcel Duchamp's avant-garde disregard for canonical, classical composition. Still, the painting is not at all out of line with the tenets of Cubism and Futurism. From any number of vantage points, including the central, negative space, the work suggests a female form. But each component is a fragment of a car: a window (reflecting a modern skyscraper), a fin, a fender, a "Dagmar" headlight, a distorted reflection in chrome. Only the floating, disembodied lips and teeth — a very Daliesque element — imply an actual woman.

A quick jump ahead and a glance at Hamilton's "Epiphany," and we see full-bore Pop.

Just six years later, in 1964, Hamilton was traveling in the United States, lecturing on Duchamp, when Pop made a real mark on him, as he observed in a 2002 interview with *The Guardian*: "I sometimes wonder if a sudden epiphany hit Marcel Duchamp when he picked up a bicycle wheel and put it through a hole in the top of a kitchen stool in 1913. I experienced such a moment of understanding when I encountered a large button in a seedy gift shop in Pacific Ocean Park, Venice, California, with the words 'Slip It To Me' blatantly displayed across it."

Possessing scale, sensuality, humor and roots in mass culture and advertising, "Epiphany" — a giant lapel button bearing a slogan for a nonexistent product or a broad-minded political campaign — is a work which Hamilton reproduced and altered for many years, and is one of the keystones of Pop.

"Epiphany" by Richard Hamilton 1964–1989. Collection of Rita Donagh, ©R. Hamilton. All rights reserved DACS, London/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

"Be an Outlaw, Be a Hero (Seja Marginal, seja herói)" by Hélio Oiticica, 1967. Philadelphia Museum of Art. ©César and Claudio Oicitica

Slogans became central elements in Pop Art, making their way back from pop culture whimsy to the political realm in the highly charged atmosphere of the 1960s in the United States and elsewhere. "Be an Outlaw, Be a Hero" by Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica is both an artwork and a piece of propaganda, one that evokes early Soviet posters. But instead of advocating the collective actions of the state, these works featured battle cries of the many countercultural movements of the time that opposed war, dictatorship and oppression and saw artists as ethical, romantic revolutionaries.

Revolution was in the air in the Pop era, and one of the real attractions of the exhibition is the attention paid to other art forms, especially the music of the late 1950s and 1960s. A Spotify playlist, curated by musician Ben Vaughan (whose own music embraces rockabilly, folk and jazz) and available through the Philadelphia Museum

website, ranges from Sonny & Cher's "The Beat Goes On" to Astrud Gilberto's "Agua de Beber," from Bob Dylan and the Velvet Underground to Miles Davis and Neal Hefti's "Theme from Batman," exploring the sounds that accompanied the art.

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"Oiran" by Ushio Shinohara, 1968. Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo. ©Ushio and Noriko Shinohara

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