

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### Roy Lichtenstein: a new dimension in art

Last Updated: 12:01am GMT 17/11/2008

**Roy Lichtenstein was famous for his paintings - but he sculpted, too, as a new book reveals. By Lucy Davies**

With their golden tresses and enormous eyes, the women who appear in Roy Lichtenstein's canvases are unmistakable. Following an exhibition of his famous "Girl" paintings at New York's Gagosian Gallery earlier this year, Yale University Press has published a lavish homage to the great Pop artist's anonymous women, featuring 22 colour plates, as well as exceptional documentary photographs and pencil sketches.



Lichtenstein's girls: Head of Girl, Blonde Waiting, Head With Red Shadow

The book, *Lichtenstein: Girls*, demonstrates the degree to which the artist re-invigorated portraiture with his celebrated series of paintings inspired by comic books in the

summer of 1961.

"Roy adored women," his wife Dorothy tells artist Jeff Koons in an interview featured in the book. "He was portraying his idea of the dream girl... but his personality was not at all like his images. He wasn't boisterous or noisy. I think [he] considered comic books to be soap operas. He was so reserved in his own feeling that this was his way of latching on to the emotional highs and lows of life. He specifically picked images that had a lot of emotional charge - the woman disappointed by love, the war hero in the heat of battle."

Less celebrated, but also appearing in the book, is Lichtenstein's distinctive series of ceramic heads. He began experimenting with sculpture around 1964, demonstrating a knack for the form that was at odds with the insistent flatness of his paintings. It was an unsurprising move for someone who venerated Picasso, an artist who famously worked in ceramics, producing wittily decorated plates, pitchers, and masks.

"I think his sculpture is the best sculpture of our times, by far," Lichtenstein said in 1973, soon after Picasso's death. "It has elements of everything that came after. Until [Claes] Oldenburg, people tended to think of sculpture as monuments, and that was a huge error. Picasso's sculpture has incredible strength combined with a lack of pomposity. I don't think there is any question that Picasso is the greatest figure of the 20th century."

Lichtenstein's sculptures are similar to those of Picasso in their lack of pretension and twinkle of humour. His mannequin heads nod to traditional busts, yet they are also clearly entrenched in popular culture. This collision of high and low modes is central to all of Lichtenstein's art.

For *Head of Girl* (1964), and *Head with Red Shadow* (1965), Lichtenstein collaborated with a ceramicist who sculpted the form of the head out of clay. Lichtenstein then applied a glaze to create the same sort of graphic motifs that he used in his paintings.

The application of black lines and Ben-day dots (familiar from cheap comic books) to three-dimensional objects results in a flattening of the form, so that the heads appear to

oscillate between two and three dimensions. "I wanted the ambiguity between realness and unrealness," Lichtenstein said.

To apply the dots, he used specially perforated tape which bent around the bust's contours. He then masked the rest of the surface and sprayed on the glazes before firing the finished piece in a kiln. The black lines, as well as certain areas of colour, were added by hand, and demonstrate his immaculate application: the invisible brushstrokes and consistent density of each coloured section create an impression of evenness.

Despite their identical facial expressions, the heads convey a good deal of emotion. Partly this is because they take the verve of Lichtenstein's paintings off the wall and into the three-dimensional space in which we play out our own lives. "You can put your own emotions into the characters," says Koons. "You can really see yourself in the story."

□ Lichtenstein: Girls (Yale University Press, £40) is out now