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The Lichtenstein You Don't Know: 6 Works and the Stories Behind Them

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Roy Lichtenstein, Look Mickey, 1961 (detail)

Roy Lichtenstein is one those artists so iconic for his signature style — the radical use of comic strips' iconography and Ben-Day dots that made him a leading figure of Pop Art — that his fuller artist's trajectory and larger body of work often go overlooked. But a recent Tate Modern retrospective demonstrates how much more there is to the great American artist than his luscious cartoon heroines and fighter pilots. The landmark exhibition (on view through May 27), with 125 pieces spanning Lichtenstein's entire career, is full of surprises, ranging from his early European pastiches, to his black and white still-lives, to Art Deco brass sculptures, all of which expand on prevailing understanding of the artist's oeuvre. For a better understanding of how they fit into Lichtenstein's career, ARTINFO UK asked Tate's assistant curator Iria Candela to comment on seven key pieces from the show.

Roy Lichtenstein, Washington Crossing the Delaware I, c. 1951

This sums up what Lichtenstein was doing in the 1940s and 1950s. When he entered art school, he started to search for his own vocabulary by looking at the European art tradition; he was painting European subjects in that "obscurist" style. "Washington Crossing the Delaware" captures a shift in subject matter: Lichtenstein soon moved on to the American tradition, and particularly to American history painting. We put this piece in the show because it began the ongoing dialogue the artist had with masters of paintings, a dialogue which is explored in the room "Art about Art."

Roy Lichtenstein, Look Mickey, 1961

“Look Mickey” is considered to be Lichtenstein’s first Pop painting. He did it in 1961, and that painting would set the course of his career. It was his breakthrough: the artist identified a new vocabulary to develop thanks to the inspiration he found in a cartoon in a little book his son had at home.

Roy Lichtenstein, Magnifying Glass, 1963

This painting illustrates Lichtenstein’s use of the Ben-Day dots as a basic element in his compositions. When he started to develop his style, he was looking at subject matter taken from comic books and advertisements, but he also looked at the way these images were produced with the very basic means painting machines allowed. It meant using outlines to draw the composition, a basic palette — and of course the Ben-Day dots, which were introduced tThe Lichtenstein You Don't Know: 7 Works and the Stories Behind Them create a sense of three-dimensionality. In “Magnifying Glass,” he’s making these Ben-Day dots the subject of the painting itself. We can also see this work as a symbol of Pop Art’s play with scale.

Roy Lichtenstein, Modern Sculpture with Velvet Rope, 1968

This is a very beautiful example of a series of works that Lichtenstein developed around the Art Deco style. Art Deco reminded him of his childhood. He was born and bred in New York City, and this style in design and architecture was very much in vogue at the time. It could be found in places such as the Radio City Music Hall, or the Chrysler Building — and all in the movie theaters. Here Lichtenstein is playing with this style in a very free manner. He’s basically improvising new forms for these sculptures. We see them as pure exercises on style.

Roy Lichtenstein, Nude with Bust, 1995

This is a painting that relates to a late moment in Lichtenstein’s career, right before he died in 1997. What’s fascinating in this painting is that he’s not painting from live models, but rather he’s going back to his comic book clippings from the 1960s. He undresses the heroines to create these images. This particular painting also illustrates a sophisticated development of his technique. Rather than conjuring up an idea of volume, the Ben-Day dots do quite the opposite: the figure and the background blend. It creates a very special sense of space.

Roy Lichtenstein, Landscape with Boat, 1996

The Lichtenstein You Don't Know: 7 Works and the Stories Behind ThemHere the artist is not simply looking back to the history of painting — in this case the Chinese tradition of the Song Dynasty — he appropriates it to make his own composition. This painting is first a landscape: you can see a little boat in the corner where two men are trying to find their way. It’s very moving because of the disproportionate scale between the sea and the figure. On the other hand, this image is really quite abstract, the shapes dramatically flowing around the space. It is a great ending to the show because it summarizes many of the issues that interested Lichtenstein throughout his career, particularly this tension between the figurative and the abstract.