

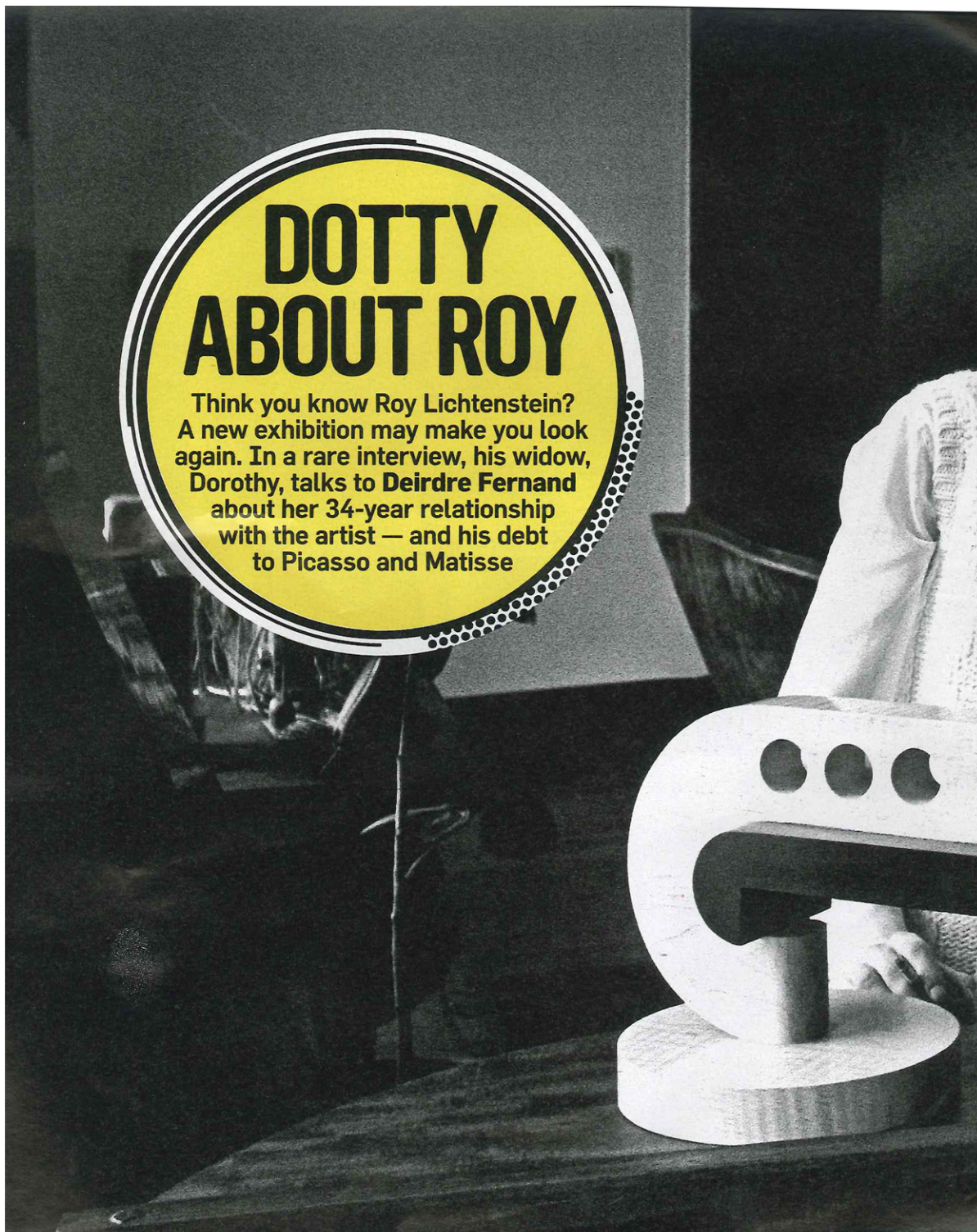
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DOTTY ABOUT ROY

Think you know Roy Lichtenstein?
A new exhibition may make you look
again. In a rare interview, his widow,
Dorothy, talks to Deirdre Fernand
about her 34-year relationship
with the artist — and his debt
to Picasso and Matisse



ROY
LICHTENSTEIN



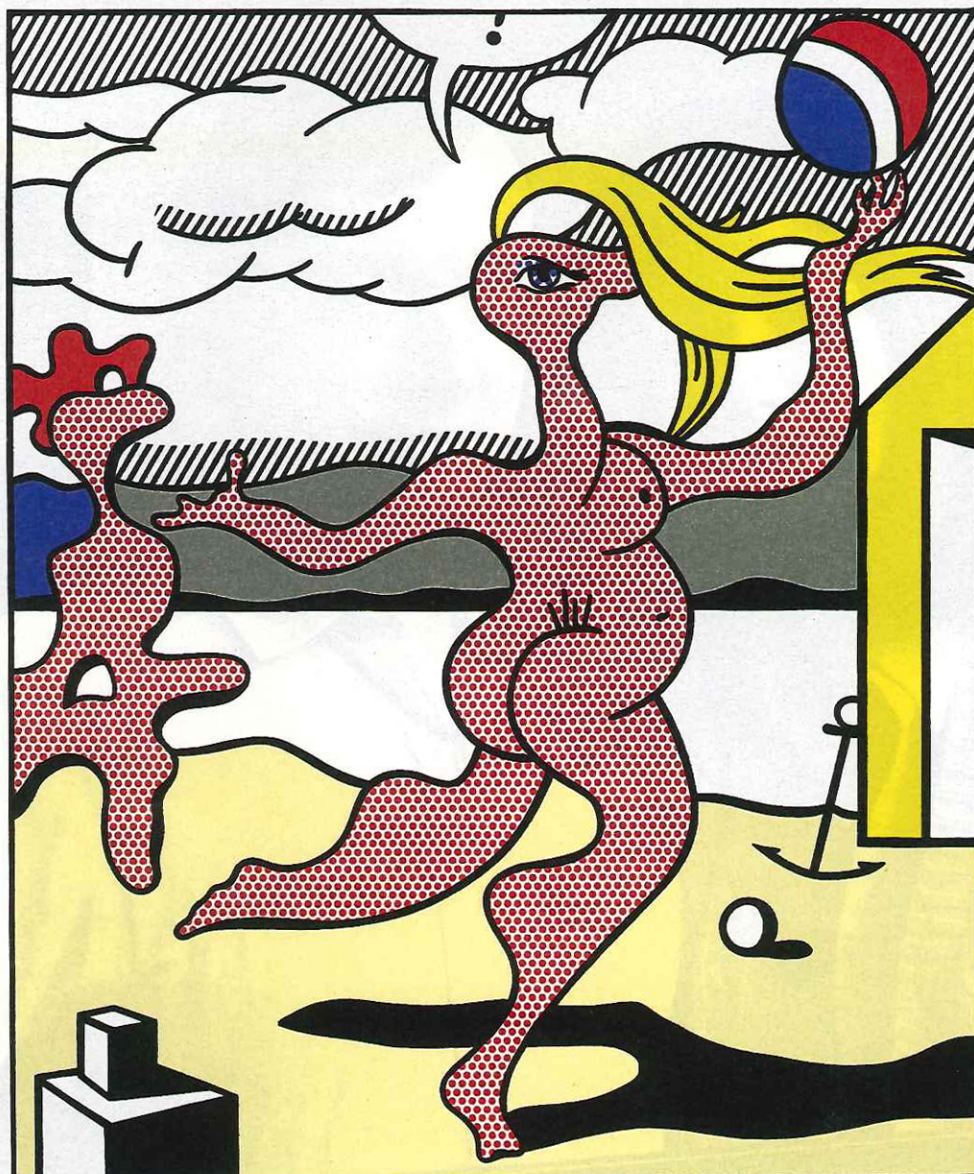
When the artist Roy Lichtenstein turned 70, his wife Dorothy bought him a saxophone. It was the perfect gift. The alto sax was the only thing that could ever keep him away from his studio in Southampton, Long Island, where for decades he had turned out the paintings that made him one of the most famous pop artists in the world. "Roy loved nothing better than to be absorbed in his work," remembers Dorothy. "But the only thing that he would ever put down his paintbrush for was that instrument. He would stop to practise his scales."

While Lichtenstein was a master of his art, his genius did not stretch to the sax. "Late in life he was just learning to read music and work at his scales," Dorothy says. "He was always disciplined and he had this total willingness to be a beginner." Both his art and music came to an abrupt end just three years later. After a lingering cough turned into pneumonia, Lichtenstein died in September 1997. A painting stood unfinished on his easel; his saxophone lay silent in its case.

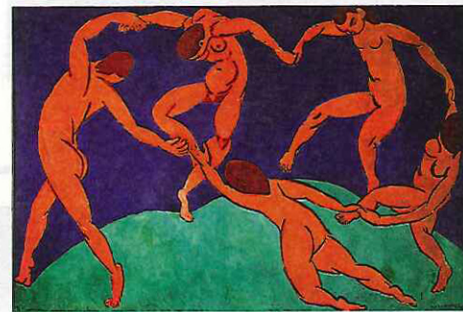
Next month, more than 15 years after his death, his works will go on show at London's Tate Modern. Lichtenstein: A Retrospective, the result of a collaboration between Tate Modern and The Art Institute of Chicago, is the first of its kind since his death and the largest show of his work mounted in Britain. Not only will the exhibition feature *Whaam!* (1963), and *Drowning Girl* (1963), two of his most popular images, but also sculptures, drawings, landscapes and ceramics. Of the 130 works, mostly coming from America, at least 30 have never been seen before in Britain.

Lichtenstein was famous for bringing cartoon imagery into high art, combining banal subject matter with a formidable artistic technique. Along with Warhol, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, among others, he was part of a generation of artists who seized upon mundane objects from popular culture — hence the epithet Pop Art — and lent them a particular visual dignity. That style is so familiar that it's easy to believe we know him — we grasp him in the same way we recognise Andy Warhol's Marilyn. Lichtenstein took comic-strip couples and consumer goods and rendered them in bold outlines, primary colours and dot shading. And it's that familiarity that might be a problem. Those who visit expecting to see more of the Lichtenstein cartoon aesthetic will be in for a shock.

"The comic-strip work only lasted a short period — some three years — yet that is what people know him for," explains Dorothy. The



HIS MASTERS' VOICES
Lichtenstein's *Frolic* (above) echoes Picasso's *Bather with a Beach Ball* (right). Matisse's *La Danse* (second right) features in Lichtenstein's *Artist's Studio 'The Dance'* (top right). Bottom right: *Haystacks #3* — a dotty reworking of Monet's *Haystacks in the Sun*



artworks on display will reveal some hidden treasures, including the exuberant canvases inspired by the masters he admired, such as Picasso, Monet and Matisse. Other rare works include a number of Chinese-style landscapes and a series of nudes he embarked upon just before his death.

It's thanks to his widow and her collection that you won't just be seeing spots before your eyes. Sixteen years his junior, Dorothy was

only 57 when Roy died. Two years later she set up a foundation in his name. Under its aegis, his works are constantly touring. Her husband left about 5,000 works of art and Dorothy owns hundreds. So where, in the exhibition, the label reads "private collection", that often means Dorothy. Part of her role is to persuade collectors to lend their Lichtensteins for what can be months at a time. "I can offer them something in exchange, so they don't



short. "I feel Roy should be there. He would have gone on to do so many things."

Jack Cowart, a former museum curator who knew the couple well and now runs the foundation, describes her as a "perfect foil" for Lichtenstein. "She allowed him space and time to practise his art the way he wanted. They were always in sync with each other," he says. So when Lichtenstein was toiling in his studio, Dorothy taught in her local high school, learnt haute cuisine in France, wrote a cookery book and rode horses. Dorothy's face and figure belie her age — she is 73. Although she has had boyfriends, she has never remarried and lives alone in the house the couple bought in 1969, a spacious clapboard home by the ocean.

And Lichtenstein is never very far away. From her bedroom window she can see his aluminium sculpture (*House III*, 1997) parked on the lawn. In her living room hangs one of his paintings (*Landscape*, 1974), while her

kitchen dresser holds a porcelain tea service he designed in 1984 for Rosenthal. All cobalt, yellow and dotty, it's part of a limited edition worth an estimated £15,000. She uses it? "It doesn't go in the dishwasher."

The garage houses his studio, preserved just as he left it. By his easel, a book about Matisse lies open; the shelves hold his paints and brushes. A *Peanuts* cartoon is stuck to a pinboard, while two tabloid newspaper

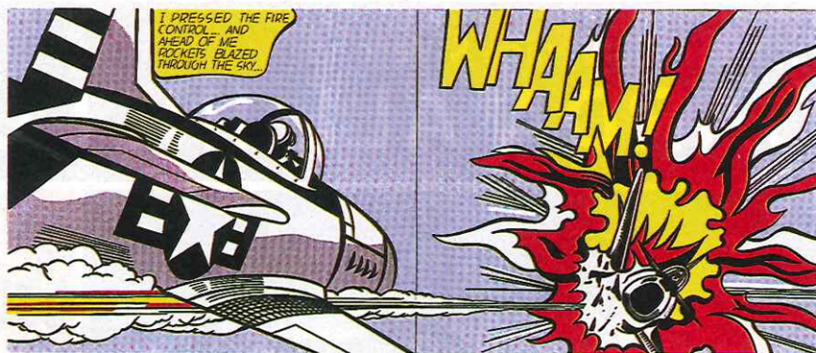
DOROTHY RECALLS AN INSTANT MUTUAL ATTRACTION — BUT HE WAS WITH ANOTHER WOMAN

cuttings about the afterlife — "Incredible Proof of Reincarnation" and "New Evidence of Life After Death" — are pasted by the door. Not, says Dorothy, that he believed in any kind of resurrection. "He was a humanist and a scientific rationalist," she says. "He loved to read *Scientific American* and *Science News*." He was not religious: "He always used to joke that he would leave his soul to science."

The couple met in 1964. Dorothy had recently graduated in political science and art history from Beaver College in Pennsylvania and was working her way up in an art gallery in Manhattan. Lichtenstein was at the height of his celebrity in New York, basking in the status that his show at Leo Castelli's gallery had brought him just two years earlier. As part of an exhibition, it fell to the young gallerist to ask the top pop personalities, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, to design a print for a shopping bag. "Andy drew a can of Campbell's soup, Roy a Thanksgiving turkey." A print of the turkey that brought them together is now in the archive. Dorothy remembers their first lunch date — and an instant mutual attraction, but there was an impediment. Lichtenstein, already separated from Isabel, was involved with another woman. And when he took his girlfriend on a trip to Paris, Dorothy feared the worst. She remembers a colleague at the gallery trying to let her down gently: "She told me: 'Guess you won't be seeing him again.'"

But Lichtenstein came back from Paris, ditched the girlfriend, and the pair soon became inseparable. Looking back, she realises how much they had in common. Both shared a *Mittleuropa* heritage. He was descended from German-Jewish immigrants, she from Czech, Hungarian, Romanian and Austrian Jews. "I think I'm a quarter of everything," she says. Both had enjoyed comfortable middle-class childhoods. The son of an estate agent, Lichtenstein grew up on Manhattan's Upper West Side, went to private school and spent his spare time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History. The daughter of a judge, Dorothy Herzka grew up in Brooklyn, attending the same high school as Woody Allen. Following Lichtenstein's divorce, they married in New York in 1968 with Dorothy taking on the role of wife, stepmother and muse. She speaks little of Isabel, only that she was "troubled" and reportedly had a drink problem. She spent her last years in sheltered accommodation and died in 1980, aged 59.

Dorothy's favourite photograph from her honeymoon period shows Roy looking up at

**JOIN THE DOTS**

Left: Roy's widow, Dorothy, 73, at home in New York. Top: Lichtenstein's famous *WHAAM!* painting (above) will appear in the retrospective alongside sculptures such as *Head with Blue Shadow* (below)

her adoringly. With her long, dark hair and wide smile, she looks like a young Jackie Kennedy. "I was very lucky to have found a soul mate in him," she says. And although New York's headline writers were suitably grateful when The Master of Dots and his very own Dot got together, to him she was always "Dorothy".

As she recounts, it's often said that Lichtenstein went to bed one night in 1962 a poor man and woke up the next day a rich one. The American art critic Robert Rosenblum once pronounced: "For most of the world Lichtenstein was born at the Leo Castelli Gallery in Feb-March 1962." His show sold out before it opened. Indeed, *Masterpiece*, painted later that year, is widely seen as an ironic take on his own success. Wearing a black polo-neck sweater, the artist (Brad) looks on while his muse gushes, "Why, Brad Darling, this painting is a masterpiece! My, soon you'll have all of New York clamoring for your work!" But Dorothy says his success actually took two decades. "Roy really had to struggle. He was an art teacher for years and didn't really have any money until he was nearly 40."

After studying art at Ohio State University (OSU), Lichtenstein had been drafted into the Second World War, serving in France and Belgium. Afterwards, he took a series of temporary teaching jobs, first at OSU, followed by Oswego, part of the State University of New York and Rutgers University, New Jersey. But he never made it to full professor. "He failed to get tenure at Ohio State," she says. "Roy always said that, in retrospect, it was the best thing that ever happened to him."

It was a happy accident when he produced — on his kitchen table in New Jersey — his first pop painting, *Look Mickey* (1961). The work depicted Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck and he used a dog-grooming brush to make the dots. Legend has it that one of his sons pointed to a comic book and challenged him to make a better drawing. Lichtenstein obliged — and begat the rodent that brought him riches. "I know that story has been repeated many times," Dorothy says. "But in the end even Roy couldn't remember whether it was true or not."

Not everyone in the art world was delighted by Lichtenstein's style and subject matter. He had come to prominence when America's great abstract expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko,

were regarded with reverence. Their immense paint-splattered canvases were regarded as spiritual tours de force. In contrast, Lichtenstein's hot dogs, washing machines and comic strips were seen as an affront

to a refined sensibility. They were also seen to attract the wrong sort. "The art galleries are being invaded by the pin-headed contemptible style of gum-chewers, bobby soxers and worse, delinquents," wrote the American critic Max Kozloff, while the venerable art historian Clement Greenberg declared that Lichtenstein would be forgotten within a decade.

The controversy rumbled on. Two years after his sell-out show, *Life* magazine, echoing an earlier feature which mooted Jackson Pollock as "the greatest artist in the United States", ran an article about Lichtenstein, posing the question: "Is He The Worst Artist In The US?" What few readers of *Life* realised was that Lichtenstein knew the writer and had encouraged its publication — and its headline. After all, coverage in *Life* would give Pop Art a platform and couldn't harm his prices.

Dorothy believes that the years of struggle contributed to his work ethic. At the height of his fame and success he remained disciplined and profoundly grateful. "He was in the right place at the right time," she says. "He used to say, 'I'm like an idiot savant — I only know how to do one kind of thing.'" Sometimes he would wonder if his whole life were a dream. He would tell Dorothy: "You'll see, someone is going to shake me and I'll be living in a nursing home in Oswego and they'll say, 'It's time for your pills, Mr Lichtenstein.'"

That discipline — coupled with a natural reticence — made him the antithesis of bad boys such as Andy Warhol and the extrovert Robert Rauschenberg. Indeed, as a young soldier in Paris, Lichtenstein had made his way to Picasso's studio in the hope of meeting the artist he so admired. "But he was too shy to knock at the door," remembers Dorothy. So in the heady, druggy days of the late 1960s and 1970s, while Warhol was courting celebrity at The Factory, partying at Studio 54 and being snapped by the paparazzi, Lichtenstein was at home with Dorothy listening to Charlie Parker records and going macrobiotic. It was alfalfa sprouts for him, not acid. A creature of habit, he worked every day, breakfasting on Raisin Bran and banana, and stopping only for ➤➤➤



lunch — fruit salad and yogurt — with Dorothy. “He never wanted to waste a minute,” she says. “He felt that he had been given permission to play in the sandbox.”

For Lichtenstein, the headline in *Life* magazine was only the first in a series of pranks. Throughout his career he borrowed images from great artists to create witty and coded visual puns. Both *Haystacks* and *Rouen Cathedral, Set 5*, dated 1969, are his dotted reworkings of Monet, while his *Still Life with Goldfish* series (1972-1974) is a hymn to Matisse. But perhaps the most enduring artistic influence of his life was Picasso. Lichtenstein's *Frolic* (1977) is an entertaining meditation on the Spanish master's *Bather with Beach Ball* (1932), while his *Femme D'Alger* (1963) is his take on Picasso's work of the same name from 1955. Sometimes, as in *Artist's Studio “Look Mickey”* (1973), inspired by Matisse's depictions of his studio, Lichtenstein sneaks in a version of one of his own paintings.

Many critics see these appropriations as a form of improvisation derived from music, like variations on a theme or a choral fugue. “He

wanted to take an idea and twist it. In jazz, you go away from the basic melody and you are riffing on it,” explains Dorothy. “So's there's an ironic playfulness at work, these are riffs on a theme. And Roy was always very serious about his playfulness.” His *Artist's Studio “The Dance”* (1974) derived from Matisse's *La Danse* (1910) even incorporates a musical staff. All this makes him not so much the man who put pop into art, but the man who put art into pop.

“Throughout his life as a painter, he had a profound engagement with art history,” says Sheena Wagstaff, co-curator of the exhibition and chairman of the modern and contemporary department at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. “We could see this as a tribute, though ambivalent, from one artist to another.” As Lichtenstein once put it: “The things I have parodied I actually admire.” As a young art student, Lichtenstein had even written some poems paying tribute to Cézanne, Gauguin, Picasso and Van Gogh, referring to them as “the Wonderful Wizards of Art”.

Yet one of the most popular Lichtensteins in the exhibition promises to be not a parody

of anyone, except perhaps his own comic book style. *Engagement (The Ring)*, 1962, features a man placing a sparkling diamond on a daintily manicured finger. When the painting went on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington recently, security guards reported men going down on one knee, ring in hand, to propose to their girlfriends in front of it. “Roy would have loved that,” says Dorothy. He may have promised his soul to science and his heart to Dorothy, but Roy Lichtenstein left his art to all of us ■

TIMES+

Lichtenstein: a Retrospective is at Tate Modern from February 21 to May 27, sponsored by Bank of America Merrill Lynch. Times+ members can buy two-for-one tickets until February 21 — call 020 7887 8998 and quote '24timesplus'



The curator's perspective on the Tate Modern retrospective, plus a slideshow of images: thesundaytimes.co.uk/lichtenstein