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A new exhibition celebrating the work of pop art icon Andy Warhol arrives at the Ashmolean Museum



Power of pink: Catriona Pearson, Ashmolean Museum exhibition co-ordinator, with Andy Warhol's Twenty Fuschia Maos

11 Feb 2016

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Andy Warhol's work has adorned museum walls for over half a century. As early as December 1962 his Gold Marilyn Monroe was accepted into the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art. In 1963, his work was included in the Guggenheim Museum's show Six Painters and their Objects. Now this stuff is in a museum, a Vogue columnist quipped at the time, I suppose we'll have to start taking it seriously.



Yet the arrival of a big Andy Warhol exhibition at the Ashmolean still comes as surprise.

Best known for its collections of antiquities, the museum has presented displays of late 20th century and contemporary art in the past, but never before on this scale.

There are 142 works on display across three rooms, on generous loan from the astonishing private collection of Andrew and Christine Hall. The loan of any one of these would represent a coup for most regional museums. A fourth room, arranged in collaboration with the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, adds the best of Warhol's late 60s films on multiple screens. There are iconic Warhol images. Brillo boxes can be ticked with a series of Flowers, a Jackie Onassis and a late Campbell's Soup Can. There's a 1979 Chairman Mao, which feels like a landslide victory for garish pink.

But more interesting are the many works which sit outside the Warhol canon such as the bold, black and white eighties paintings and a seventies series made by haphazardly urinating on copper. And there are rare pictures of historical importance from the sixties, such as Warhol's small portrait of the actor Troy Donahue from August 1962, which hangs in the first room.

This, along with a head of Warren Beatty, was Warhol's first experiment with silkscreen printing. In his memoirs he recalled how making these felt quick, chancy and thrilling, and gave him the idea to make screens of Marilyn Monroe when she died that very month.

Nearby sit portraits of fellow artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella and James Rosenquist, and four 20 x 16in portraits of Ethel Scull, who along with her husband Bob, amassed the biggest collection of pop art in 1960s America. Former Metropolitan Museum director Thomas Hoving admitted in his biography that he had considered killing them to get hold of it.

The Ethel Scull portraits were made as part of Warhol's debut commission, ordered by Bob Scull, who amassed a fortune operating his "Sculls Angels" taxicabs across New York.

The story goes that Warhol walked Ethel down from the couple's Fifth Avenue apartment to an amusement arcade on the corner of Times Square. There, he sat her in a photo booth for an hour.

While the machine took pictures, Warhol told jokes. Over one hundred dollars worth of small change was dropped into the slot.

Warhol later applauded the Sculls as heroes for any swinging mod couple wishing to build an art collection. A couple perhaps, just like Andrew and Christine Hall.

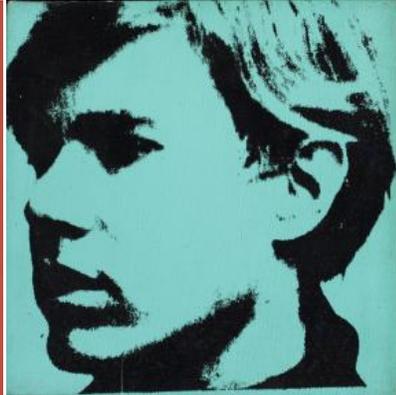
Although there have been numerous Andy Warhol exhibitions in recent years, this one stands apart for being drawn from a single private collection. The ensemble doesn't claim to provide an exhaustive survey, or represent every facet of Warhol's work. But it's a thrilling snapshot. Plus, as the Barbican's Magnificent Obsessions show proved last year, there are shameless voyeuristic joys to be had just by rifling through other people's stuff.



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- Martha de Henriquez and Warhol's Self Portrait

The second room features Warhol's 1970s portraits, which seem to glow more brightly with the passing of time. Together, they showcase him as a great portrait painter of his age, much as Gainsborough or Sargeant were of theirs.

Across one wall, 24 of his commissioned portraits have been masterfully hung in a grid. A close look reveals thick slabs of colour around faces that, perhaps even now, are only remembered because they paid the \$25,000 Warhol charged per portrait.

The Black and White pictures in the third room offer a complete departure. Made from 1985-1986, they vary in size and in subject from hamburgers to kitsch \$9.98 gift shop Christs, to a large 72 x 80in painting entitled Map of the Easter U.S.S.R. Missile Bases. Intriguingly, I'm told this hangs above the staircase in Andrew and Christine Hall's Florida home.

Andrew Hall has described himself an obsessive, compulsive collector, who claims that he started buying art to fend off an oncoming midlife crisis. His friendship with the Ashmolean is a stroke of luck for Oxford gallery goers, yielding a trio of Norman Rosenthal-curated shows to the museum in the past few years.

I can only hope there's more like it to come. But for now, enjoy this unmissable show.

Where and when

Andy Warhol, Works from the Hall Collection runs until May 15.

Tickets are £10 (£9 concs) from ashmolean.org/exhibitions



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