

Andy Warhol brings stardust to the Ashmolean in Oxford with 100 hardly-seen works

By Mark Sheerin Published: 24 February 2016

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A new exhibition at the Ashmolean shows how Warhol's experiments kept arts writers busy for decades - and features a marathon film of the Empire State Tower



Andy Warhol, Self Portrait

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It was once surely one of the few unrealised ambitions of the fame-seeker Andy Warhol: a solo show at MoMA devoted entirely to his unmistakable

portraits. Warhol envisaged one of each subject, each a characteristic medium-sized headshot with unlikely colour highlights. The grandiose title which the artist had in mind was *Portrait of Society*. Perhaps in Oxford we have an approximation of what such an exhibition might have been like.

The Hall Collection has loaned out more than 100 rarely or never seen works. Their appearance at the venerable Ashmolean Museum will ensure that Andrew Hall, an obscure commodities trader, achieves a degree of fame all his own. Curator Norman Rosenthal gives the show an imprimatur of critical importance. It is up to visitors whether or not this exhibition is an exercise in puffery or a genuinely important survey.



Twenty Fuschia Maos

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Hall has collected in an interesting fashion and specialised in portraits. There are the screenprints of a demagogue (Chairman Mao) alongside a series depicting an everyman president of an insurance company (Watson Powell). There is the German artist and shaman Joseph Beuys, alongside another celebrity in a hat, the singer Paul Anka. There are representations of Warhol's peers: the artists Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella, and James Rosenquist, alongside too many actresses and glamour girls to mention.

If Warhol had stuck to portraiture, the visual interest in these screen stars and art stars might begin to pale. But Hall's collection reminds us of the darker side of Warhol's imagination, if imagination is the right word for someone whose art appears so observational. Also here in Oxford are many of his black and white paintings which explore religion and geopolitics. Of particular resonance are one or two maps of the former Soviet Union which are dotted with the location of ICBM launch sites.

There are self-portraits, too: one from 1967, another from 1986. Both ensure that the biggest celeb in this show is Andy himself. It is somewhat strange to find him here in the Ashmolean, alongside the many emperors, the buddhas and Greco-roman gods. Even after more than a millennium or two the classical statuary has more gravity than, say, Warhol's portrait of Arnold Schwarzenegger's wife. But even that criticism has a flipside in which the artist has merely held up a caustic mirror to our times.



Joseph Beuys

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A single Brillo box, a number of flower paintings and roomful of slow-moving black and white film remind you that the Pittsburgh artist explored enough avenues to keep art writers busy for another 30 years at the very least. The latter include screen tests for John Cale and Nico, which serve to bring to mind The Velvet Underground. Well, none of the greats of antiquity could have thought of filming a building for an eight-and-a-half hour stretch, as Warhol does here with the Empire State Tower.

And yet it is through the indirect and direct patronage of collectors like Hall by which you can draw a line back through history connecting Warhol with those artists supported by the likes of the Medici in Renaissance Italy. No longer do we have such skills in handling paint, but we have here a genius in handling media. Works from the Hall Collection stand the relative test of time.

- **Andy Warhol: Works from the Hall Collection runs until May 15 2016. Open 10am-5pm Tuesday-Sunday. Admission £5-£11, book online. Follow the museum on Twitter @ashmoleanmuseum, Facebook and Instagram.**

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