

Early Roy Lichtenstein: A fount of insight on postwar America

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 7, 2021, 47 minutes ago



Roy Lichtenstein's "Washington Crossing the Delaware II," from about 1951. ESTATE OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN/COURTESY OF GABRIEL MILLER

WATERVILLE, Maine — In 1940, an Ohio State undergraduate named Roy Lichtenstein — yes, that Roy Lichtenstein — made a loose and gestural ink

sketch of Paul Bunyan felling a tree with a mighty swing. He passed it off to his roommate with a wink. Keep it, he said. I'm going to be famous someday.

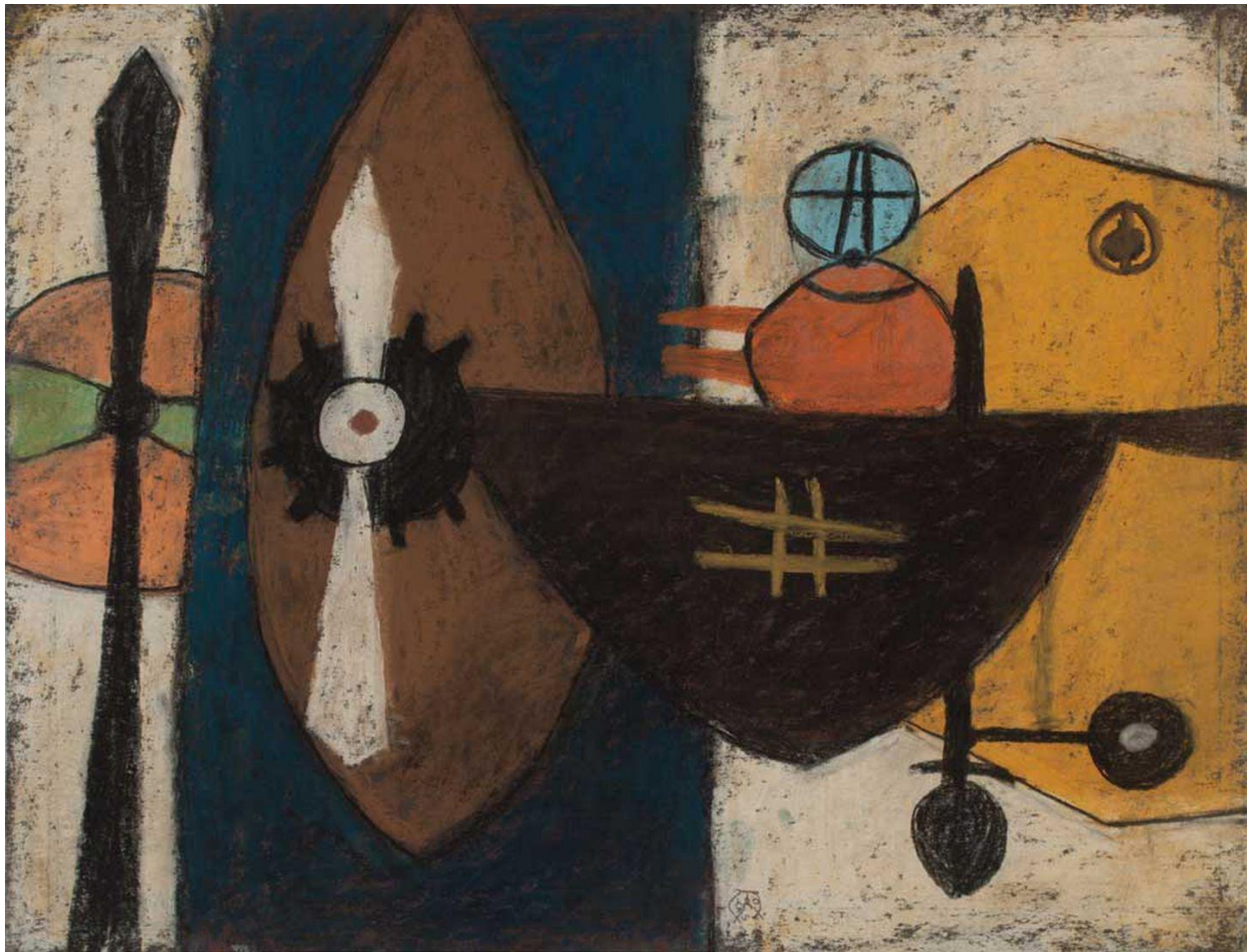
Someday came, and famous he was, though not for works like that. [In 1961, Lichtenstein made "Look Mickey," his first-ever appropriation of a four-color pulp illustration.](#) (He lifted it from the 1960 kids' book "Donald Duck: Lost and Found.") That anchored him as one of the pillars of the thoroughly American Pop Art movement.

But "Roy Lichtenstein: History in the Making, 1948-1960," at the Colby College Museum of Art, isn't about any of that. It's about Lichtenstein before he became *Lichtenstein*, and it's a revelation: A fresh view of an artist who reached a saturation point so long ago he can feel as familiar and over-worn as old wallpaper.

"History in the Making" is instead unfamiliar, exhilaratingly so, spanning the artist's long teaching stints in Cleveland and upstate New York, up to a breath before that fateful Mickey steered his course into mass-cultural history. The show captures a young artist in a postwar moment, unmoved by the sunny optimism of a burgeoning American dream and driven to peel back its thin myths. It underpins Lichtenstein's own myth in the American mind — because what's more American than Pop Art, with its slick language of advertising, its breezy consumer critique? — with a foundation rooted in old-world artistic traditions. It's even *painterly*, for heaven's sake, the artist's rough brush strokes and thick textures pure anathema to the sleek surfaces of the hands-off works he's known for. It constantly surprises, and as a result is more than occasionally thrilling.

All of this puts "History in the Making" right in step with a prevailing ethos of the times. Don't we all know by now how history is selective and incomplete, and how arbitrary notions of "significance" can whittle complicated narratives down to fine points? I'd say so. It's both the dilemma and corrective of our times. ("History in the Making" is very much of our times in another way too. It's been hanging at the Colby since February, but due to the pandemic, will open to the public for only the final days of its run in early June. Day-trippers will be able to catch it in August at its next stop at [the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y.](#))

A dilemma shared by our times and Lichtenstein's was the prevailing ethic of the market, which found his comic book paintings wonderfully saleable. And so the back story — these paintings, a life before all that — was put in a box, to keep the air of complication away from the pure pursuit of profit. It made Lichtenstein a victim of his own success, at least to me. I got what he was doing, alongside Warhol, in the 1960s — elevating dumb, sophomoric American consumer trash culture to the status of art by force of gleeful, sardonic chutzpah. (That's not all he did. Once he *was* famous, he was more than happy to turn his sharp wit on the system that made him, and even on himself.) And though I got the point of his later work, I never much cared for it; there's only so much winkingly self-conscious cynicism you can take.



Roy Lichtenstein's "Pilot," from about 1948. ESTATE OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN/COLLECTION OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK

That's why "History in the Making" is a revelation. These are bold, expressive paintings — experimental, gestural, full of color, fracture, and life. They grapple with the dark fable of American exceptionalism and explode its blithe exclusions into visceral critique. The show starts gently — a selection of beguiling figurative pastels made in the late 1940s, evocative of European surrealists like Joan Miró and, inevitably, the jagged and totemic forms of Pablo Picasso — but becomes quickly more urgent.

A step around the corner brings you to "The Cowboy (Red)," the Colby's lone Lichtenstein from the period, and curator Elizabeth Finch's touchpoint for the show. ("History in the Making" is a collaborative affair between Finch and her counterpart Marshall N. Price at Duke University's Nasher Museum, where the show will wind up its run in 2022.) Lichtenstein was fascinated by uniquely American icons and the legends that spawned them. The cowboy, that symbol of rough-and-tumble self-reliance on the western frontier, was just one example. In the piece, Lichtenstein's view isn't one of reverence but befuddlement; the figure is grimly simplistic, a child's drawing dismembered and mawkish, like the wings pulled off a fly. It's as though the artist, in unpacking American lore, found it too slim and fragile to reassemble.



Roy Lichtenstein's "The Cowboy," from about 1951. ESTATE OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN

That work, from 1951, is a powerful touchpoint for us, too. Lichtenstein made it in Cleveland while the New York art world was ascending to global dominance on the backs of Abstract Expressionism, the first full-blown American art movement to gain international recognition. It quickly became the proverbial irresistible force: Serious modern painters had followed the medium to its logical conclusion in abstraction; those who didn't, in their view, just weren't serious. (Picasso, I'm sure, begged to differ.)

That, of course, was never really the case, and great work was being made across a spectrum of practice while the movement hogged the limelight. But that simple narrative dominated American art history orthodoxy for decades, and to a degree, still does. To get a sense of how selective history can be, it's instructive to read [Lichtenstein's short bio that accompanies the "Look Mickey" page on the National Gallery of Art website](#). Born in New York, he decamped for art school at Ohio State in 1940 and, after serving three years in the army during the war, returned in 1946 to finish his MFA. At the time, New York was on the cusp of becoming *New York*, postwar angst coalescing with artists like Clyfford Still and Jackson Pollock to spawn a visual language beyond representation, so they said, of raw emotion.

At the same time, Lichtenstein, the NGA says, spent 13 years working as an art professor at Ohio State, the State University of New York at Oswego, and at Rutgers. He had his first exhibition in New York in 1951, and then moved there (post-Mickey) for good in 1963.

What it neglects to mention at all is what he was *doing* for those 13 years, which was painting furiously and with intent, tackling big narratives about American identity that his suddenly famous New York peers had abruptly abandoned. That, ultimately, is what "History in the Making" is about.

The postwar years were a time of soul-searching, with residual trauma forcing hard questions about living in an increasingly fractured world. The Abstract Expressionist answer was, simply, to abandon that world entirely on a quest for emotional purity, the world of images not enough to express the tumult within. For Lichtenstein, that wouldn't do. Maybe it was being in Cleveland, away from New York's careerist pressures and keenly in touch with another America, where the touchstones of Americana — cowboys and Indians,

westward expansion, the square jaws and noble intentions (or so the stories go) of the founders — still centered daily life.



Roy Lichtenstein's "The Outlaw," 1956. ESTATE OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN

For Lichtenstein, the formal language of Modernism was a way to dismantle those notions, to wobble the pillars on which American exceptionalism was built. Whether that meant the movies or great works from the canon, Lichtenstein gave them equal weight. He transformed the movie poster for the 1955 Lloyd Bridges cowboy movie “Wichita” into a jagged puzzle of riotous color and painterly cross-hatching with his 1956 work “The Outlaw.” And Emanuel Leutze’s absurdly famous, achingly heroic “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” a textbook painting recognized instantly by every American, became a simplistic, quasi-cubistic tableaux of reductive blandness.

In works like that, you can see the artist Lichtenstein would become, seeded here, ever a dubious eye cast on bloated American self-regard. There are passages of deeper awareness, too, of the destructive path cut by the country’s creation; Lichtenstein made several paintings of Native Americans in the same fractured way, all of them more robust, powerful, and complex than what feels like a sneering pass at Leutze. (“Two Indians,” from 1953, with its elegant, angular forms on deep blue, will wow you.)

Speaking of complex, two works here feel critically, monumentally totemic. One, “The Death of the General,” from 1951, is Lichtenstein’s take on Benjamin West’s “The Death of General Wolfe,” from 1770, a dizzying painting that gathers up European colonialism in North America with a single scene of carefully choreographed, grandiose chaos. The other is “Emigrant Train,” a take on William Ranney’s 19th-century painting of the same name glorifying westward expansion.



Roy Lichtenstein's "Emigrant Train After William Ranney," 1951. ESTATE OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN

In Lichtenstein's hands, both paintings are dense tangles of figure and object, claustrophobic and confusing — an acknowledgment, I like to think, of the artist's view on cut-and-dried jingoism. His take on the West painting is one of implosion, the scene draped in the American flag — not present in the original — in what seems to be a nod to American puffery. But "Emigrant Train" is more than claustrophobic; where Ranney's is ennobling, Lichtenstein's feels violent. (A preparatory sketch more closely echoes Picasso's "Guernica," about the carnage of the Spanish Civil War.) It says much about the dark heart of sparkly postwar American optimism, which Lichtenstein saw clearly while so many chose to look away.

"History in the Making" is important, partly because it deepens — or even introduces — an understanding of an artist so long at the center of American culture as to be lost in plain sight. But it also asks an important question: In

streamlining a myth of greatness, can what gets lost be as great, or more? The answer is a resounding yes; with “History in the Making,” you’re looking at it.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN: HISTORY IN THE MAKING, 1948-1960

At the Colby College Museum of Art, opening to the public June 4-6. 5600 Mayflower Hill, Waterville, Maine. 207-859-5600, colby.edu/museum

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