

Roy Lichtenstein

Teaching Resource

Roy Lichtenstein in the Studio / January 31 – August 16, 2026

About Roy Lichtenstein

(Pronounced LIK-tuhn-styne)

Roy Lichtenstein was born in New York City on October 27, 1923. As a child, he had a passion for building model airplanes, listening to science fiction radio programs, visiting the American Museum of Natural History, reading comic books, and drawing. His interest in the arts grew as a teenager, furthered by taking watercolor classes and starting a jazz band in high school. While studying at Ohio State University, Lichtenstein was drafted and sent to Europe for World War II. He served as a clerk and draftsman whose duties included enlarging army newspaper cartoons for his commanding officer. During his travels throughout Europe, Lichtenstein saw the works of modern European masters such as Paul Cézanne, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Pablo Picasso, all the while continuing to draw and paint in tempera and watercolor. Upon his return, Lichtenstein earned a bachelor's and master's degree in fine arts from Ohio State. In the following years, he worked as a window-display designer for a department store, an industrial engineer, a college level art instructor, and a commercial-art instructor.



Roy Lichtenstein. Photo: Jack Mitchell/Getty Images

In his early career, Lichtenstein painted subjects from mythology and American history and folklore. He soon began experimenting with imagery taken directly from cartoons, comic books, and advertising. Lichtenstein was drawn to the strong outlines, abstracted shapes, and flattened designs of comics and advertisements. His meticulous handwork mimicked the mechanized printing process in paintings that centered on the primary colors of red, yellow, and blue. It was at this time that Ben-Day dots, originally used in the printing of newspapers and magazines to approximate shading and texture, entered Lichtenstein's visual language. Lichtenstein's signature style and subject matter mirrored his interest in the intersection between art and popular culture, and established him as a primary figure in Pop Art.

Roy Lichtenstein in the Studio presents more than two dozen works in the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation's 2023 gift to the Nasher Sculpture Center and the Dallas Museum of Art. The exhibition provides a glimpse into Lichtenstein's creative process and the exploration of his subjects in both two and three dimensions.

Nasher Sculpture Center

Head with Blue Shadow

"I've always wanted to make up someone as a cartoon. That's what led to my ceramic sculptures of girls. I was going to do this for some fashion magazine. I was going to make up a model with black lines around her lips, dots on her face, and a yellow dyed wig with black lines drawn on it, and so forth. This developed into the ceramic sculpture heads. I was interested in putting two-dimensional symbols on a three-dimensional object." – Roy Lichtenstein

Many of Lichtenstein's early paintings give the impression of an enlarged single frame from a comic book. *Head with Blue Shadow* is part of a series that Lichtenstein started after he bought two mannequin heads and painted one like a female cartoon character. The series represents a rare instance in which Lichtenstein translated the 2-dimensional graphic silhouette of a woman into a conventional three-dimensional form. With the accompanying three sculptures, each titled *Ceramic Head (Abandoned)*, you can see different color combinations that Lichtenstein played with before deciding upon the bust of a woman with yellow hair, a hint of a blue top, and whose face is covered with red Ben-Day dots on one side and blue Ben-Day dots on the other. Thick black lines suggest volume and shadow, creating a visual tension between the two-dimensional graphic style of a comic book with the three-dimensional form of sculpture.

Lichtenstein was greatly inspired by the popular visual culture of his time. What are examples of today's popular (pop) culture? This might include products, people, or other subjects or items that are part of our everyday life or seen in advertisements.

Mix it up: Divide a piece of paper into four equal quadrants. Make the same simple drawing in each quadrant. This can be a portrait of yourself or someone else, something in your bedroom or classroom, something from pop culture, etc. Choose a palette of three colors and fill in each drawing with a different color combination, using only colors from your palette. Which composition do you like best, and why? What are some ways the different combinations affect the drawing's mood, balance, etc.?



TOP: *Head with Blue Shadow*, 1965. Painted ceramic, 15 x 8 1/4 x 8 in. (38.1 x 21 x 20.3 cm.). Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas. (c) Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Photographer: Tom Jenkins. LOWER THREE IMAGES: *Ceramic Head (Abandoned)*, c. 1964-65. Glazed high-fired ceramic, 15 x 8 1/2 x 8 1/8 inches (38.1 x 21.6 x 20.6 cm).



Roy Lichtenstein working on RLCR 778, Image Duplicator in his West 26th Street studio in 1963.
Photo: John Loengard/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock.com

Brushstrokes

"I was very interested in characterizing or caricaturing a brush stroke. The very nature of a brush stroke is anathema to outlining and filling in as used in cartoons." –Roy Lichtenstein

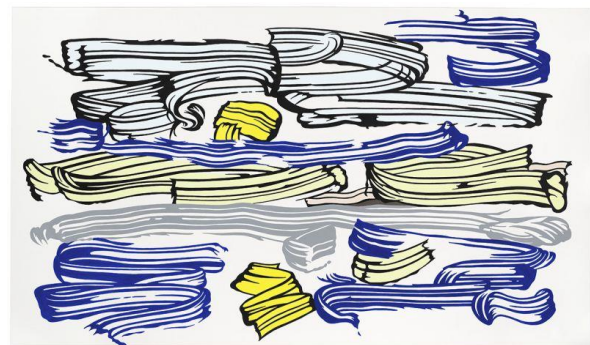
In the mid-1960s, Lichtenstein moved from painting comic and cartoon images to landscapes and seascapes inspired by cartoon backgrounds. Additionally, the brushstroke emerged as a subject at this time, captured in Lichtenstein's signature cartoon style. The brushstroke served as a sly parody of the prominent Abstract Expressionist style of the 1950s. In Abstract Expressionist paintings, the brushstroke is a physical trace of the artist's expression. In Lichtenstein's paintings, the stylized brushstroke becomes a subject of its own. Lichtenstein returned to the brushstroke motif two decades later, when he fabricated the two-dimensional gesture into three dimensions. While some are small enough to stand on a pedestal, larger examples are both freestanding and mounted on the wall.

Elevating the brushstroke to an artwork's subject rather than simply a mechanism for painting, in some minds, may be considered a subversive act. A subversive act challenges our thinking about an established system (in this instance, traditional notions of painting) and goes against the rules, often in a playful manner.

When have you or someone you know performed a humorous subversive act? Why do you consider it subversive?

Lichtenstein's *Barcelona Head* brings together three of his signature elements: the brushstroke, Ben-Day dots, and the portrait of a woman. The study and maquette were realized in a glazed ceramic tile sculpture that stands over fourteen tall in Barcelona's Port Vell, commissioned for the 1992 Olympic Games.

TOP: *Three Brushstrokes (Study)*, c. 1983. Cut painted paper, graphite pencil on board, 40 1/4 x 30 1/2 inches (102.2 x 77.5 cm). SECOND FROM TOP: *Three Brushstrokes (Maquette)*, 1983. Painted wood, 30 3/4 x 12 1/8 x 8 1/4 inches (78.1 x 30.8 x 21 cm). THIRD FROM TOP: *Sunrise over Water*, 1982. Acrylic, graphite pencil on canvas, 66 x 112 1/8 inches. Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger Collection. BOTTOM LEFT: *Barcelona Head (Maquette)*, c. 1987, Cut painted paper, cut printed paper, graphite pencil on foamcore, T-pins, ball head pins. 36 13/16 x 22 1/8 x 15 inches (93.5 x 56.2 x 38.1 cm). BOTTOM RIGHT: *Barcelona Head*, c. 1988 (fabricated 1992). Glazed ceramic tiles, concrete, 770 3/8 x 261 7/16 x 183 1/16 in. (1956.8 x 664 x 465 cm).



Peace Through Chemistry

Though most recognized for the Pop Art style he honed in the 1960s, Lichtenstein turned to other forms of modern art in the 1970s. In *Peace Through Chemistry*, he stylizes the profile of a scientist looking through a microscope along with images of gears, pulleys, and test tubes. The imagery and background designs are in the Art Deco style he would have seen during his childhood in New York City buildings, such as the Rockefeller Center, Radio City Music Hall, and the Chrysler Building. Lichtenstein produced *Peace Through Chemistry* first as a series of prints, then in cast bronze reliefs, both made in collaboration with the experimental print publisher Gemini G.E.L. He varied the depths of each plane to achieve a layered effect through a complex process of converting the original drawing to cardboard, plaster, wood, and metal maquettes. *Peace Through Chemistry* is one of the few bronze sculptures Lichtenstein left unpainted. He declined to comment on the title, describing the work simply as a play on Cubist composition and linking it to the W.P.A. murals of the 1930s.

Layered Relief: Notice how Lichtenstein divides the relief into sections using diagonal lines. Most sections contain an item related to chemistry. He filled the remaining section and negative space with design elements associated with the Art Deco style: geometric shapes, diagonals and zigzags, wavy lines, sunburst and fan shapes. Some items and design elements appear to extend forward in the picture plane, while others appear to recede.

On cardboard, create a drawing inspired by a subject of your choice: a class, a hobby or sport, a book or movie, etc. You may divide your composition into sections using diagonal, horizontal, vertical, straight, or wavy lines. Fill in the sections with items related to your subject, adding design elements in negative spaces. Transform your drawing into a layered relief by tracing and cutting parts of your drawing out of another sheet of cardboard and gluing them onto your original drawing.

Additional Resources

Roy Lichtenstein: A Catalogue Raisonné <https://www.lichtensteincatalogue.org/>

Roy Lichtenstein Foundation <https://lichtensteinfoundation.org/>

Coplans, John. "Talking with Roy Lichtenstein." *Artforum*, vol. 5. Issue 9, May 1967, pp. 34-39.

<https://www.artforum.com/features/talking-with-roy-lichtenstein-211372/>

Craft, Dr. Catherine. "Off the Canvas." <https://www.nashersculpturecenter.org/read-watch/articles/article/id/396>

Suggested Curriculum Connections (TEKS)

Fine Arts: Knowledge and Skills | §117.302. Art, Level I (b) (4)

Fine Arts: Critical Evaluation and Response | §117.4 (b), (d) and (e)

Fine Arts: Critical Evaluation | §117.52 Art, Level I (c) (3) and (4)



TOP: *Peace through Chemistry*, 1970. Bronze, 27 1/4 x 46 1/4 x 1 1/4 inches (69.2 x 117.5 x 3.2 cm.). BOTTOM: *Peace Through Chemistry (Study)*, 1970. Cut printed paper, cut paper, marker, graphite pencil on board, 27 1/8 x 46 7/8 in. (68.9 x 119.1 cm).