

January 2012 OOM  
Kent State, Acc. # P71.155  
Color screen print and photo screen print  
Richard Hamilton  
Gallery 368

ARTIST: Richard Hamilton, a pioneer of the Pop Art movement, was born in the Pimlico, London, 24 February, 1922 and died 13 September, 2011 at the age of 89. He was working on a major museum retrospective of his work when he died. Hamilton began his art study as an apprentice at an electrical component manufacturer. He found he had a talent for draftsmanship. He enrolled at the Royal Academy of Art, only to have his studies interrupted by the war. After he returned from war he re-enrolled at the Royal Academy only to be expelled because he “did not profit from instruction.” Hamilton also studied at the Slade School of Art and at the University College of London. He was influenced by the work of Marcel Duchamp and the writer, James Joyce. Hamilton was a member of the “Independent Group” which included a critic, two architects, two artists, a photographer and a writer. In 1956 the group organized an exhibit of their work titled, “This is Tomorrow” in which Hamilton exhibited his most famous work, “Just what is it that makes today’s home so different, so appealing?” (image attached). It was the English critic, Lawrence Alloway, Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in London that first use the term “Pop Art”. In the 1970’s Hamilton distanced himself from the Pop Art movement. He designed the album cover for the Beatles “White Album”. He did a number of pieces that blurred the line between artwork and product design. A retrospective museum show of Hamilton’s work will open at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in June 2013.

The Movement: Pop Art developed independently but simultaneously in Britain and the U.S. between about 1955 and 1965. Hamilton and his group asked the question: What is the function of art in a comfortable, industrial society that seemed to lack nothing? Hamilton reasoned that the mass culture of TV, movies, and media had taken over the previous functions of traditional art. If art is to show ideal beauty, then mass advertising shows it more vividly. If art is to comment on society, then TV does that. If art is to give us heroes then movies do that, and if art is to reflect our times, then consumers goods do that just as well. Hamilton’s answer was to use the same strategies as mass culture, but use them ironically. With his tongue firmly in his cheek, Hamilton wrote that Pop Art should be:

Popular (designed for a mass audience)  
Transient (short-term solution)  
Expendable (easily forgotten)  
Low-cost  
Mass-produced  
Young (aimed at youth)  
Witty  
Sexy

Gimmicky  
Glamorous  
Big Business

Pop Art's media sources were comics, advertising, brand name, newspaper, film, TV. The emotional tone of Pop Art was ironic, cynical, detached, and satirical. He thought art should make ironic comments on contemporary life and challenge cultural assumptions of the definition of 'art'.

The Incident: The election of Richard Nixon in 1968 was based on the promise that the Administration would end the Viet Nam war. However, on April 30, 1970, Richard Nixon announced that American troops had invaded Cambodia. The reasoning given for the invasion was that Cambodia had become a safe haven for the Viet Kong. This was seen as a widening of the war that was to have been wound down. A draft lottery that had not been in place since World War II, was re-instituted. Protest rallies arose on college campuses all over the country. A protest arose on the campus of Kent State University, which is in NE Ohio, 30 miles SE of Cleveland. The protest began on Friday, May 1 when a confrontation arose between students and city police. By Saturday, May 2 the confrontation had escalated and the campus ROTC building was set on fire. The mayor and police chief appealed to the then governor of Ohio, James Rhodes, to send in the Ohio National Guard. The governor's inflammatory statement, "...these protestors were the worse type of American, and every force of law will be use to deal with them" only served to escalate the tensions. On Monday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, an anti-war rally was banned. Much conjecture remains as to how the shooting actually began, but the Ohio National Guard soldiers opened fire on the students, killing 4, Jeffery Miller, Allison Krause, William Schroeder, and Sandra Scheuer. Nine other students were wounded. The campus was closed, and did not re-open until the summer of 1970. H.R. Haldeman, a top Nixon aide, was quoted to have said, "The shootings at Kent State began the slide to Watergate."

The Object:

In his piece "Kent State" Hamilton uses the blurring of media. He uses a photo of a BBC television broadcast of the Kent State shootings. He makes a color screen print of a photo screen print. When discussing this piece Richard Hamilton said, "It was too terrible an incident in American history to submit to arty treatment. Yet there it was in my hand, by chance. It seemed right, too, that art could help to keep the shame in our minds."

Possible tour topics:

Art Since 1950

Focus on Photography

Highlights of World Art 1850-present

References:

Oxford Art on Line

Wikipedia: Richard Hamilton

Wikipedia: Kent State shootings

Marilyn Stockstad, "Art History" vol.6, p.1151

Patrick Frank, "Prebles' Artforms"

MoMA website

Tate Modern website

Jerry M. Lewis, Professor Emeritus of History, Kent State University

Gallery label, Gallery 368



