

How Imitation and Pop Culture Combine with Fine Art

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Abstract

This article delves into the dynamic relationship between imitation, pop culture, and fine art throughout history. Traditionally, art was perceived as either a creation or an imitation. However, with the emergence of avant-gardes in the late 19th century, the focus shifted towards artists expressing their emotions and unique perspectives. The avant-gardes mirrored societal themes and challenged existing artistic and societal norms. The rise of mass production and electronic media in the mid-20th century, as foreseen by Marshall McLuhan, led to the birth of pop art. Lawrence Alloway coined the term "pop art," defining it as an aesthetic influenced by popular and mass culture. Artists like Andy Warhol revolutionized the concept of art by embracing everyday life and consumerism. Richard Hamilton's artwork exemplified the incorporation of media symbols and the fascination with popular icons. These developments prompted artists to explore the intersection between artistic expression and the demands of a consumer-driven society. They employed techniques such as photography, reworked advertising images, comic books, performances, and improvisation to redefine the boundaries of art. Ultimately, this transformative journey marked the end of a millennium-long era in the art world.

Keywords: imitation, pop culture, fine art, existing artistic, societal norms, boundaries of art, artistic expression

Since its origins, art has been a method used by humans to materialize ideas, messages, and symbols. Inspiration, genius, and creativity have always been seen as qualities that have allowed man to act on a symbolic level, rendering the reality that surrounds him abstractly through art and culture. It is an intrinsic ability of human beings to express their ideas through a visual medium. This article explores how imitation and pop culture interact with fine art, leading to significant changes in artistic expression over the centuries.

In the common way of thinking about art, it is customary to oppose two main concepts: art as creation and art as imitation. Anyone who speaks of art as creation underlines the absolute freedom of the artist, who has no fixed rules to follow or knows how to subordinate them to his own will and inventiveness, to his own genius, and to his own inspiration. On the other hand, those who speak of art as imitation underline art's dependence on nature or reality in general.

In the past, artists commonly depicted saints, rulers, and landscapes in their works, but then art began to draw inspiration from common people, comics, billboards, and even supermarket products. In the art world, starting from the end of the 19th century, the focus on imitation faded: the protagonists of the works became the artists themselves, their emotions, and their way of seeing the world and representing it in art.

This is how the avant-gardes were born: the artistic activity of the avant-gardes developed internationally and crossed all the arts (painting, theatre, music, cinema, and literature) with close links between one art and another. Each avant-garde is linked to very specific themes, firmly united with the culture, with the dynamics of its time: works of art become a mirror of society.

The end of the avant-gardes, considered briefly, coincides with that of great history. More specifically, it is linked to the birth of a methodology of art that has abandoned the imperative of originality, in the sense of a radical origin, and has ceased to conceive of itself as the unconditional search for ends that go beyond the codes in use, that are it artistic codes or social and intellectual conventions. In the USA, on the moral and human ruins of the Second World War, a society took shape at the end of the 1950s that saw in the mass production of consumer goods and in modern domestic technologies an evident sign of progress.¹

In 1951, the Canadian sociologist Marshall McLuhan² published *The Gutenberg Galaxy*³, a book that anticipated the revolution in the field of electronic communications: photography, cinema, and then television and computers would increasingly threaten the exclusive role of artists as creators of images.

¹ Crane, D. (1987). *The transformation of the avant-garde: The New York art world, 1940-1985*. University of Chicago Press.

² Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2023, February 3). *Marshall McLuhan*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marshall-McLuhan>

³ McLuhan, M. (1963). *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto: University of Toronto.

On both sociological considerations destined to cause a sensation for over a decade, in 1954 the English critic Lawrence Alloway⁴, reflecting on the value of images in mass society, coined the term: pop art (where pop stands for popular).⁵ These are more or less the connotations that will be given to this new nascent aesthetic: easy, transitory, suggestive, commercial, and massified.

Pop culture is a type of culture characteristic of societies that have entered the stage of mass consumption. This is characterized by the action of influence that the mass media have on it. It is a type of culture that also influences the economy of a particular society. In fact, it spreads through the laws of the free market. The most important ideas and concepts are disseminated through newspapers, cinema and above all through television: in mass culture there is a very close link between influences from television and consumption.⁶ So, much of the population directs its expenditure precisely according to those rules implicitly dictated by the mass media. Hence, the mass media exercise a tight control over society itself.

One of the greatest figures of American mass culture is certainly Andy Warhol⁷ – he revolutionized art and the very concept of the artistic gesture, and he did so through the 'banality' of everyday life, mass culture, the "kitsch" (the term kitsch has German origins and was initially used to describe ugly objects).

Through photography, the silk-screen repetition of popular images – whether they were the road accident or the Coca-Cola bottle – filming, and writings, he recorded or rather consumed, everything that surrounded him. He did this by setting up a real commercial enterprise, the famous Factory, the result of the idea that art is nothing more than an industry and therefore falls within the commercial logic.⁸

On these sociological considerations destined to cause a sensation for over a decade, in 1954, the English critic Lawrence Alloway, reflecting on the value of images in mass society, coined the term: pop art (where pop stands for popular). These are more or less the connotations that will be given to this new nascent aesthetic: easy, transitory, suggestive, commercial, and massified. Then in England, there was the artist Richard Hamilton, who created a revolutionary work: Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?

A lot is already understood from the title: the artist represents a room containing a variegated combination of popular symbols, starting from media such as a newspaper and television. Various imaginative and oversized objects such as a lampshade with the Ford logo, and elements that arouse mystery such as Mars, draw attention to the UFO phenomenon that was all the rage in those years.

The first thing one realizes, however, is a bodybuilder and a pin-up represented as a lamp woman. The two icons represent the ideal types of human beings of their respective sexes, often featured in advertising campaigns.

The avant-gardes of the beginning of the century had expressed the individual's need for freedom with respect to an oppressive society, some had exalted war as a possibility of redemption, as a starting point for the birth of a new social order. Post-WW2, a new world emerged that was hungry for images, which produced and consumed like never done before.

In conclusion, artists began asking completely different questions from those investigated by their colleagues of the past. They wondered how they could have preserved the exclusive character of art and, above all, how it was possible to create a mix between artistic needs and consumer society. They attempted to answer these by creating new artistic methods like photos, a reworking of advertising images, comic books, performances and, in some cases, even works improvised by the artist in front of the spectators. This was the end of an era of art that lasted for over a millennium.

⁴ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2023, January 1). *Lawrence Alloway*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lawrence-Alloway>

⁵ Gablik, S., Russell, J., Alloway, L., McHale, J., Rosenblum, R., Smith, R., ... & Bell, L. (1969). *Pop art redefined*. Frederick A. Praeger.

⁶ Kunzle, D. (1984). Pop Art as Consumerist Realism. *Studies in Visual Communication*, 10(2), 16-33.

⁷ Honnef, K., & Warhol, A. (2000). *Andy Warhol, 1928-1987: commerce into art*. Taschen.

⁸ de Duve, T., & Krauss, R. (1989). Andy Warhol, or The Machine Perfected. *October*, 48, 3-14. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778945>