



Lichtenstein's Indian Territory

Linking two bodies of painting based on Native-American subjects and motifs, and supplementing them with historical objects, a traveling exhibition explores a little-known aspect of Roy Lichtenstein's career.

BY RICHARD KALINA

There are few facets of Roy Lichtenstein's Pop art production that have not been extensively exhibited and thoroughly explored critically. One important body of work from his middle Pop period, however, has thus far had little exposure. Between 1979 and 1981, Lichtenstein produced a group of paintings, drawings and prints, plus a sculpture and a large tapestry, based on American Indian motifs. These works dovetail stylistically with the larger body of Surrealist-inspired work executed in 1977-79. The American Indian series, while a relatively small part of Lichtenstein's Pop output, is distinguished by its clear and direct relation to the artist's pre-Pop oeuvre.¹ Lichtenstein was not given to mulling over the past. Once he'd hit upon his Pop style, he paid little attention to his early work and, when questioned about it, tended to be vague. But scholarship, particularly on major artists, pushes on. In recent years critical and, one would imagine, commercial interest, combined with the forceful advocacy of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, has made that previously neglected work increasingly visible.

The first ten or so years of Lichtenstein's professional life could be characterized as a young artist's search for style and subject matter. The work that he produced in the '50s, although indebted to the art of others, does speak with a voice of its own. Lichtenstein's gestural Abstract Expressionism of the late '50s is punchy and bold, while the lesser-known and more reticent School of Paris Cubism of the earlier years of the decade is formally well-wrought, and possesses considerable charm. The latter also carries with it the conceptual seeds of his Pop work, particularly in its use of the reproduced image as subject matter. A recurring theme from that early period is the American Indian. Gail Stavitsky and Twig Johnson, curators at the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey, worked closely with the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation to present a small, lively show titled "Roy Lichtenstein: American Indian Encounters." The exhibition features paintings, drawings, mixed-medium pieces, prints and wooden sculptures from



The Last of the Buffalo II, ca. 1952, oil on canvas, 50 by 42 inches. Private collection.

the '50s; the Pop American Indian work; printed source material from Lichtenstein's library; plus a sampling of historical objects from the museum's own impressive American Indian collection.

The Indian has long occupied an important yet equivocal place in this nation's psyche. A member of a non-European, nonindustrialized and often deracinated culture, he was seen as victim and victimizer, the noble savage and the degraded one, the tragic figure and the buffoon. Unlike some other colonized indigenous groups—the Australian Aboriginal, for example²—American Indians (or representations of them) have remained highly visible in their native land. We see the Indian in place, product and organization names, in a variety of popular entertainment forms, and also in the child's world of cowboys and Indians, summer camps and woodlore. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Indian figured prominently in the academic history paintings and genre sculptures that showed up so often in popular books and reproductions.

Lichtenstein, who was born in New York and lived on the Upper West Side (where he often visited the Museum of Natural History with its American Indian dioramas and artifacts), studied, taught and painted in Ohio in the early '50s. Although he traveled back to New York on occasion, he felt himself to be out of the artistic mainstream. Local Midwestern museums notwithstanding, much of the art that he encountered in those years was in the form of photographic reproductions. Rather than seeing this distancing from actual artworks as a disadvantage, he found himself increasingly interested in the mutable, second-hand quality of reproduced images. And Lichtenstein's ironic sense was in place early, which no doubt accounts for his attraction to histrionic paintings like John Vanderlyn's *The Murder of Jane McCrea* (1803-04), depicting the tomahawking of a Revolutionary War-era woman by two Indians. Lichtenstein's *The Death of Jane McCrea* (1951) simplifies and abstracts Vanderlyn's composition, flattening and schematizing the figures and rendering the forms with a childlike awkwardness. The picture's ostensible naiveté is undercut by its sophisticated use of color, in which earthy browns, beiges and greens are enlivened by strategically placed sectors of orange, red, yellow and blue.

Completed in the same year were the painting *The End of the Trail* and an accompanying drawing. Both were based on a bronze of the same title by James Earle Fraser. The popular and rather corny sculpture, first executed in 1894 and recast many times over the years, depicts an Indian hunched over on his horse, which looks every bit as wretched as its rider. The warrior's spear is lowered and every part of him expresses defeat. Lichtenstein's version is funnier and scrappier. His horse (an echo of the

horse in Picasso's *Guernica*) seems to snarl, and the rider has considerably more gumption. These works employ a palette similar to *The Death of Jane McCrea*, and the sharp tonal contrasts give the work the sense of drama (as opposed to melodrama) that the sculpture sorely lacks.

Probably the most formally interesting of this group of paintings is *The Last of the Buffalo II* (1952). The second version of a takeoff on Albert Bierstadt's ca. 1888 painting of the same name, Lichtenstein's work turns an expansive horizontal landscape composition with figures into a compressed and interlocked vertical picture, held in place by the stylized brown and green circle of the buffalo's body, the red rectangle of the Indian hunter, and the vertical white spear that pierces the animal's back. As Lichtenstein got deeper into this body of work, his innovative abilities seemed to increase. An untitled masklike work, ca. 1955, made of painted splintered plywood, wood battens and canvas, breaks the rectangular boundaries of traditional painting, and *A Winnebago* (ca. 1956) shows us the boldly stroked and

aggressively patterned head of a Plains Indian seen in profile. These are the works that seem most to foretell the later American Indian paintings, and a comparison of the two earlier pieces with the frontal, forcefully patterned, and angular *Head with Braids* (1979) reveals considerable similarities.

Painting subjects from American history enabled Lichtenstein to engage with important and distinctly American themes (there was much talk in the '50s of "the Great American Novel" and similar projects). Given the sources he chose, however, he hardly seems to have intended taking the matter too seriously, and his irony enabled him to avoid the trap of Regionalism—an especially dangerous association for a forward-thinking artist living in the Midwest. In any case, Lichtenstein's most important early influences were Miró, Klee and, above all, Picasso. Those three artists (although Picasso much less often) mixed whimsy and humor with innovation and formal flair. Their ability to combine seriousness of purpose with lightness of touch clearly appealed to Lichtenstein, for this was a goal he pursued throughout his career.

The American Indian series from the late '70s can be seen as part of Lichtenstein's longstanding project of appropriating prior art—or more to the point, its familiar image—and turning it into something that bore his own stylistic stamp. That he could so easily do this reflected the prior dilution of his subject matter by repeated reproduction. The early Pop appropriations (the "Non-objective" paintings, for example) are compositionally straightforward. *Non-objective I* and *II* (both 1964) look like Mondrians in their color and composition. The main difference lies in the substitution of benday-dot passages for solid color areas. In the later '70s, possibly prompt-



Head with Braids, 1979, oil and Magna on canvas, 50 by 40 inches.
Private collection.

Left, *A Winnebago*, ca. 1956, oil on canvas, 14 by 12 inches.
Private collection.



ed by the spatial dislocations so common in Surrealism, his model at the time, Lichtenstein took a new compositional approach, pulling his subject matter apart and reconstituting it in a jangly, collage-like way. This is seen to excellent effect in the large-scale paintings *Razzmatazz* (1978) and *Go for Baroque* (1979). His patterned in-fills were no longer simply dots, but could also be parallel diagonal lines, or an exaggerated faux wood grain. His palette expanded as well. In addition to the usual primaries plus black and white and the occasional grass green, Lichtenstein added pastel tones and sometimes metallic colors. The American Indian series regularly employs a range of sweetly annoying buttercup yellows, seafoam greens and grayed-out pale blues, often juxtaposed with more fully saturated tones of the same hue. This color placement is quite capable of setting your teeth on edge. In *Amerind Composition II* (1979), for example, the

American Indian motifs appealed to Lichtenstein not only for their mix of popular and "serious" art, but also for their strongly graphic nature.



Untitled, ca. 1955, canvas, wood, screws and mixed mediums, 27 1/4 by 33 1/4 inches. Private collection.

dominant color is that ingratiating light yellow, but scattered through the painting are small passages of bright golden cadmium. It hurts to see them together. I am certain that Lichtenstein, with his sly sense of disruption, was aware of this chromatic discordance and enjoyed playing with it.

The collage sensibility reflected in these works is evident not just in their composition, but in the artist's approach to their subject matter. If it said "Indian" to Lichtenstein, it was usable. Motifs were pulled out of context, simplified, stylized and abstracted. Materials drawn from widely separated tribal groupings (even from different continents) and from different physical sources were mixed in single paintings and knit together by Lichtenstein's considerable formal skills. While it might seem less than reverent to throw together images from Southwestern pottery and Peruvian textiles, along with bear paws, smoke from a campfire or smoke signals, lightning bolts and arrow forms, as he does in *Indian Composition* (1979), this sort of cheeky attitude lies at the heart of Lichtenstein's enterprise.

It would be reasonable to assume that American Indian motifs appealed to Lichtenstein not just for their mix of popular culture and "serious art" but also for their formal interest. Their strongly graphic nature made a good fit with his own bold style. That many of those forms were drawn from ornamentation inscribed on three-dimensional objects made it easier to treat them as malleable entities not subject to the strictures of conventional painting organization. Lichtenstein was thus able to extract elements from their original context and effectively position them in the complex compositions he was constructing at the time. He seemed to enjoy the challenge of "tough" compositions—pulling something off that didn't want to sit easily. *Composition with Two Figures* (1979) is a good example of that. The

painting uses forms from the Acoma and Zuni Pueblos of New Mexico. These forms were reproduced in a Dover book that Lichtenstein had in his library. The book itself is included in the exhibition, as is a Zuni pot, ca. 1880, with the "rain bird" motif that he adapted for the female figure on the left. The male figure on the right—a jagged-edged wood-grained rectangle topped with feathers—visually tussles with the white, curving female figure, while the blocky diagonal elements that occupy much of the rest of the painting steadfastly resist pictorial integration. The painting teeters on the edge of instability and garishness (as do many in this series) but somehow stays intact. It is all the more interesting for the disequilibrium.

It is tempting to speculate on why Lichtenstein spent as little time as he did on a series that promised so much, both formally and iconographically. Lichtenstein was a restlessly innovative and productive artist. He was also a hands-on painter, and of course there was only so much he could take on at one time. He might simply have tired of the subject, but it is likely that something he considered more compelling engaged his interest. A major portion of Lichtenstein's painting from the early to the mid-'80s deals with expressionism in its many variants. While this might seem to be yet another art-historical mode to be translated into Lichtenstein's distinctive Pop dialect, his expressionist paintings took quite a different stylistic turn. In these works, cool and carefully delineated Pop passages were frequently interspersed with actual brushstrokes—loose, fluid, and quick.³ Did the American Indian series, with its look back at his own early work, allow him to continue the retrospective process and integrate his discarded Abstract Expressionism of the late '50s into a current project? There is something else we might consider—the strange hold that expressionism, reinvigorated by the immensely successful Neo-Expressionist movement, had on American painters, both young and old, in the 1980s. Everyone seemed to feel the pressure, and many who might have known better—Frank Stella, Mel Bochner and Roy Lichtenstein among them—succumbed, at least for a while.⁴

The Montclair Museum show is a fascinating look not at what might have been, but what was for a while. It puts together work from two separate but linked periods in a major artist's career, and bolsters that presentation with valuable source material and significant related objects. This first-rate effort shows how a small, general purpose museum with real depth in one field (in this case Native American art) can move beyond its curatorial comfort zone and give us something that is focused and scholarly, yet fascinating for a wider audience. □

1. It is likely that Lichtenstein was prompted to reinvestigate his earlier work by spending time with Ernst Busche, who was conducting research on Lichtenstein's early work for his dissertation.

2. The widespread presence of Aboriginal design motifs in Australia, seen on everything from cocktail napkins to the bodies of Qantas jets, is a relatively recent phenomenon. The model for these motifs, the acrylic paintings of the desert dot painters, did not exist before the 1970s.

3. These real-time, one-shot brushstrokes are problematic for me: I have difficulties with the strokes' edges, their surfaces and their drawn shapes, and I find the paintings from this period (the very large 1985 pictures, *Mountain Village* and *Figures in a Landscape*, for example) to be some of Lichtenstein's most chaotic and unresolved works.

4. Lichtenstein was an engaged and savvy artist. Is it purely coincidental that the American Indian series had much in common with the Pattern and Decoration movement of the mid- to late '70s, while his expressionist work mirrored the Neo-Expressionism that followed in the early '80s?

"Roy Lichtenstein: American Indian Encounters" opened at the Montclair [N.J.] Art Museum [Oct. 16, 2005-Jan. 8, 2006]. It is currently on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe [Feb. 3-Apr. 23, 2006], and travels to the Tacoma Art Museum [May 13-Sept. 4, 2006], the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, N.Y. [Sept. 25-Dec. 31, 2006], and the Eiteljorg Museum, Indianapolis [Jan. 19-Apr. 18, 2007].

Author: Richard Kalina is an artist who also writes about art.