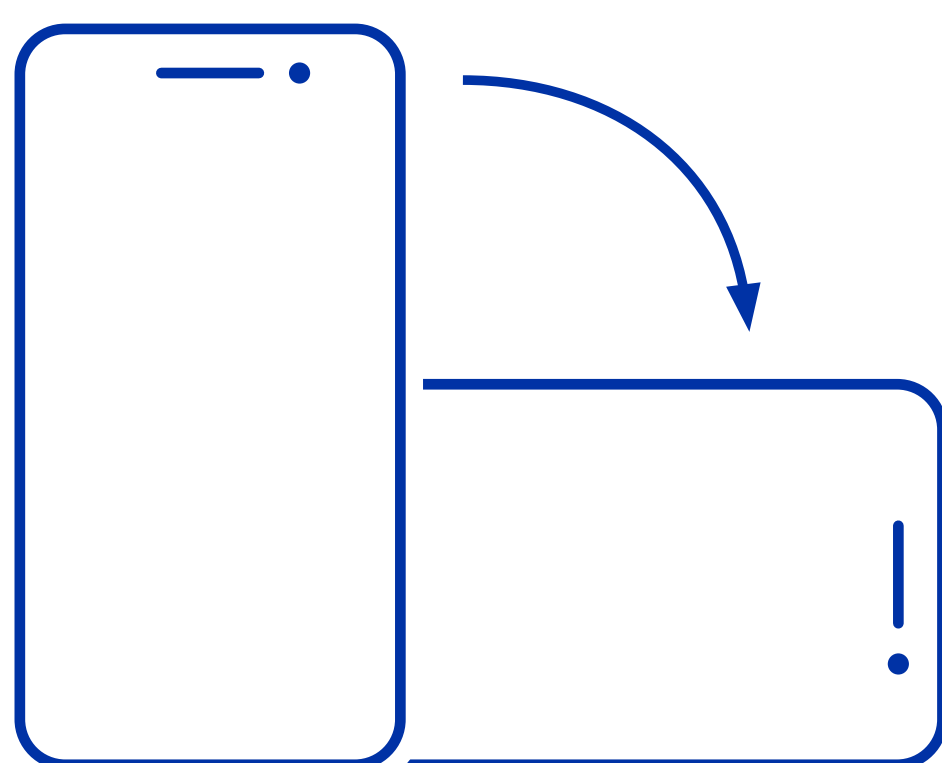


ROY LICHTENSTEIN

SWEET
DREAMS,
BABY!

22.8.2026 — 14.3.2027



ROY LICHTENSTEIN AND POP ART PRINTMAKING

With the advent of Pop Art (short for “popular,” in the sense of popular culture) in the 1950s, the imagery of everyday life found its way into art. After World War II (1939–1945), the United States experienced profound social contradictions. On the one hand, the Civil Rights Movement gained strength, household appliances such as televisions and refrigerators were becoming more affordable, and the dawn of space flight inspired hope for the future. But at the same time, the Cold War, the Vietnam War (1955–1975), and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 cast this optimism into doubt.

Against this backdrop, the American artist Roy Lichtenstein (1923–1997) made a significant contribution to a new form of expression, transposing the visual language of consumer goods and advertising into fine art with humor and irony. The characteristic features of mass media served as his stylistic devices. In particular, he embraced the aesthetics of comics. Their typical elements—enlarged details, vibrant colors, and patterns of evenly-spaced dots (called Ben-Day dots)—became his trademarks.

The New York art world was initially shocked by Pop Art, perceiving it as trivial. The familiar visual vocabulary, however, attracted a new, broader audience. Printmaking played a significant role in its popularity. Exhibition posters and invitations printed in large quantities made Lichtenstein widely known.

To commemorate the anniversary of the artist’s 100th birthday in 2023, the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation donated 33 prints to the Kupferstichkabinett (Department of Prints and Drawings) at the Kunstmuseum Basel, which are now on display for the first time. They offer a representative overview of Lichtenstein’s body of print work, in which his engaging motifs—rendered in silkscreen prints, etchings, lithographs, woodcuts, and linocuts—are handled with technical virtuosity and a palpable delight in experimentation.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

27.10.1923

Roy Fox Lichtenstein is born in New York City. His father is a real estate broker and his mother a homemaker. As a young man, he attends jazz concerts at the Apollo Theater in Harlem and draws portraits of the musicians.

1940–1949

He studies and then teaches art at Ohio State University in Columbus, USA, where he first begins to produce prints. In World War II, he serves in the military and is deployed to Europe.

1949

Marriage to Isabel Wilson. The couple has two sons: David Hoyt (* 1954) and Mitchell Wilson (* 1956).

1951

Lichtenstein moves to Cleveland, where he works as a graphic artist and a window display designer, among other things.

1960

Takes a position as an assistant professor of art at Rutgers University in New Jersey, where the performance artist Allan Kaprow (1927–2006) was teaching as well. He meets Claes Oldenburg (1929–2022), who would also become a Pop Art artist.

1961

After experimenting with abstract painting, Lichtenstein combines comic motifs and so-called Ben-Day dots for the first time in the painting *Look Mickey*.

1962

First solo exhibition of his Pop Art works held at Leo Castelli in New York. All the works are sold before the opening. Andy Warhol (1928–1987) attends the exhibition and will also be represented by Castelli in the future.

1963

First solo exhibition in Europe held at the Ileana Sonnabend Gallery in Paris.

1965

The Kupferstichkabinett (Department of Prints and Drawings) at the Kunstmuseum Basel acquires Lichtenstein prints for its collection for the first time.

1968

The Kunsthalle Bern mounts the first retrospective of Lichtenstein in Switzerland. He marries the art historian Dorothy Herzka (1939–2024) after getting divorced from his first wife.

1969

The Guggenheim Museum in New York honors him with a large exhibition.

1971

Hopeless becomes the first Lichtenstein painting to find a home at the Kunstmuseum Basel, as a permanent loan from the Peter and Irene Ludwig Foundation.

1973

The gallery of Ernst Beyeler (1921–2010) shows the first solo exhibition in Basel.

1994

The art historian Mary Lee Corlett publishes the catalogue raisonné of Lichtenstein's prints, encompassing over 350 works.

29.9.1997

Roy Lichtenstein dies unexpectedly in New York City of complications from pneumonia.

1998

Dorothy Lichtenstein establishes the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

2023/24

In honor of the artist's 100th birthday, the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation donates over 100 prints in total to the Kunstmuseum Basel, the British Museum in London, and the Albertina in Vienna.

STILL LIVES — FORMS OF THE EVERYDAY

Pop Art artists were fascinated by simple, everyday objects. Throughout his career, Roy Lichtenstein devoted a great deal of attention to a wide variety of foodstuffs as well as items of furniture. He was particularly intrigued by glasses and mirrors, abstracting their transparent or reflective surfaces into dots and straight lines.

The still lifes vividly illustrate the breadth of Lichtenstein's formal vocabulary. Aside from the Ben-Day dots, it also includes caricaturishly exaggerated brushstrokes. The brushstroke is the mark of the artist's hand and is ultimately a symbol of painting as such. It played an especially significant role in Abstract Expressionist painting in the USA from the late 1940s to the 1960s. The painters of this movement sought not so much to represent a recognizable motif but rather to express emotions through bold brushwork and color. Lichtenstein took the highly individual and seemingly spontaneous painterly gesture to the point of absurdity by laboriously constructing it and transposing it into the anonymous aesthetic of the comic book.

NEW INTERPRETATIONS —

POP ART MEETS ART HISTORY

In the late 1960s, Roy Lichtenstein began to engage more rigorously with art history, focusing particularly on the question of what defines artistic style. He identified the essential features of various modern Western art movements and incorporated them into his own artistic vocabulary. Magnification, simplification, and schematization give iconic masterpieces the appearance of mass-produced items. Through such reinterpretation, Lichtenstein highlighted how art that was once radical had long since found its way into popular culture.

Around the same time, Lichtenstein began collaborating with professional print studios such as Gemini G.E.L. (Graphic Editions Limited) in Los Angeles. Their technical expertise lent his prints an unprecedented level of precision. From then on, in addition to individual prints, he would also produce annual series of six to eight prints. Thanks to the reproducibility of prints, the same motif could be explored in various ways, for instance in different color variations.

INNOVATION — COLLABORATION AS A CREATIVE MOTOR

In the 1960s, so many painters and sculptors in the United States began experimenting with printmaking that the period came to be known as a print revival (the so-called “Print Renaissance”). Roy Lichtenstein, however, had already been familiar with a wide variety of techniques from his student days in the 1940s. As his works grew in complexity, he became increasingly more involved in the printing process. His long-standing collaboration with highly professional print studios motivated him to continually explore the potential of printmaking anew.

The rendering of these works, which sometimes required over 30 printing passes, was extremely demanding and often took several months. A common feature of many of these pieces is the combination of different printmaking techniques. Each technique creates specific surface effects. The layering of glossy, matte, flat, and relief-like textures lends Lichtenstein’s prints a sensual, three-dimensional quality.

DECORATION — POP ART FOR YOUR HOME

Pop Art drew its motifs and materials from contemporary everyday life in the US. In turn, Pop Art works then became part of that everyday life themselves. Aside from paper plates, Roy Lichtenstein designed printed fabrics and T-shirts, wrapping paper, and wallpaper. He conceived of his art as a practical enrichment of life and created numerous murals and sculptures for public spaces as well.

In keeping with this idea, Lichtenstein also explored architectural motifs. Repeatedly emphasizing the tension between three-dimensional space and the two-dimensional picture plane, he humorously thematized the gap between reality and representation. Art and life were for him understood equally as fiction. His entire body of work can be seen as a commentary on consumer culture and the notion that money and material possessions bring happiness.

WELCOME TO THE LICHTENSTEIN LOUNGE!

Have a seat and immerse yourself in publications about Roy Lichtenstein's art! Or create your own compositions using brushstrokes, dots, and grids on the magnetic board. Lichtenstein prepared many of his prints using collages, layering colored papers and patterns one on top of another and moving them around in whatever configuration he pleased.

The two exhibition posters from Bern and Stuttgart are representative of the numerous opportunities European audiences had to discover Lichtenstein early in his career. The two posters for exhibitions in New York, for their part, were sent out as invitations or sold as limited editions. These affordable prints are one reason why Lichtenstein's art can still be found in many living rooms today.

Opening Hours
Tue–Sun 10 a.m.–6 p.m. / Wed 10 a.m.–8 p.m.
Special opening hours
→ kunstmuseumbasel.ch/besuch

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