



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Pop Art and the Contest over American Culture

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My analysis of U.S. pop art situates its production and reception within a more thorough consideration of the social and cultural upheavals of post-WW II America than previous accounts. I argue that the controversy pop provoked was not merely aesthetic, but served as a locus for mid-century anxieties about class, taste, culture, and gender. Post-war critics such as Clement Greenberg attributed the degradation of American culture to the pernicious influence of three strains of outsider taste: the conspicuous consumption of the *nouveaux riches*, the popular culture of teenagers, and the camp sensibility of gay subculture. In introducing these marginalized forms of taste into the art world, pop effectively challenged the hegemony of elite taste. Pop's efficacy in confounding established boundaries was evidenced by the paradoxical cultural status it had achieved by the mid-1960s: while art critics finally acknowledged it as an avant-garde *art*, the popular press simultaneously defined pop as a form of *mass culture*. Pop art was not, however, blindly affirmative of commercial culture: the celebrities and commodities depicted by artists such as Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist were visibly out-of-date. This camp recycling of obsolescent mass-cultural imagery undermined the seductiveness of the commodities depicted, while providing a crucial precedent for subsequent postmodern popular- and high-cultural practices. Pop art thus not only forced an unsettling of prevailing cultural hierarchies, but also pioneered modes of artistic practice that established it as the first fully fledged postmodernist art movement.