

Where Andy Warhol's Legacy Endures in Pittsburgh

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There maybe isn't a person with a sentient brain in this country who doesn't know the name Andy Warhol or, at the very least, wouldn't recognize a human-sized painted Campbell's soup can as "important art." He is likely the 20th century's most widely recognized artist, best known for his screen-printed depictions of celebrities and commercial objects, like the soup can.

Warhol, whose name is synonymous with 1960s New York City and Studio 54, is actually a native Pittsburgher and a pioneer of pop art who took everyday images and products and turned them into memorable pieces of art deeply rooted in the industrial influences of the Rust Belt. His legacy perfectly encapsulates the spirit of a city that grew up around the steel industry and depended on factories for economic stability. He spent his lifetime immortalizing the mundane and his work continues to play an instrumental role in Pittsburgh's unique approach to the arts.



Rooted in the city

Andy Warhol (originally Warhola) was born on August 6th, 1928 in Pittsburgh. At the age of 6, he moved to a house in the Oakland neighborhood where his oldest brother Paul taught him to develop photos from his first Brownie camera in the fruit cellar. It was in this same home that Andy Warhol would be bedridden for many months as a young child after being diagnosed with Sydenham's chorea, or colloquially Saint Vitus Dance, where limbs become uncontrollably unwieldy. Becoming somewhat of an outcast due to his isolation, Warhol spent hours learning to draw, listening to the radio, and collecting photos of celebrities. This led him to attend free art classes at what is now the Carnegie Museum of Art. Warhol later went on to describe his childhood in Pittsburgh as instrumental in the development of his skill set and aesthetic sensibilities.

He attended Carnegie Mellon, then still the Carnegie Institute of Technology, studying commercial art. It was there that he first made waves with the divisive nature of his art -- when you depict cartoonish images of people picking their noses and claim it as "high art," you're bound to draw critics.

Looking around Pittsburgh

Touches of Warhol can be found all over the city. Much like the city's many bridges, Warhol's images are iconic in Pittsburgh and serve as a constant reminder of our complex roots that embrace both working class values and artistic innovation. Whether it's a wall of prints at the Pittsburgh airport, a display at Trader Joe's, or the Brillobox (a bar named after one of Warhol's many pieces repurposing household objects), Warhol's art can be found in all different forms throughout the city.

One of the most memorable homages to this artist is "The Two Andys" mural by Tom Mosser and Sarah Zeffiro in Downtown Pittsburgh. Appropriately situated above Weiner World, a longstanding hot dog shop with a neon sign, this vibrant painting depicts Andy Warhol and Andrew Carnegie getting made over in a beauty salon. The mural is the perfect marriage of two of Pittsburgh's most iconic figures who, despite sharing the same first name, are vastly different personalities in our city's history. But the largest monument to Andy Warhol in Pittsburgh is the Seventh St bridge that was named after him in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Andy Warhol Museum.

Influencing our future

One of four Carnegie museums, the Andy Warhol Museum opened in May of 1994 in a building erected in 1911 and used as a distribution center for products sold to mills and mines. The narrow seven floor building is now home to 100 sculptures, 900 paintings, 4,000 photographs, and a large collection of other pieces created and collected by the artist during his short lifetime. In 2004, the Warhol began the Sound Series as an ongoing lineup of concerts at venues around the city. Bringing in musicians that blend genres and challenge the confines of music, the performances reflect Warhol's close relationship with the boundary defying The Velvet Underground. This series is responsible for hosting dozens of artists in Pittsburgh including Kimya Dawson, Television, and a huge array of other musicians who may have never made it to our city otherwise.

The museum also holds classes and offers studio space for young artists and has featured the work of other influential, and often not well known, artists over the years. Special exhibitions have included My Mommy is Beautiful, an installation by Yoko Ono; Chuck Connelly: My America; and Jeremy Kost: Friends With Benefits, an exhibition focusing on gender, sexuality, and nightlife that includes images of Pittsburgh-based drag queens. Warhol's influence has not only played an important role in Pittsburgh's approach to the arts, it has also helped to change a sometimes conservative city's understanding of gender and the fluid nature of sexuality.

The museum also has a traveling exhibition of Warhol's work that, in 2012, brought the "15 Minutes Eternal" collection to five cities

across Asia, including Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, which has presented works by contemporary protest artist Ai Weiwei. This kind of outreach has helped in internationalizing Pittsburgh's creative influence as a city.

Connections on film

Pittsburgh has recently become a prime destination for big budget movies, but this connection to film is nothing new. At the age of 9, Warhol developed a love for movies that spurred his obsession with fame and celebrity. In 1968, at an exhibit in Stockholm, Warhol uttered what has become his most well-known quote: "In the future, everybody will be world-famous for 15 minutes." It was at this point in his career that he started exploring film and sculpture.

In his studio that would eventually be known as "The Factory," Warhol debuted his Heinz Boxes, which were an homage to the Pittsburgh-based ketchup factory. It was in this studio that he began his ongoing and notorious relationship with a variety of artists and celebrities. This led to the Exploding Plastic Inevitable, a multimedia show created with The Velvet Underground.

Over the span of his lifetime, Warhol went on to make more than 350 experimental films, each presenting different perspectives of the artist and the raw quality of his artistic experience. Unlike some of his better known work, which often uses vibrant colors and high contrast to create pieces that epitomize pop art, Warhol's films showed that the artist had a grittier side and an undeniable connection to the industrial roots of America.

"I never understood why when you died, you didn't just vanish, and everything could just keep going on the way it was only you just wouldn't be there. I always thought I'd like my own tombstone to be blank. No epitaph and no name. Well, actually, I'd like it to say 'figment.'" -- Andy Warhol

Kitsch of death

Although Warhol died in Manhattan on February 22nd, 1987, he was buried in Pittsburgh at the St. John the Baptist Byzantine Catholic Cemetery. Staying true to the way he lived, Warhol was buried in a black cashmere suit, sunglasses, and a platinum wig. In 2013, the Andy Warhol Museum and [EarthCam](#) collaborated to create Figment, a 24/7 live stream of Warhol's grave that can be viewed worldwide.

Because of Warhol's lasting impression on both Pittsburgh and the rest of the world, his gravesite is frequently visited by everyone from groups of high school students and families to his diehard fans who leave behind items like Campbell's soup cans, drawings, flowers, boxes of Brillo pads, figurines, and glass Coca-Cola bottles.

Although Andy Warhol spent his life creating an image of opulence that mirrored his obsession with fame and celebrity, he inevitably dictated that the worth of his entire estate would support a foundation advancing the visual arts. The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts opened in 1987 following his death, focusing "primarily on supporting work of a challenging and often experimental nature."

Much like Pittsburgh, Andy Warhol was an eclectic embodiment of tradition that he rarely allowed to be seen as part of his public image (he continued to attend Catholic church services as an adult much like he had with his family as a child) and artistic expression. Warhol's own twisted brand of the American dream continues to play a part in Pittsburgh's identity; a forever growing and evolving melange of the unusual and the mundane.

