

Roy Lichtenstein

## 216 LICHTENSTEIN, ROY

1923-1997 United States

### *Mustard on White* (1963)

Magna color on plexiglass

32" x 38" x 2" (80 x 94 x 5 cm)

The Tate Gallery, London, UK

### The Artist

The American painter and sculptor Roy Lichtenstein was born in New York in 1923. He studied at Ohio State University. After a stint in the military, he returned to Cleveland, Ohio, where he taught for a short time. Lichtenstein's early paintings were mainly historical canvases depicting archetypal American subjects such as cowboys and Indians. Between 1957 and 1960, Lichtenstein was strongly influenced by the Abstract Expressionist movement, which was much in vogue in New York at the time.

During the late 1950s, however, some artists, who believed that Abstract Expressionism had become too powerful, began to revolt against the tenets of Action Painting and created the Pop Art movement. The proponents of Pop Art wished to reintegrate everyday objects and images into painting and sculpture. Pop Art, which takes its inspiration from popular culture and the mass media, is characterized by its use of images from comic strips, commercial packaging, advertising, and movies. After 1965, Pop Art moved from a position of relative obscurity into the forefront of avant-garde American art and was practiced by some famous painters such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and George Segal.

Following his colleagues, Lichtenstein began to introduce figuration into his own art in the early 1960s, choosing popular heroes from comic strips and cartoons. Once he had removed these figures from their contexts, Lichtenstein blew them up to inordinate proportions, taking great care to also enlarge the commercial screen print of tiny dots in the background. Lichtenstein did this by painstakingly stenciling in each dot by hand. Lichtenstein's art is deliberately simplistic, aiming to express the crude banality of contemporary society.

Although Lichtenstein also sculpted, painting was always his first love. His canvases are included in the permanent collections of many museums and galleries, and two major exhibitions of his work were held at the famed Leo Castelli Gallery in 1977 and in 1981.

### The Image

*Mustard on White* is a painting by one of the leading American Pop Artists. Pop Art is an art movement and style that began in England in the 1950s and became popular in the United States during the 1960s. Pop Artists have focused attention upon familiar images from discredited mass culture sources. Here, Roy Lichtenstein has taken something as familiar as a piece of sliced white sandwich bread and yellow mustard and made it into a work of art. By isolating and enlarging the image, simplifying the color scheme and adding the screen dot motif (standard pattern from reproduction techniques), he changed the viewer's perception from the mundane to the interesting – we see the word around us with fresh eyes.

### Dominant Elements and Principles of Design

The four dominant elements of art used are:

**Color** Lichtenstein used a minimum of strong contrasting colors; the three primary colors (red, yellow, blue) and black and white. The colors are applied flat – without modulation or variations of tone – a popular technique of the comic book and commercial illustrators.

**Texture** The use of flat colors gives a slick, mechanical appearance to the work. The "Benday," the screen dot motif, is exaggerated and purposely makes the subject seem flat and impersonal.

**Shape** The shapes are simplified but remain figurative, reminiscent of comic strip images.

**Line** The heavy black line that contours the shapes in the work keeps the image flat and two-dimensional.

The main principle of design used is:

**Emphasis** The picture frame is filled with the image of a person spreading mustard on their bread. By enlarging these elements, the viewer has the distinct impression that he/she is participating in this meal. Emphasis is placed on the objects and we see them in a completely new way.

### Suggested Activity

**Theme** Have students work with Pop Art. Have them draw a "real-life" object very large on the page. Tell them to reduce the shapes to the point of abstraction, apply the colors flat (smoothly and evenly), and make the screen dot motif part of their composition. When the paint is dry, outline the object in thick black marker.

**Media** Liquid tempera paint in vibrant hues (no black), black felt markers on 12" x 18" (31 x 46 cm) cartridge paper.