

The Elite and Popular Reception of Classical Antiquity in the Works of Cy Twombly
and Roy Lichtenstein

This paper seeks to understand better the relationship of classical antiquity to postmodern art and culture through a focused examination of two artists working in diametrically opposed artistic traditions. Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997) was a Pop artist, who painted items from the classical world in the style of comic books. By contrast, his contemporary Cy Twombly (1928-2011) was an Abstract Expressionist, whose drawings and paintings typically constituted abstract lines with names and concepts from the classical world written directly on the canvas and/or in the artworks' titles. These two opposed ways of receiving classical antiquity in postmodern art occur at a pivotal moment in the reception of antiquity, at the height of post-World War II consumer culture. Twombly's reception is "elite" or "high", Lichtenstein's is "popular" or "low." Comparing these two artists' receptions of antiquity helps to delineate some of the mechanics of classical reception by popular culture.

As Caroline Winterer (2002) and others have shown, classical antiquity and the academic discipline that promulgated it were integral parts of American education and culture from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. This type of reception is elite [] With declining enrollments in Latin and Greek and the mushrooming enrollments in higher education after World War II (Reinhold 1984: 12), though, the popular reception of classical antiquity received a boost from burgeoning enrollments in Americans have encountered classical antiquity primarily through the filter of the academic discipline of Classics.

This paper will first consider Twombly's series of paintings *Fifty Days at Iliam* [sic] (1978). These pieces consist of splashes of paint and scribbles in pencil with names from Homer's *Iliad* such as "Achilles" and "Achaean", sometimes rendered with letters from the

ancient Greek alphabet. These works are almost incomprehensible without at least a cursory knowledge of ancient Greek language and mythology that an elite education in the United States would be expected to provide. Although we should not think that these paintings can only be interpreted “correctly” by someone with specialized knowledge of classical antiquity (Fletcher 2012), the *Fifty Days at Iliam* series does construct an elite culture viewer in the tradition of the Abstract Expressionist works of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, “a lofty, moral enterprise, identified with abstract levels of truth” (Haskell 1984: 89).

By contrast with Twombly’s appropriation of antiquity into an elite register, Roy Lichtenstein appropriates the same material into a popular register. He renders the temple of Apollo at Corinth into his characteristic comic-book style in his 1964 painting *Temple of Apollo*. Comic books were a staple of popular culture in the latter half of the twentieth century, and so Lichtenstein’s rendering of the Doric temple with four-tone Ben-Day dots would be instantly recognizable to his American audience, regardless of whether they were aware of the specific temple on which it was based. This popular reception contrasts with Twombly’s non-representational scribbles and splashes of paint.

In this paper I will build on this growing body of scholarship by situating Twombly’s work in its historical context by comparing it to Lichtenstein. By doing this, we gain a better appreciation and new perspectives both on the mechanics of classical reception as well as on Twombly’s practices of reception more specifically.

Bibliography

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