First Opinion: What is Art? Introducing Roy Lichtenstein


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Picture book biography can be a tricky genre in which to work, with inherent tensions among the depth of the subject, the youth and inexperience of the intended audience, and the brevity of the format. Susan Goldman Rubin, with her background and experience in art and artist biography, negotiates these tensions with aplomb, bringing to her subjects rich and nuanced historical perspective. In *Whaam! The Art & Life of Roy Lichtenstein*, she offers a portrait of the artist more than the man, emphasizing his artistic process, inspiration, and influences; consequently, the book becomes an introduction to Pop Art and art culture.

Rubin does not, of course, neglect biography; in fact, she offers anecdotal stories about the boy Roy, several gleaned from interviews with Lichtenstein’s younger sister, Renée. Readers learn of Roy’s affection for science fiction radio shows and comic strips (*Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers*), and Rubin speculates that those early influences manifested later in Lichtenstein’s art. Readers learn also of Roy’s early passion for art, his decision to train to teach as well as to practice, and his military service at the end of World War II, all experiences that eventually appear in the artist’s work.

While the question “What is art” is foregrounded throughout the text—earlier probed by Lichtenstein and art critics of his time—Rubin asks her readers to accept that whatever we may decide “art” actually is, Lichtenstein’s work qualifies without fully exploring this conclusion. Defining art shapes her depiction of the shift in popular and critical perceptions of what makes art: a shift that included and embraced the incorporation of and
com­men­ta­ry on icons of pop­u­lar cul­ture. Rub­in men­tions Andy War­hol as Lichtenstein’s con­tem­po­ra­ry in the Pop Art move­ment while high­light­ing the dif­fer­ences in their cre­a­tive pro­cesses.

The forty-eight pages are text­-heavy, indi­cat­ing an inten­ded audi­ence of pri­mar­ily inde­pen­dent read­ers. This is some­times com­pli­cat­ed with awk­ward­ly-simplis­tic lit­er­ar­y con­struc­tions. Phrases such as “said Roy” or “recalled Renée” are a bit cum­ber­some, as are a few ex­pos­i­tion­al sen­tences: “His son David Hoyt was born and named for Roy’s professor” (10); “[t]hroughout his life he had enjoyed mak­ing things” (32); and as a de­scriptor for one of his man­nequin head sculp­tures: “Head with Blue Shadow […] re­sembles a pretty girl” (32). These awk­ward bits are, how­ever, small irri­tants in an oth­er­wise effec­tive work.

The text is bal­anced by at least one illus­tra­tion on each dou­ble-page spread, alto­gether an impres­sive total of thirty-nine pic­tures. These images are com­prised pri­mar­ily of Lichtenstein’s own work, but also in­clud­ed are pho­tos of the artist him­self—par­tic­u­larly as a boy and young man, repro­duc­tions of paint­ings by oth­er artists who in­flu­enced him, and im­ages of the artist’s source ma­ter­i­al. The im­ages are clos­ely tied to the text, of­fer­ing ex­am­ples not sim­ply of the works un­der dis­cus­sion, but of the art­is­tic styles and pro­cesses that Rub­in so effec­tively ex­plains as funda­men­tal to Lichtenstein’s body of work and art­is­tic de­vel­op­ment.

Art­ist bi­og­ra­phies can be es­pe­cially effec­tive as pic­ture books, and Lichtenstein’s work lends it­self beau­ti­ful­ly to this for­mat. Each dou­ble-page spread fea­tures his sig­nature Benday dot back­ground, black on white on text pages, with shades of red, yellow, and blue as back­ground for im­ages. The entire for­mat re­lies on bold pri­mary col­ors, com­ple­ment­ing and strong­ly evok­ing Lichtenstein’s style. Whaam! The Art & Life of Roy Lichen­stein is effec­tively con­ceived; form and func­tion serve each other admi­rably in Rub­in’s dis­cus­sion of Lichtenstein’s evolu­tion of style and his dis­tinctive pro­ces­sors. Ju­xta­pos­i­tions of ori­ginal images with Lichtenstein’s rep­resenta­tions of those im­ages al­low view­ers to make their own con­nex­tions be­tween source ma­ter­i­al and Lichtenstein’s work.

Clear­ly, Whaam! is in­tended as an in­tro­duc­tion, a first step in what the au­thor hopes will be a life­time’s jour­ney for her read­ers. The final pages of the book of­fer my­ri­ad pos­si­bil­i­ties for that next step with an im­pres­sive col­lec­tion of ref­er­ence ma­ter­i­al, in­clud­ing a gloss­ary of terms, page-by-page notes on source ma­ter­i­al, a list of ref­er­ences and re­sources with special no­tations of ma­ter­i­al suit­able for youn­ger read­ers, a list of “Museums & Public Places Where You Will Find Work by Roy Lichtenstein,” and even an index.

Whaam! joins Rub­in’s sim­i­lar bi­og­ra­phies of Mat­tisse, Mag­ritte, War­hol, Jacob Law­ren­ce, Edward Hopper, and Wayne Thie­baud. Her work ac­cess­i­bly and en­gag­ingly opens tradi­tion­al de­fin­i­tions and un­der­stand­ings of art and artists to child (and adult) read­ers; Lichen­stein’s life, as man and artist, opens the read­er’s un­der­stand­ing of mul­ti­ple fac­ets of art and the art­is­tic process.

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Work Cited


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Caroline E. Jones received her M.A. in English with a specialization in children’s literature at Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia, and her Ph.D. in English Studies at Illinois State University. She teaches courses in children’s and adolescent literature in the English department at Texas State University-San Marcos.