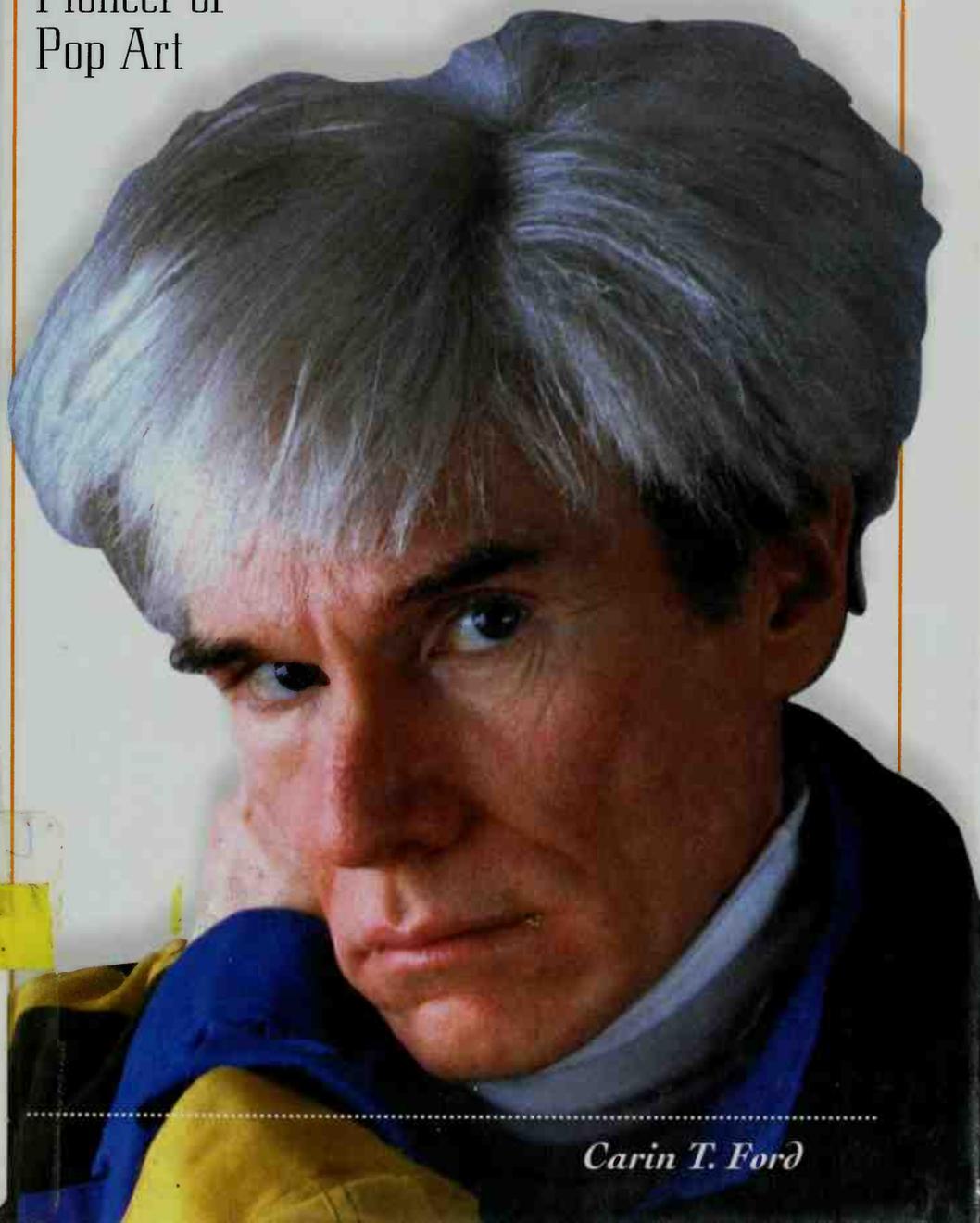


◆ PEOPLE TO KNOW ◆

Andy Warhol

Pioneer of
Pop Art



Carin T. Ford

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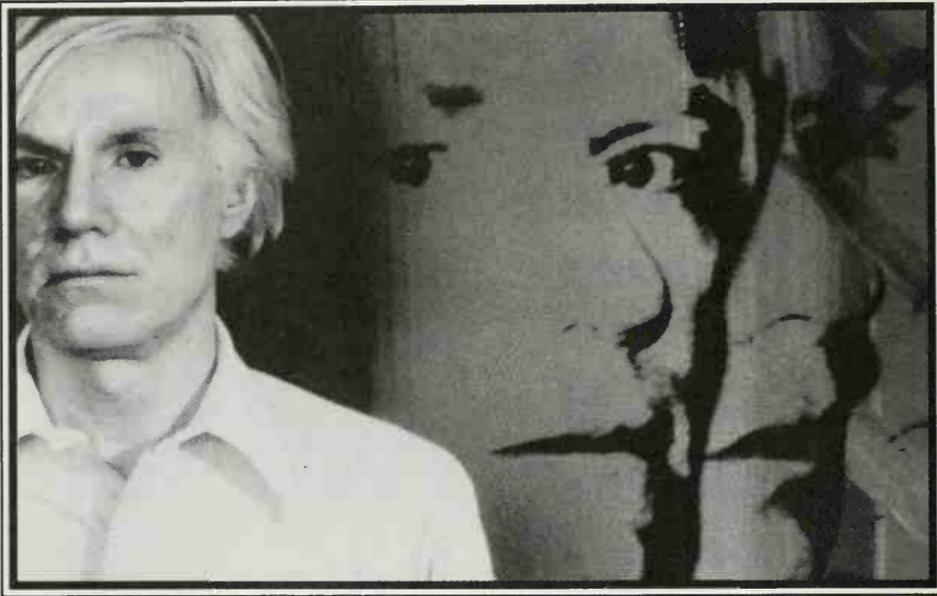
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Andy Warhol, with a self-portrait.

A Can of Soup

It was time to make a change. The year was 1961, and Andy Warhol had been working for more than a decade as an illustrator for newspapers and magazines.

But now he wanted to move beyond the world of advertising. He wanted to be considered a serious artist. And to do that, he needed to come up with an idea—something new, something different.

A movement called Pop Art was taking root in the United States at this time. Artists were trying to bring the real world into their art. They were experimenting with paintings of everyday, commonplace objects. Warhol had tried painting pictures of Coca-Cola bottles and cartoon characters such as Dick Tracy

and Popeye. But he was told his pictures were too similar to the work of other artists.

What he needed now was an idea—and he needed one desperately.

Warhol was already a successful commercial artist. He drew illustrations to help sell a variety of products—creating everything from shoe ads and record album covers to greeting cards and book jackets. His apartment overflowed with newspapers, magazines, art supplies, and photographs. It was littered with scores of objects that he had illustrated for advertisements—shoes, gloves, pocketbooks, hats, belts, jewelry, and scarves. Running around in the midst of this clutter were as many as twenty cats, all named Sam. Warhol was earning more money than he was able to keep track of. A friend once rummaged through the disorder and found a check for \$700 that Warhol had misplaced and never cashed.¹

Warhol had been determined to succeed as an artist ever since his arrival in New York in 1949. In the course of twelve years, he had climbed to the top of the commercial art world, earning a considerable amount of money and winning numerous prizes.²

But it was not enough.

“I want to be Matisse,” he once said, referring to French artist Henri Matisse, who became famous for using color in an unconventional way.

Warhol knew commercial artists could become rich . . . but serious artists could become *famous*. And fame was what he craved.³

Feeling desperate and depressed, Warhol asked a friend, interior designer Muriel Latow, for advice. What

could he paint that would have a lot of impact and make his work stand out? Latow agreed to help, but she was going to charge a fee for her ideas. When Warhol asked how much it would cost, Latow replied, "Fifty dollars."

"Okay, go ahead," Warhol said, writing out a check for the amount. "Give me a fabulous idea!"⁴

Latow said, "Now, tell me, Andy, what do you love more than anything else?"

Money, he told her.

Latow replied that he should paint money. She also said he should paint something so familiar that people had ceased to notice it. "Something like a can of Campbell's soup," she said.⁵

The idea appealed to Warhol immediately. A painting of a soup can would be basic and straightforward, very different from the elegant illustrations for which he was known.⁶ Warhol also enjoyed challenging the traditional ideas of art. If a flower or a bowl of apples could be the subject of a painting, why not a can of Campbell's soup?⁷

He instructed his mother, who shared his apartment, to go to the supermarket and buy every variety of Campbell's soup on the shelves.

Surrounded by each of the thirty-two varieties of soup, Warhol began painting. He experimented with different combinations and sizes of soup cans. Ultimately, he painted a bold portrait of each can of Campbell's soup against a pure white background.

"I wanted to paint nothing," Warhol later said of the soup cans. "I was looking for something that was the essence of nothing, and that was it."⁸

Irving Blum, owner of Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, California, expressed an interest in showing the soup can pictures at his gallery. Warhol excitedly agreed.

The paintings were put on sale at the gallery for \$100 each, one-tenth of the price of Warhol's commercial artwork. Reaction to the soup cans ranged from puzzlement to amusement. A nearby gallery owner purchased several cans of Campbell's soup and put *them* up for sale. He charged sixty cents for three cans. His sign read, "Buy them cheaper here."⁹

Warhol quickly became known throughout the world as the artist who painted the Campbell's soup can. He was even photographed at a supermarket signing his name on an actual can of soup.¹⁰

Two more shows in New York followed in the fall of 1962, one at the Sidney Janis Gallery and another at the Stable Gallery. By this time, Warhol was becoming known as one of the country's outstanding Pop artists.

Paintings of movie star Marilyn Monroe, dollar bills, Coca-Cola bottles, and soup cans were featured at the shows. Warhol repeated the same image—often one hundred times—on one canvas. His logic seemed to be: If one is good, a hundred must be better.¹¹

The Stable Gallery show was Warhol's first one-man exhibition.

"I'll never forget the sight of him coming into the gallery that September, in dirty, filthy clothes and his worn-out sneakers with the laces untied, and a big bunch of canvases rolled up under his arm. . . . Oh,



Warhol's paintings of Campbell's soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles brought him fame as a Pop artist.

he was so *happy* to have a gallery!" said gallery owner Eleanor Ward.¹²

Along with the paintings of soup cans, Coca-Cola bottles, and dollar bills, Warhol's portraits of Marilyn Monroe caught the public's attention. The famous movie star had died that summer, and Warhol made numerous portraits of her. In one work, he covered a twelve-foot canvas with one hundred images of Monroe's face. He used extremely bright colors for her lips, hair, and eyes. In another, he used the repeated image of her lips alone.

"I like boring things," Warhol once said. "I like things to be exactly the same over and over again."¹³

Public reaction to this show was markedly different

from the one in Los Angeles. People were not simply confused and curious. Now many people claimed they loved his pictures; many others hated them.

“Isn’t it the most ghastly thing you’ve ever seen in your life?” a Museum of Modern Art employee asked his colleague, referring to a Monroe portrait.

“Yes, isn’t it?” the colleague agreed. “I bought one.”¹⁴

Perhaps because of the controversy, nearly all the pictures in the show were sold.

With these gallery openings, Warhol was on his way to becoming one of the most famous and influential artists in the world. His career would span virtually every medium—painting, sculpting, writing, magazine publishing, moviemaking, and photography.

Yet years later, Warhol said that he only hoped to be remembered as a can of soup.¹⁵

Pittsburgh

In the early 1900s, the people of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, had come to expect the sky to be pitch black. The big, rough city was the steel and coal capital of the United States. Rarely was the sun able to penetrate the thick blanket of smog that filled the sky.¹ The streets were grimy and crowded with trolleys and horse-drawn carriages.

The steel industry dominated Pittsburgh, and many immigrants, searching for work and a better way of life, flocked to the city. It became a classic melting pot, with its number of foreign-born citizens doubling between 1880 and 1900. Years earlier, immigrants from Ireland, Scandinavia, and Germany had settled there. But by the turn of the century,

immigrants from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Italy, and other European countries were arriving in droves.

Life for these immigrants was not easy. In fact, it would have been difficult for the situation to be worse. Arriving with little money and frequently unable to speak English, the immigrants were forced to live in crowded tenement houses. It was not unusual for twelve or more people to share a single room.²

The city did not have adequate sanitation facilities, so diseases—including deadly typhoid fever—spread easily. There were not enough schools for the children; there was not enough fire or police protection. Fighting occurred on a daily basis between longtime Pittsburgh residents and the immigrants who had come in hopes of making better lives for themselves.

Andrei Warhola was one of these immigrants.

He had traveled to Pittsburgh in 1906 at the age of seventeen, leaving behind his small village of Medzilaborce in what is now Slovakia. The Ruthenians lived off the land, raising livestock and growing crops. Their houses were made of wood and had straw roofs. Each house was surrounded by a fence that was adorned with repeated images of stars, flowers, and crosses.³

In Pittsburgh, Andrei Warhola became a coal miner and worked in the mines for two years. He then traveled back across the ocean and returned to his village, marrying sixteen-year-old Julia Zavacky in 1909. Like her husband, Julia Zavacky came from a family of farmers and goatherds. She had spent much time as a child helping her fourteen brothers and