Andy Warhol at The Factory, 1968, posing for a portrait to publicize his book *a*.

Photo: Getty Images/David Gahr

Who Was Andy Warhol?

A sickly child from working-class origins found stardom as a Pop artist who transformed American culture.

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

Ask almost anyone in the art world, and they'll agree that Andy Warhol is the most important 20th-century artist aside from Picasso. He made images of Campbell's soup cans, Coca-Cola bottles, Marilyn Monroe and his own mop-topped self-portrait into indelible icons of contemporary fine art that sell for tens of millions of dollars.

One reason for his reputation is that Warhol was a self-created cultural phenomenon of unparalleled sweep and influence. His legacy extends beyond fine art into the fields of fashion, movies, commerce, politics and gay chic. Working the nexus of bohemia and high society, he was the embodiment of '60s cool, a one-man brand synonymous with avant-garde New York when the city was the undisputed cultural capital of the world. No wonder *Time* magazine listed him among the 100 most influential people of the 20th century.

Warhol, who died in 1987, is remembered as the Pop artist whose disjointed DayGlo aesthetic is so familiar that Apple's Photo Booth application features a "Pop Art effect" filter that gives photos a Warhol-esque treatment. He also worked as a commercial illustrator, photographer, avant-garde filmmaker, videographer, rock music manager, publisher, author, talk show host and society portraitist, transforming the very idea of what an artist could be.

After Warhol, the artist was no longer a genius perfecting a craft in order to express beauty and truth. He could be a media-manipulating businessman skimming low culture for images and replicating them using industrial techniques. It would be hard to imagine Cindy Sherman, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and a spate of younger contemporary artists without his precedent.

Critics initially questioned whether or not his pictures were art at all, but today they trade for astronomical sums. His 1963 canvas "Eight Elvises," a black-and-white silkscreen taken from a movie still, reportedly sold privately in 2009 for $100 million. Two years earlier, a turquoise portrait of Marilyn Monroe sold for $80 million, and a silkscreen of a lurid tabloid car crash photo went for $71.7 million at auction. Only a handful of artists command comparable prices, and none with the frequency of Warhol, who accounted for 17 percent of all contemporary art auction sales in 2010. ▷

Photo: Jason Kaufman

Campbell's Soup Cans

Rags to Riches

Warhol's is a quintessential American story. He started out in Pittsburgh as Andrew Warhola, Jr., youngest of three boys born in 1928 to Slovakian-immigrant Catholics. His coal miner father died in an automobile accident when Warhol was 13. Shy, pale and probably dyslexic, Warhol suffered from St. Vitus Dance, a nervous disorder that causes uncontrolled fidgeting. Much of his eighth year he lay in bed, poring over Hollywood magazines, comics and coloring books, developing a talent for drawing that led him to study graphic design at Carnegie Institute of Technology.

In 1949, he decided to try his luck in New York City and found immediate success as one of the city's top illustrators, juggling lucrative assignments from cosmetic and fashion firms. He dropped the final "a" from Warhola and bought a townhouse on the Upper East Side.

But Warhol aspired to be a "real" artist, like Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein and Robert Rauschenberg, then emerging as successors to the Abstract Expressionist school. Instead of the brooding color fields and spatters of Rothko and Pollock, they were making pictures of American flags, comic strips and found photos. Warhol followed their lead with paintings of ads and grocery labels. Not one of 32 Campbell's soup can paintings sold at his first one-man painting show, which took place in Los Angeles in 1962. (Afterwards gallerist Irving Blum bought the set for $1,000, an investment worth tens of millions today.) ▷

Photo: Getty Images/Fred W. McDarrah

Sales were better from New York exhibits that featured Elvis, Marilyn and a warehouse-style stack of Brillo box replicas. One critic wrote, “The air of banality is suffocating.” But Arthur Danto, a philosophy professor at Columbia University, interpreted the Brillo cartons not as a glib mockery of American consumerism and art world pretension, but as a game-changing erasure of the line between art and reality. “Andy showed that art and non-art cannot be told apart just by looking at them,” he says—a classic example of a critic applying his own ideas to transform base material into intellectual gold.

Any philosophical significance in Warhol’s art was an unintended by-product of his pursuit of fame and money. More journalist than philosopher, he mirrored popular culture and whatever was in the news. It wasn’t all glamour and groceries. His subject matter took a dark turn with paintings of car crashes, suicides, electric chairs at Sing Sing prison, the civil rights riots in Birmingham, Alabama—emblems of the violence of American life. ▷

Brillo Boxes

Marilyn

Photo: Getty Images/AFP

Photo: Getty Images/Mario De Biasi/Mondadori Portfolio

Andy Warhol in his studio at The Factory, on the fifth floor at 231 East 47th Street in New York City, 1964. On the floor are "Jackie O" paintings made shortly after Kennedy's assassination.

Photo: Getty Images /John Peodincuk/NY Daily News Archive

Andy Warhol checks lighting for a picture featuring underground movie star Edie Sedgwick.

Films and The Factory

In the mid-1960s, Warhol started making films and videos of goings-on at his workshop on East 47th Street. Dubbed "The Factory," the loft became a hangout for everyone from drug addicts and hustlers to movie stars, fashionistas, writers, curators and collectors. The experimental films were mainly scriptless reels of his entourage improvising and misbehaving. Few got into theaters and made any money, and others were mind-numbing, multi-hour shots of subjects like the Empire State Building or a man sleeping. Perhaps the most significant were "Screen Tests," in which visitors to The Factory sat in front of the camera for four minutes. These extended portraits included Marcel Duchamp, Bob Dylan, Dennis Hopper and other Warhol associates, around 500 in total.

It was long before gay liberation, but there were no social boundaries at The Factory. The place was awash in drugs and casual sex, yet Warhol was more observer than participant, avoiding most drugs and tending towards asexuality. According to an intimate partner, "He was obsessed by sex, he just didn't like to do it." Warhol's closest relationship may have been with his mother, who lived with him from the 1950s to the early 1970s. ▷

His days were spent surrounded by a quirky coterie that included renegade rich girls Edie Sedgwick and Brigid Berlin (whose father headed the Hearst media empire); former Dalí muse, Ultra Violet; artist assistant Gerard Malanga and drag queens Divine and Holly Woodlawn. They competed for his attention and unpaid roles as "Superstars" in his movies. Some ended their lives by overdose or suicide, but Warhol was callous to their plights. When one Factory denizen jumped out of a window nude, Warhol commented to his assistant, "If Edie [Sedgwick] kills herself, I hope she'll let us know so we can film it."

The underground rock group The Velvet Underground with Lou Reed drifted into the circle, and Warhol managed them for several years, producing their first album with German model Nico as singer and staging rave performances with films projected onto the band. He also founded the movie magazine *Interview* to broadcast his fame. ▷

Photo: Getty Images/Hervé Gloaguen/Gamma-Rapho

Andy Warhol during the shooting of "Chelsea Girls" at The Factory, 1966.

Photo: Getty Images/David Montgomery

Fame and an Assassination Attempt

Warhol became a boldfaced name. It was said he would show up at the opening of an envelope if the press would be there, and his presence ensured the success of any party. His former studio manager and filmmaker Paul Morrissey said, "He didn't enjoy parties: He didn't drink, he didn't take drugs, he didn't dance and he didn't have anything to say. He was the ultimate wallflower." But Warhol relished the attention, dominating Manhattan's social scene through the 1970s and into the 1980s, the disco era of Studio 54 and the demimonde hangout Max's Kansas City.

In 1979, he hosted a short-lived cable television series about the fashion world, then "Andy Warhol's TV," a talk show with guests from Paloma Picasso, Bianca Jagger and Marc Jacobs to Steven Spielberg and Georgia O'Keeffe. He had a cameo on "The Love Boat," and at the end of his life capped his television career with "Andy Warhol's Fifteen Minutes," a music talk show on MTV titled after his oft-quoted quip that "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes."

Culture critic Fran Lebowitz has observed that "Andy made fame more famous." The irony is that he was neither handsome nor especially engaging. Nearly 6 feet tall and less than 140 pounds, with blotchy skin and a nose job, he wore wigs to cover his baldness. And he cultivated an air of vapid boredom, typically responding to interviewers with lines like, "Gee. I don't know." Asked why he decided to make films instead of paintings, he replied, "Because it's easier; the camera has a motor so you just turn it on and walk away." As one CBS News commentator observed, "Andy Warhol tries to say nothing, and succeeds." Truman Capote called him "a sphinx without a secret."

Another irony is that for all his innovation, Warhol was not an idea man. Dealer Ivan Karp recalled, "He used to ask me all the time, 'Oh, Ivan what should I paint? What should I do?'" Another friend he asked responded, "Well, what do you love most?" "Money," Warhol answered. "Well, paint money," she said, and soon he had silkscreened dollar bills onto a canvas.

He culled motifs from periodicals and product labels, and had others do most of the silkscreening and filmmaking, sometimes even delegating his signature to assistants. Printmaker Sam Green, who signed many of Warhol's prints, said, "Andy cared about authorship only in that if he made it he could sell it, and if he sold it he would get the money, which he wanted."

Warhol's idyll came to a crashing halt in 1968 when the radical feminist Valerie Solanas barged into The Factory and shot Warhol point-blank with a pistol. She was angry that he had refused to use her film script, she later said. (Robert Kennedy was assassinated the next day.) Warhol was pronounced dead, but surgeons saved him. He would be ill the rest of his life—a grisly portrait by painter Alice Neel shows his abdomen crisscrossed by scars—and friends say he became the ghost of his former self, cautious and less productive. (Solanas served only three years in jail because Warhol refused to testify in court. After her release, she spent time in psychiatric hospitals before dying in a welfare hotel in 1988 at age 52.)

Security at The Factory tightened, and a new studio manager professionalized the operation, urging Warhol to abandon filmmaking for more profitable paintings, including self-portraits and society commissions. The society portraits were a cash cow: He'd churn them out from Polaroids, have assistants generate silkscreens, then charge $35,000 for the first canvas and $5,000 for each additional one, varying the colors. He portrayed around 600 sitters, all on 40-by-40-inch canvases that he envisioned would one day be presented in the Metropolitan Museum in a side-by-side composite portrait of society. ▷

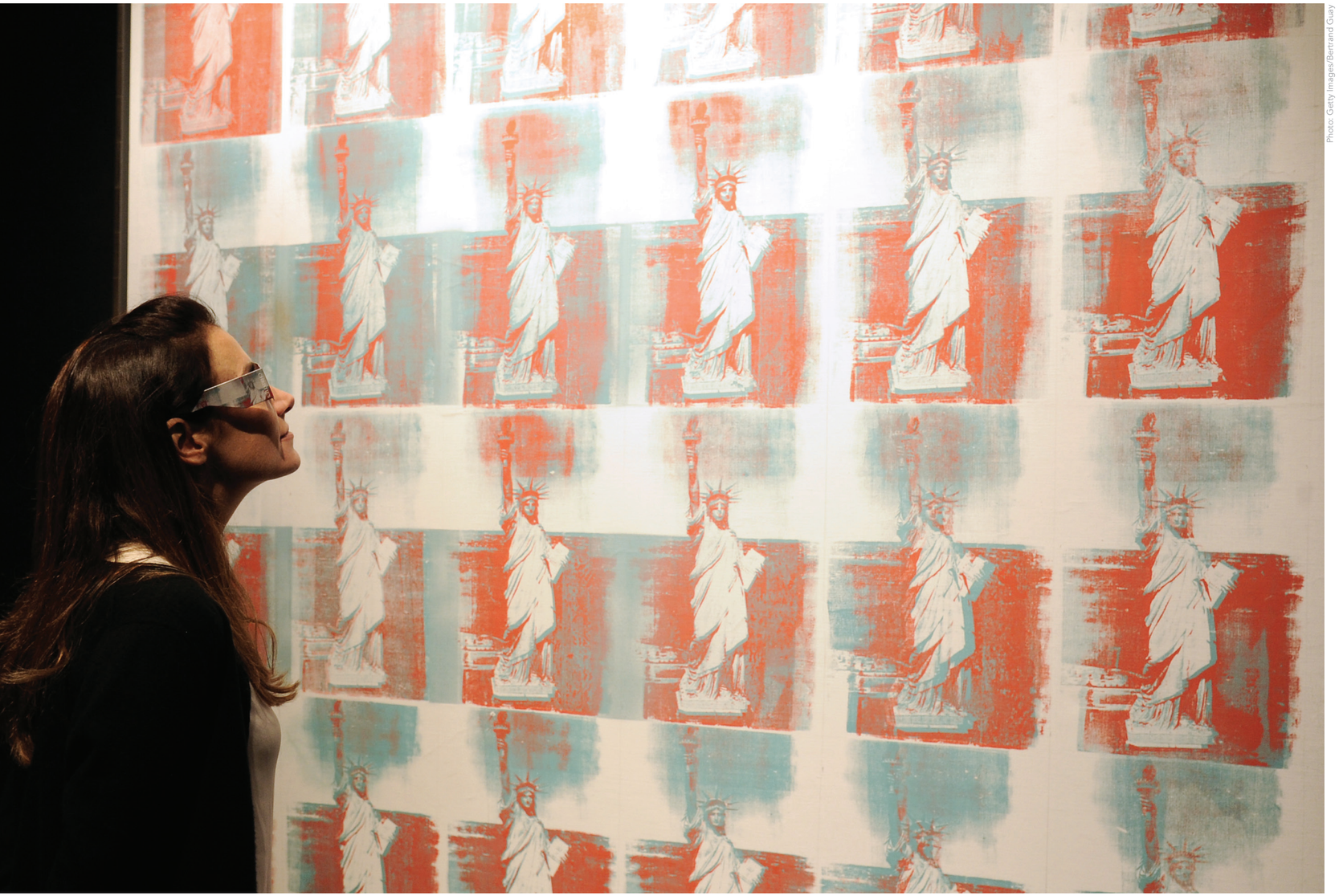

Photo: Getty Images/Bertrand Guay

A woman looks at the Warhol painting "Statue of Liberty," as it is presented by U.S. auction house Christie's as part of the Post-war and Contemporary evening sale on October 17, 2012, in Paris. The auction took place in New York on November 14, 2012.

The Warhol Legacy

Warhol wasn't as lucky on his next visit to the hospital. In 1987, he checked in for routine gall bladder surgery and died in recovery, age 58. He left nearly 100,000 paintings, prints, photographs and drawings and a vast miscellany of memorabilia and collectibles purchased on chauffeur-driven shopping sprees around Manhattan. After years of litigation by executors, lawyers and the IRS, the estate was valued at $220 million, a gross underestimate.

Nearly everything went to The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, whose current assets of more than $300 million (including $100 million in art currently being liquidated at Christie's auction house) allow it to annually grant more than $13 million to United States nonprofit arts organizations—some $250 million over the last 25 years. In 1994, the foundation established the Andy Warhol Museum in his hometown of Pittsburgh, donating nearly 4,000 key works and a vast archive. It's the largest single-artist museum in the nation and sends exhibits around the world.

As prices for Warhol soared, fakes proliferated, and the foundation decided to police the market via an authentication board. The committee controversially denied works made outside Warhol's direct supervision—a puzzling policy for an artist who deliberately blurred the notion of authorship by adopting mechanical means of production. After winning a costly lawsuit that challenged one of its rejections, the board disbanded last year, leaving questions of authenticity to the market rather than the courts.

Worldwide demand keeps Warhol prices in the stratosphere. The New York–based Mugrabi family, in an effort to corner the lucrative Warhol market, has reportedly amassed 800 paintings, some of which that have elicited huge offers from museums in the Arab Emirates. Jose Mugrabi told *The Wall Street Journal* what makes Warhol important: "Every empire has its influences, and I realized Andy was the authentic American. Five hundred years from now, people will see his art and recognize American culture in an instant. He was the only artist who absorbed it all." ◆