

In the 1950s and 1960s a new generation of British artists responded to a radically new cultural and social context. Four of the leading young artists were celebrated in Ken Russell's 1962 BBC Monitor film *Pop goes the Easel* - Peter Blake, Peter Phillips, Derek Boshier, and Pauline Boty, the female Pop art painter who died tragically young.

These and other artists adopted imagery from a wide range of cultural sources including advertising, comics, science fiction and contemporary music, using new techniques such as screen printing and unconventional materials. The term Pop Art is usually associated with the work of artists working in New York in the 1960s such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, but the movement actually found its earliest voice in Britain a decade earlier. Post-war Britain, living with austerity and rationing, looked longingly across the Atlantic to the glamorous commercialised consumer society of the USA.

The first artistic manifestation of this was the work of Eduardo Paolozzi (1924 - 2005) who gave an inaugural lecture in 1952 to the Independent Group of artists centred on the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London. Paolozzi was interested in the impact of technology, mass production and popular culture on art, and presented *BUNK! (2)* - a set of collaged images and tear sheets from American popular culture magazines, created over the previous five years. The title is a reference to Henry Ford's statement "History is more or less bunk.... We want to live in the present".



(2) Eduardo Paolozzi, *Evadne in Green Dimension* (from *BUNK!*), (1952)

Another of the pioneer British artists in the Independent Group was Richard Hamilton (1922-2011), a former Slade student, who produced a collage screenprint in 1956 for the Independent Group Exhibition *This is Tomorrow*.



(3) Richard Hamilton: *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956)

This was entitled *Just what was it that made yesterday's homes so different, so appealing?* **(3)** – drawing on iconic images of male and female stereotypes, and including a whole range of modern consumer goods. Hamilton designed the collage as a parody of American advertising, quoting ironically an advert from the *American Ladies' Home Journal*.

The work of artists like Paolozzi and Hamilton, and others including Nigel Henderson, challenged thinking about art and mass media in the post-war period, questioning the traditional division between high and low art.

Hamilton wrote a definition of Pop Art in a letter in 1957: "Pop Art is: popular, transient, expendable, low-cost, mass-produced, young (aimed at youth), witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, and Big Business."

Lawrence Alloway, curator and art critic associated with the group summed it up: “movies, science fiction, advertising, pop music... We felt none of the dislike of commercial culture standard among most intellectuals, but accepted it as fact, discussed it in detail, and consumed it enthusiastically.”

By the 1960s popular culture in Britain was developing its own identity, more independent of American influences, spearheaded by British popular music in a new style that broke away from American-led Rock and Roll. This was very much a culture celebrating youth, contemporary fashion, social and sexual liberation. As the Swinging Sixties began, a new generation of young artists who had trained at the Royal College of Art in the 1950s came into prominence. Ken Russell’s film *Pop goes the Easel* presented his subjects not just as artists, but as young people in the liberated culture of street markets and the music scene of Chelsea.

Of these, Peter Blake (b.1932) was, and continues to be, one of the most significant of the British Pop artists. He came from a working class background, with a passion for American jazz and blues, but also traditional British popular and folk art. He studied and then taught at the Royal College of Art, and brought a different focus to Pop Art, focusing on the experience of the average consumer rather than intellectual investigation of mass communication or media.



(4) Peter Blake, *Girls with their Hero*, 1959-62

Blake's art makes use of collected objects of popular sub-cultures in paintings, often arranging objects to give the effect of collage. This is shown in his oil painting *Girls with their Hero (4)*, which presents 'metapictures', looking at the objects collected by fans such as record sleeves, magazine covers, tattoos, badges, etc. The picture is structured with the traditional viewpoint at top, beneath that images appear as if on a table top, and on propped up pinboards beneath.

Blake has continued to produce art over the decades and is best known for one of the most iconic and enduring images of 1960s popular culture – the record sleeve for The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album in 1967. This was co-created with his first wife, Californian Jann Haworth, a pioneer of soft sculpture and one of the few women known as Pop artists.

The most important female artist in the group was Pauline Boty (1938 – 1966), also featured in the Ken Russell film. Boty's artistic career, cut short by her early death from cancer, is important in its own right and also for demonstrating the barriers faced by women artists, even in the radical and Bohemian art world of the 1960s. She studied at the Slade and then the Royal Academy of Arts, where she was one of only eight female students out of a class of 36. Her paintings combined bright geometric backgrounds with collage sections featuring elements of pop culture. She also worked as a dancer, actress, set designer and model. She epitomised 1960s Swinging London, producing artworks that were an explosion of sexual and creative liberty. Her reception as an artist was actually undermined by her fame and glamour, which demoted her to the status of sexy girl/starlet in the media.

An example of her work is *It's A Man's World (1)*, a combination of painting and collage, presenting images of masculinity, fame and violence through the centuries. The death of J F Kennedy features at the foot of the picture between painted busts of Lenin and Einstein. These are counteracted by the inclusion of a single bright red rose, floating above the head of the only woman in the picture, Jackie Kennedy, with her arm round her dying husband in the motorcade.

Pop Art, in parallel with the pop music scene, became increasingly aligned with radical protest politics in the 1960s. The threat of nuclear war, highlighted by the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, American involvement in Vietnam and the presence of US Air Force bases in Britain, were all reflected in pop music and media and the visual arts. Artists were involved in creating posters depicting Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh and other iconic figures, and also paintings of specifically political protest.



(5) Colin Self, *Waiting Women and 2 Nuclear Bombers*, 1962

A notable example is Colin Self's *Waiting Women and 2 Nuclear Bombers* **(5)**. Self (b.1942) was encouraged at the Slade by David Hockney and Peter Blake, and travelling to the USA and Canada in the 1960s heightened his political awareness. This painting highlights the threat and fear of nuclear war and the impact on the women, dressed in glamorous 1960s fashion styles.

A very different example of 1960s protest through art is Richard Hamilton's *Swinging London* **(6)**. This was prompted by the arrests on drug charges in June 1967 of Mick Jagger and art dealer Robert Fraser (who was Hamilton's agent), at the Sussex home of Keith Richards, the lead guitarist of The Rolling Stones. Hamilton used as a basis a photograph from the *Daily Mail* of Jagger and Fraser being driven in handcuffs to Chichester Magistrates' Court.



(6) Richard Hamilton, *Swingeing London*, 1967

The title is a pun in protest at the so-called "swingeing" six month prison sentence imposed on Fraser for drug possession. Hamilton produced six artworks, each incorporating a screen print of the photograph. In this version he added paint and metallized acetate to emphasise the handcuffs and incorporated a metal frame to replicate the windows of the police van.

The six artworks presented above illustrate the range and variety of Pop Art, which also includes many early works by artists whose careers developed on different lines, such as David Hockney. My talk will present these and other artists, in the context of cultural theories developed, among others, by the curator and critic Lawrence Alloway, offering new ways of thinking about art and its relationship to the mass media and popular culture.

Further reading:

POP! Art in a Changing Britain: Claudia Milburn & Louise Weller;
Pallant House Gallery 2018

Pauline Boty: British Pop Art's Sole Sister; Marc Kristal. Quarto
Publishing PLC 2023

Pop Art: Lucy Lippard; Thames and Hudson 1974

Pop goes the Easel: Ken Russell; BBC Monitor film: [https://
www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00drs8y](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00drs8y)

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