Warhol heralded as pop-art king

By JOHN COBBS
Staff Writer

If I'd gone ahead and died 10 years ago, I'd probably be a cult figure today.

With this sentence, Andy Warhol opened a 1980 autobiographical retrospective of his finest hours, entitled POPism: the Warhol 60s. Last week, at the relatively young age of 58, Warhol died. But by some accounts this self-proclaimed prince of pop, who, at least in public, carried on an act as brash and flashy as the Hollywood stars he often depicted on canvas, had already achieved cult status.

Warhol, whose trademark silk-screened designs adorned clothes, record albums and magazine covers as well as gallery walls, will not soon be forgotten by the patrons and practitioners of the art world. As his longtime art dealer Leo Castelli said, "Of all the painters of his generation, he's still the most influential on the younger artists."

Warhol not only played fashion's guru for a generation of artists, but also ruled as champion of an underground revolution and as a pale mirror of the popular culture. His influence on the times, the music, and especially on the people of the decade he defined with his name prompted one critic to call him "the most famous living artist in America." He became recognized, as another critic stated, more for who he was and who he associated with than for what he did artistically. But that was how he planned it.

Warhol's craving for fame and his attention to celebrity status in the late 50s dictated his meteoric rise from the high ranks of commercial illustration to the high society of the New York art scene. Critic Calvin Tompkins said Warhol "wasn't what you'd call ambitious, although he did have this thing about famous people. He was always writing to movie stars to get their autographs." He even cooked up a scheme, Tompkins recalled, to turn others' fame into his wealth. "He had some wild idea about movie stars' underwear. (Warhol suggested) you could go into business selling underwear that had been worn by the stars, it would cost $5 washed and $50 unwashed."

Luckily for the art world, the advent of pop art provided Warhol a legitimate chance to sell images of the stars rather than their undergarments.

Warhol, like other painters in the foreground of the pop movement, had already parlayed his creative talent into commercial success before 1960. Warhol had dressed windows, illustrated magazine ads and even colored television weather maps on his way up. But unlike his stricter contemporaries, who were quick to distinguish between works produced for art's sake and those produced for the sake of survival, Warhol allowed his commercial instincts and appeal to dictate his art. To Warhol there was no separation. Success on both counts was determined by sales. Art was just another business, Warhol implied, saying, "being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art."

Warhol was exhibiting his work privately by 1961, the same works he was contributing to commercial accounts for Vogue, Glamour, Tiffany's and Bergdorf-Goodman's. By reaping double dividends from the same works, Warhol demonstrated a proficiency in both the art of business and the business of art.

Established artists and critics scoffed, but Warhol continued to startle. He saw no room for himself in the ruling clique, so he created his own. He challenged existing notions of style as well as art. "You'd have to have seen the way all the Abstract Expressionist painters carried themselves," Warhol said, "to understand how shocked people were to see a painter coming on swish. I certainly wasn't a butch guy by nature, but I must admit, I went out of my way to play up the other extreme."

But Warhol's success and notoriety stemmed both from deviation from the norm and an acute sensitivity to the impulse of the masses. Warhol the personality was an extraction distilled from reflections gathered from the public mirror. He was the symbol and standard-bearer of the new public taste, not its originator.

Pop, as an artistic movement, was under way by the time Warhol jumped aboard. A breathless Warhol called a friend in late 1962 saying, "there's something new we're starting. It's called pop art and you better get on it because you can do it, too." Warhol saw pop as his long-awaited train to success and fortune, and he was not to be left behind.

The aesthetic groundwork had been laid for pop by artists as early as Marcel Duchamp in 1917, whose "ready-mades" relegated art to a decision rather than a process; the artist merely extracted an object from his surroundings which smacked of everydayness, and held it up as art. Other artists in the late 50s continued to dismantle the distinctions between art and life by featuring familiar popular icons in their works, but it was Warhol who translated an artistic statement into a cultural vision, a way of observing and cataloging the world around him. "Once you 'got' pop," Warhol said, "you could never see a sign the same again. And once you thought pop you could never see America the same way again."

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For Warhol, pop signaled the onset of a pervasive popular revolution. The accessible, eye-catching imagery resonated with the same vitality that the other arts and the people themselves were starting to express. Warhol's detached, cool depictions of soup cans, cartoons, Coke bottles and celebrities shifted the emphasis from the artist to his society. Critic Robert Hughes said, "painting a soup can is not a radical act. But what was radical in Mr. Warhol was that he adapted the means of production of soup cans to the way he produced paintings, turning them out en masse — consumer art mimicking the process as well as the look of consumer culture."

Warhol not only depicted what critic Barbara Rose called the "materialism, spiritual vacuity and ludicrously sexual environment of affluent America" in his various pop reproductions, but he also embraced these trends in the creation of his own public persona. Though Warhol's role behind the canvas and the camera was cool and passive, his life in front of the lights, conducted within the silvery walls of his famous Factory studio, was anything but.

The Factory, which Warhol set up on East 47th Street in New York, was the take-off point for most of the Warhol productions. It was Andy the artist's studio, Andy the filmmaker's set and Andy the music producer's concert hall. The Factory was THE scene in New York in the mid-60s and served as both a base for Warhol's extended family of artisans and hobos as well as a favorite stopover for visiting celebrities. Beneath the constant spotlight of the Factory, a site of constant parties and art "happenings," Warhol quenched his personal thirst for fame and showcased the talents of his ever-changing cast of hangers-on.

Warhol was the first to put a camera on Edie Sedgewick, the attractive debutante turned sex symbol whose later drug death only encouraged comparisons between her and a previous darling of Warhol's canvas, Marilyn Monroe. It was Warhol, too, who offered Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground their first steady gig as the Factory's house band.

But Warhol's entourage included some who were neither successful nor grateful despite the artist's support. One particularly frustrated writer named Valerie Solanis tried to put an end to the male race and chose Warhol as a starting point.

"She was the founder of an organization she called SCUM (for the 'Society for Cutting Up Men')," recalled Warhol. She had once left a film script at the Factory for Warhol's perusal, but it was lost in the studio's clutter. In return for Warhol's apparent negligence, she fired two bullets through his chest and stomach. Warhol barely escaped death and was out of action for over a year as a result. Typically though, Warhol's first complaint on regaining consciousness was a lament that Robert Kennedy's assassination 48 hours later had "upstaged" his own shooting.

In the 70s, Warhol retreated to a less visible posture. He became more involved in filmmaking and founded Interview magazine, a posh parade of celebrity profiles and interviews. The magazine and his frequent appearances at New York's Studio 54 demonstrated Warhol's sustained fascination with the glitterati. His art continued to be produced and to sell, the faces and images changing with the times. Jimmy Carter replaced Nixon in a presidential series, and Liza Minelli overthrew Marilyn Monroe as Warhol's principal Hollywood image.

The last two decades of the artist's life also saw the final resolution of his parodoxical existence as both a documenter and a document of his society. Warhol's own image was reproduced on T-shirts and book bags the familiar silver hair, dark glasses and pallid complexion becoming as much a property of the media as a possession of the personality contained within. As film critic Stephen Koch said, Warhol achieved superstardom, a word he coined himself, "at what must be great cost perhaps nearly the cost of his life (and) has made himself and his work into something entirely singular."

Warhol's death does little to tarnish his stardom, and his relative youth and health at the time of his passing may tend to stimulate curiosity on his behalf once again. Sculptor George Segal said of Warhol: "He had this wry, sardonic knack for dismissing history and putting his finger on public taste, which to me was evidence of living in the present. Every generation of artists has the huge problem of finding their language and talking about their own experience. He was out front with several others of his generation in pinning down how it was to live in the 60s, 70s, and 80s."

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