

# Artifacts

## CONSERVATION CENTER for Art and Historic Artifacts

 treatment spotlight:

## Famous ~~For 15~~ Minutes Ever

In *New York* magazine's September 2005 issue on annual New Yorker salaries, Andy Warhol didn't do too badly. Dead since 1987, Warhol made \$16,226,741 in 2004. Call it the work of a well-run foundation, call it a cult of Andy Warhol, but the sheer amount of this income points to a simple fact: the artist celebrated for his take on fame is arguably the most famous American artist of the 20th century. And he shows no sign of slowing down.

Born in Pittsburgh in 1928, Warhol studied art at the Carnegie Institute of Technology and moved to New York upon graduation in 1949. There, Warhol had a successful career as a commercial illustrator for glossy women's magazines and several retailers, including Bergdorf Goodman's. In 1952, Warhol had an individual show at the Hugo Gallery and four years later he was included in a group show at the Museum of Modern Art.

It was in the early 1960s that Warhol began using the silkscreen process, a printmaking medium that produces nearly identical multiples and where the artist's hand is almost invisible. (In silkscreening, rather than producing a hand-drawn image, a prepared stencil or photograph is adhered to a screen made of very fine mesh and transferred directly to the surface.) A 2002 retrospective of Warhol's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles said that by "employing mass-production techniques to create works, Warhol erased traditional distinctions between fine art and popular culture, subtly blurring the boundaries of mass art and high culture with his striking appropriations. His choice of subjects tapped into important themes: power, fame, and tragedy. With an unerring eye for iconic images, from common objects to celebrities and disasters, Warhol produced a lasting oeuvre that captured the essence of American culture." Those iconic images include the Coca-Cola cans, the Campbell soup cans, and the celebrity portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy.

Warhol was obsessed with fame and celebrity, or at the very least, the contemporary worship of it. His medium of the silkscreen underlines this in suggesting a mass-marketing of celebrities similar to that of common household objects. And the magazine he founded, *Interview*, suggests it, as does his most renowned quote: "In the future, everyone will be famous for 15 minutes."

It seems the future is here. There have always been famous people of course, but they were usually famous for an achievement of some sort—good acting, singing, writing, politicking, athleticism, etc. To be sure, contemporary culture still celebrates a talented person (We love you, Tiger Woods!), but with the onslaught of 24-hour entertainment networks and the increasing number of magazines dedicated to the every move of "celebrities," who isn't famous? And who isn't famous for longer than 15 minutes? If you are a pretty, party-hopping twenty-something or rich and have a hobby, you have a decent chance of becoming a nouveau celeb. It all makes Warhol's overtures to cult of fame, seem almost...well, quaint.

If Warhol's celebrity images seem all too familiar these days, his portraits of Chinese political leader Mao Zedong (1873-1976) are a counterpoint. Perhaps more so today than when they were produced in 1972. Mao may not have seeped into the current cultural imagination as a tyrant for the record books<sup>1</sup> but he is far from simply the leader of a failed economic policy. In February 1972, with President Nixon's visit to China, many Americans were getting their first peek behind a communist regime shrouded in mystery. Mao's despotic reputation hadn't been solidified and what most



people knew of him was from leftist, anti-war leaflets that were circulating around the U.S. in the early 1970s. "With his smooth, warm, red face which radiated light in all directions, Chairman Mao Zedong was a fixture in Chinese propaganda posters produced between the birth of the People's Republic in 1949 and the early 1980s... Chairman Mao, portrayed as a stoic superhero..." write the authors of *Chinese Propaganda Posters*.

On September 10, privately-owned Warhol Mao screen-prints arrived at CCAHA. The prints were stacked with interleaving papers in a brown cardboard box with "Warhol: Mao Tse Tung" printed on the outside. The original interleaving papers were acidic, causing discoloration to the prints, and in some cases literally adhered to it. The damage varies from print to print but the majority of the staining is on the shiny black ink and shiny blue ink, colors that contain a different ratio of additives in the printing inks. The affected inks retain a softness that are prone to scratches and abrasions. Also, under the microscope, conservators can see the fibers of the interleaving paper embedded into the printed ink surfaces.

Conservators Soyeon Choi and Corine Norman McHugh are currently treating these prints. They are removing the interleaving papers as much as possible by peeling them away at a low angle. Then, they remove the fiber residues using deionized water, foam-tipped swabs, and a small brush under the microscope. The process is painstaking but overall Ms. Choi expects a vast improvement in the appearance of the prints.

Warhol took his image of Mao from the leaflets and by reconfiguring this propaganda—imbuing it with bright, garish colors—Warhol altered the nature of how we view an icon, a celebrity. Which is more real—the image or the reality? Does art imitate life or does life imitate art?

—Keltie Hawkins