

THE ART OF BEER

Pilsners that Pop!

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The pop art movement of the 1950s and 1960s elevated images from popular culture into high art. Simply by taking mundane, everyday objects such as soup cans or comic books, and placing them into a gallery setting, pop artists changed the character of the images. Pop art is conceptual art in the sense that it is not so much the image itself that is important (we see soup cans everyday), but rather the idea, or concept, behind it.

In beer, there is nothing more mundane than pilsner, although when I say so, I am using "pilsner" in its abused form; the universal term for a light, often flavourless lager. But a true pilsner can be elevated to high art.

Classic pilsners such as Pilsner Urquell and Trumer Pils, as well as modern interpretations such as Victory Prima Pils, are anything but mundane. When well made, pilsners feature a firm, but gentle maltness and a wonderful hop bitterness and sharp hop flavor, typically from noble varieties such as saaz or hallertauer.

High art pilsners are always visually appealing. They are light in color, crystal clear and capped

by a thick, white head. Indeed, the popularity of pilsner beer blossomed when glassware became affordable. Since people could see what they were drinking, the appearance of the beer became important to its overall enjoyment.

One of the things that I most enjoy while looking at a pilsner is the significant beading that occurs in a proper, highly-carbonated pilsner. I love to watch as the bubbles rise from the bottom of the glass to the top. The bubbles grow slightly larger and rise faster as they near the top due to the slight reduction in pressure.

These bubbles remind me of Ben-Day dots, a coloring technique used in comic books and which featured prominently in the work of American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997). In addition, the crisp, sharp lines of Lichtenstein's work are reminiscent of flavors of pilsner, which are often described as crisp.

Lichtenstein did have a varied style, but he is most famous for his works based on frames from comic books. These works have well-defined lines and shapes defined by black outlines. Colorization is either uniform or through perfectly-spaced Ben-Day dots. For these works, Lichtenstein used only a limited palette of primary colours: blue,

yellow and red. For this reason, many people often believe his paintings were made by mechanical reproduction, but original Lichtensteins were hand-painted magna (a precursor to modern acrylic paints) on canvas. Ironically, Lichtenstein's paintings were often then commercially reproduced as lithographs.

Lichtenstein was prolific and his style is instantly recognizable, so his works are highly collectible. As a result, you can see his works in any respectable modern art gallery in the world. His paintings can be seen in the Museum of Modern Art, Guggenheim and Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Art Institute in Chicago, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Modern in London and the National Galleries of the United States, Australia and Scotland. His sculptures include large public pieces such as "The Head" in Barcelona and "Six Brushstrokes" in Singapore, while many smaller pieces are widely distributed throughout the world, including some that can be seen in the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas. Even his lithographs are highly sought and can fetch tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars if hand-signed.