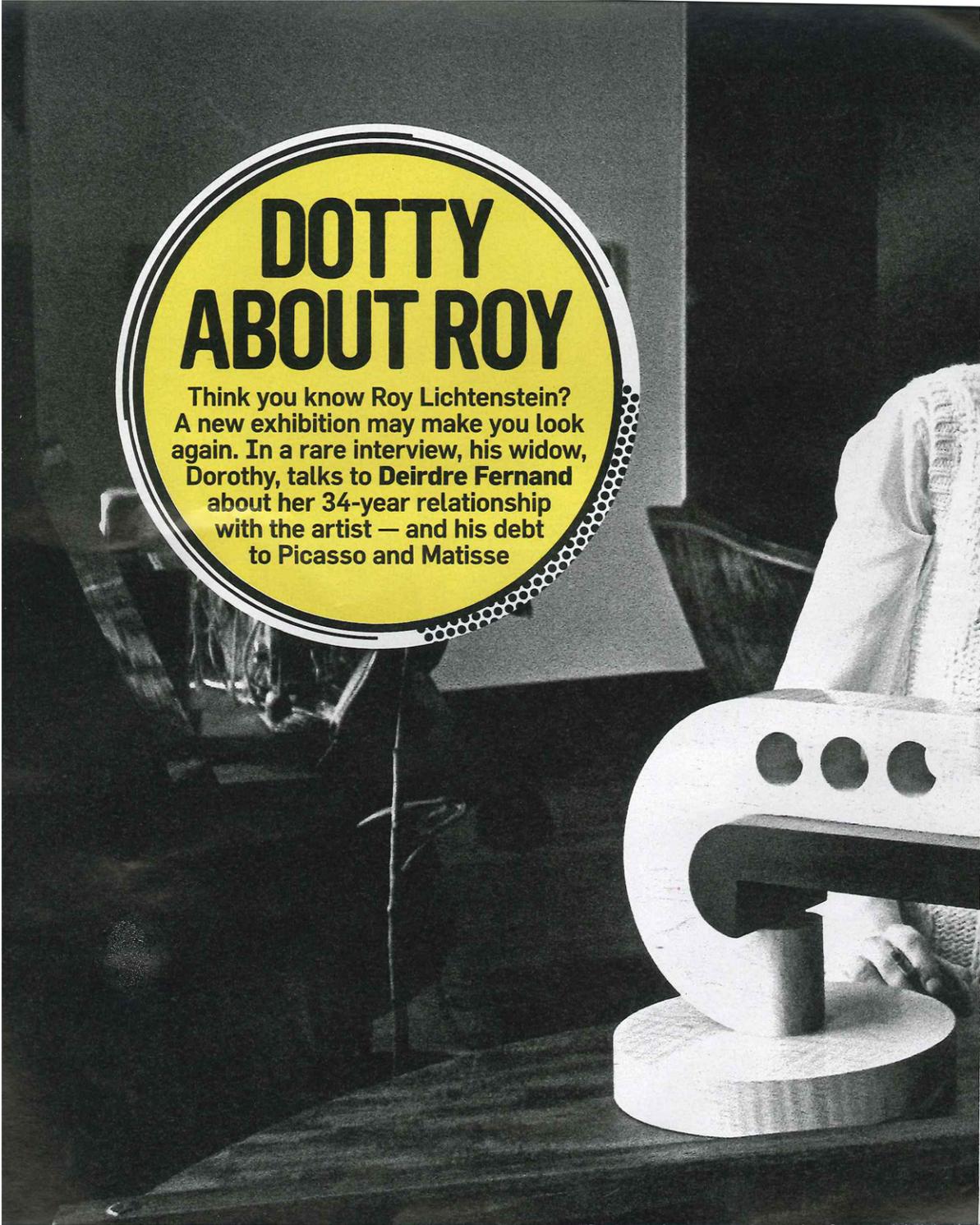


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DOTTY ABOUT ROY

Think you know Roy Lichtenstein?
A new exhibition may make you look
again. In a rare interview, his widow,
Dorothy, talks to Deirdre Fernand
about her 34-year relationship
with the artist — and his debt
to Picasso and Matisse

ROY
LICHTENSTEIN



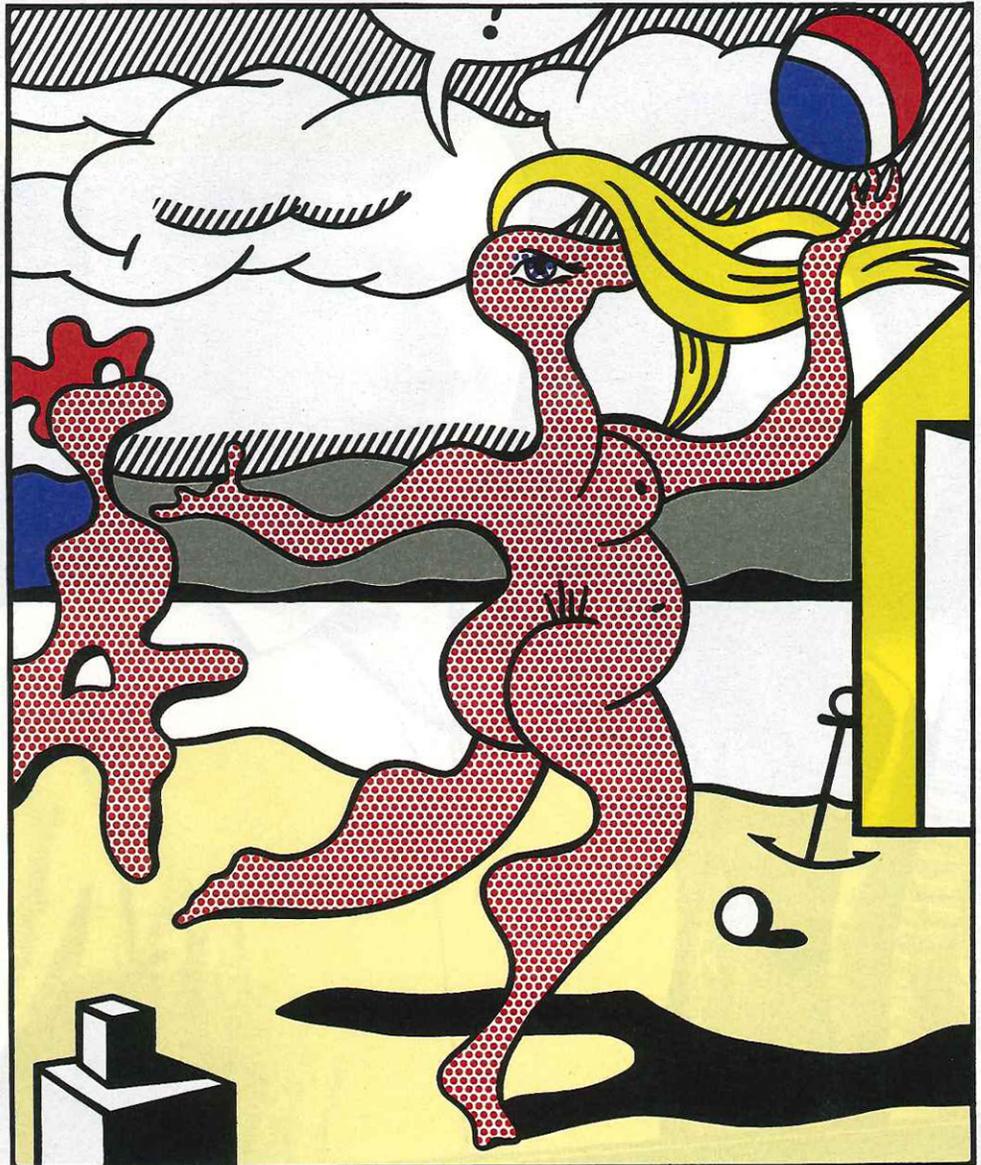
When the artist Roy Lichtenstein turned 70, his wife Dorothy bought him a saxophone. It was the perfect gift. The alto sax was the only thing that could ever keep him away from his studio in Southampton, Long Island, where for decades he had turned out the paintings that made him one of the most famous pop artists in the world. "Roy loved nothing better than to be absorbed in his work," remembers Dorothy. "But the only thing that he would ever put down his paintbrush for was that instrument. He would stop to practise his scales."

While Lichtenstein was a master of his art, his genius did not stretch to the sax. "Late in life he was just learning to read music and work at his scales," Dorothy says. "He was always disciplined and he had this total willingness to be a beginner." Both his art and music came to an abrupt end just three years later. After a lingering cough turned into pneumonia, Lichtenstein died in September 1997. A painting stood unfinished on his easel; his saxophone lay silent in its case.

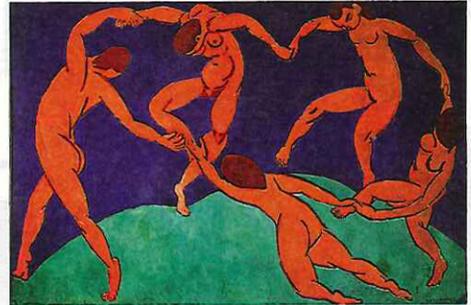
Next month, more than 15 years after his death, his works will go on show at London's Tate Modern. Lichtenstein: A Retrospective, the result of a collaboration between Tate Modern and The Art Institute of Chicago, is the first of its kind since his death and the largest show of his work mounted in Britain. Not only will the exhibition feature *Whaam!* (1963), and *Drowning Girl* (1963), two of his most popular images, but also sculptures, drawings, landscapes and ceramics. Of the 130 works, mostly coming from America, at least 30 have never been seen before in Britain.

Lichtenstein was famous for bringing cartoon imagery into high art, combining banal subject matter with a formidable artistic technique. Along with Warhol, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, among others, he was part of a generation of artists who seized upon mundane objects from popular culture — hence the epithet Pop Art — and lent them a particular visual dignity. That style is so familiar that it's easy to believe we know him — we grasp him in the same way we recognise Andy Warhol's Marilyn. Lichtenstein took comic-strip couples and consumer goods and rendered them in bold outlines, primary colours and dot shading. And it's that familiarity that might be a problem. Those who visit expecting to see more of the Lichtenstein cartoon aesthetic will be in for a shock.

"The comic-strip work only lasted a short period — some three years — yet that is what people know him for," explains Dorothy. The



HIS MASTERS' VOICES
Lichtenstein's *Frolic* (above) echoes Picasso's *Bather with a Beach Ball* (right). Matisse's *La Danse* (second right) features in Lichtenstein's *Artist's Studio 'The Dance'* (top right). Bottom right: *Haystacks #3* — a dotty reworking of Monet's *Haystacks in the Sun*

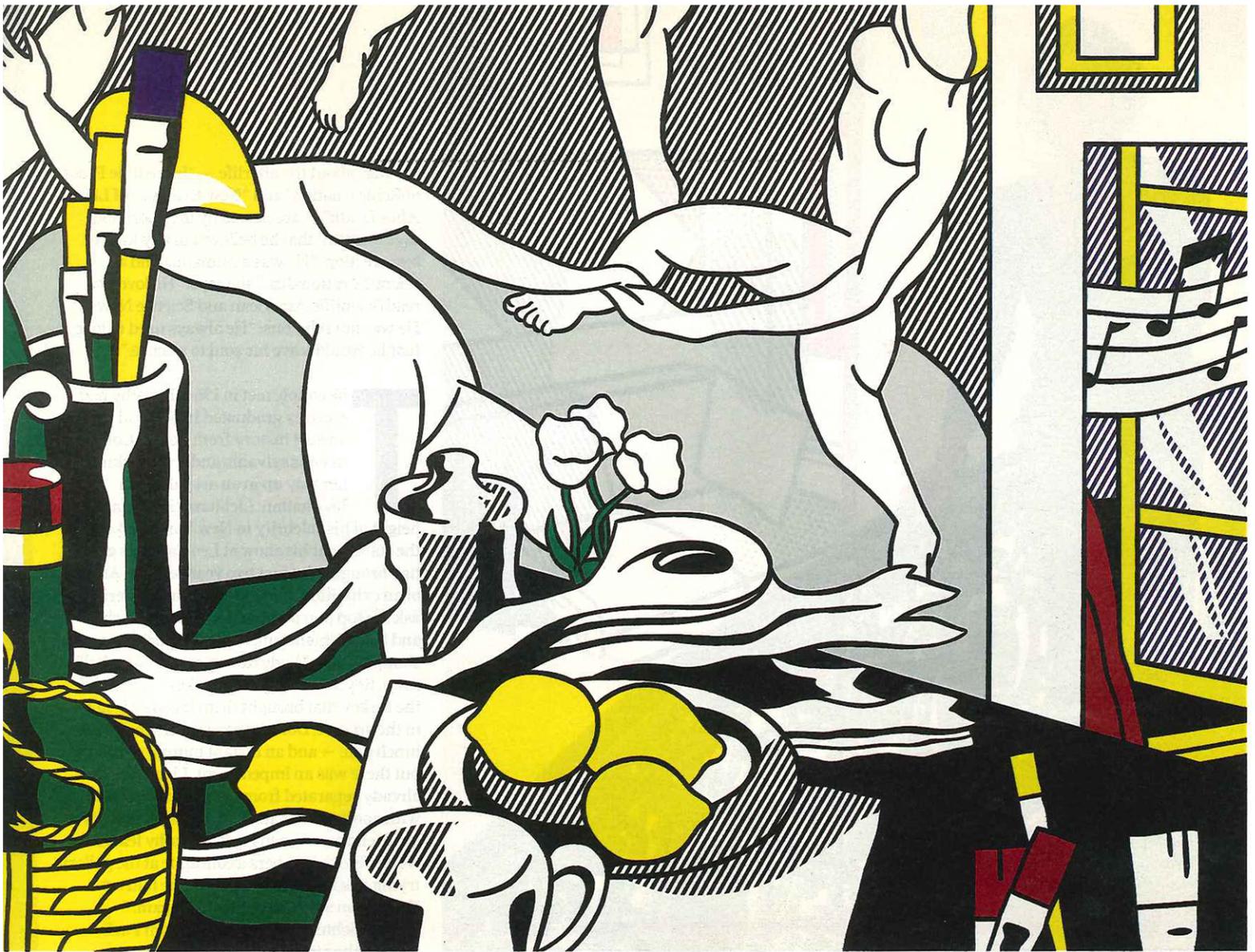


artworks on display will reveal some hidden treasures, including the exuberant canvases inspired by the masters he admired, such as Picasso, Monet and Matisse. Other rare works include a number of Chinese-style landscapes and a series of nudes he embarked upon just before his death.

It's thanks to his widow and her collection that you won't just be seeing spots before your eyes. Sixteen years his junior, Dorothy was

only 57 when Roy died. Two years later she set up a foundation in his name. Under its aegis, his works are constantly touring. Her husband left about 5,000 works of art and Dorothy owns hundreds. So where, in the exhibition, the label reads "private collection", that often means Dorothy. Part of her role is to persuade collectors to lend their Lichtensteins for what can be months at a time. "I can offer them something in exchange, so they don't

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have an empty wall," she says. Often, she can match the exact shape and size of the missing Lichtenstein — she must be a decorator's dream.

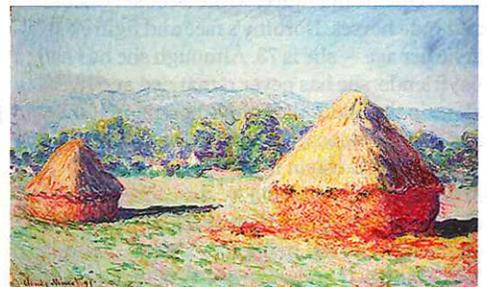
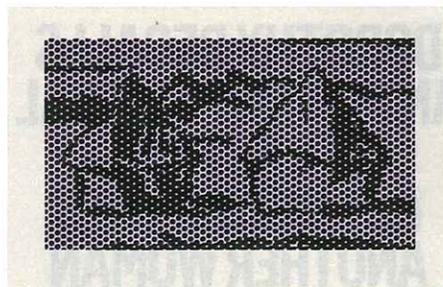
What of life after Roy? It would have been easy for her to do nothing. Her income is secure with his works consistently achieving high prices at auction. The world record for a Lichtenstein was set in New York in May last year when *Sleeping Girl* (1964) sold for £27.5m at Sotheby's. She could have become one of those Park Avenue princesses who grace the columns of *Women's Wear Daily*, partying her way around the world — an opening here, a reception there... yet to spend time with Dorothy is to realise that an endless round of smart-art socialising would bore her senseless. Reluctant to be in the limelight, she rarely gives interviews. "I like to stand back... it's his work that maintains the legacy," she says. "The art has to stand up and people have to want to see it. The foundation puts me in the background." Exactly where she's happiest:

she funds a number of charities including medical research, arts education and her local museum, The Parrish, and is part of a network of philanthropists in New York.

Roy and Dorothy were together for 34 years. She helped to bring up his two sons by his first marriage to Isabel Wilson. David, a recording studio engineer and Mitchell, a film-maker, are now both in their fifties. Today, in the library of her house in Southampton, Dorothy recalls a remarkable partnership. It's clear that she

feels his death keenly. "My memories are bittersweet," she says. "One is lucky to find someone with the same world view. We had a kind of kinship... being married to Roy was effortless. I didn't mind that he worked all the time. I had a lot of freedom. So I think it was like being alone — in the best kind of way. He allowed me to be myself."

When she meets some of his peers, such as the artist Ellsworth Kelly, now 89, she cannot help but feel a stab of grief for a life cut ➤➤➤





cuttings about the afterlife — “Incredible Proof of Reincarnation” and “New Evidence of Life After Death” — are pasted by the door. Not, says Dorothy, that he believed in any kind of resurrection. “He was a humanist and a scientific rationalist,” she says. “He loved to read *Scientific American* and *Science News*.” He was not religious: “He always used to joke that he would leave his soul to science.”

The couple met in 1964. Dorothy had recently graduated in political science and art history from Beaver College in Pennsylvania and was working her way up in an art gallery in Manhattan. Lichtenstein was at the height of his celebrity in New York, basking in the status that his show at Leo Castelli’s gallery had brought him just two years earlier. As part of an exhibition, it fell to the young gallerist to ask the top pop personalities, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, to design a print for a shopping bag. “Andy drew a can of Campbell’s soup, Roy a Thanksgiving turkey.” A print of the turkey that brought them together is now in the archive. Dorothy remembers their first lunch date — and an instant mutual attraction, but there was an impediment. Lichtenstein, already separated from Isabel, was involved with another woman. And when he took his girlfriend on a trip to Paris, Dorothy feared the worst. She remembers a colleague at the gallery trying to let her down gently: “She told me: ‘Guess you won’t be seeing him again.’”

But Lichtenstein came back from Paris, ditched the girlfriend, and the pair soon became inseparable. Looking back, she realises how much they had in common. Both shared a *Mittleuropa* heritage. He was descended from German-Jewish immigrants, she from Czech, Hungarian, Romanian and Austrian Jews. “I think I’m a quarter of everything,” she says. Both had enjoyed comfortable middle-class childhoods. The son of an estate agent, Lichtenstein grew up on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, went to private school and spent his spare time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History. The daughter of a judge, Dorothy Herzka grew up in Brooklyn, attending the same high school as Woody Allen. Following Lichtenstein’s divorce, they married in New York in 1968 with Dorothy taking on the role of wife, stepmother and muse. She speaks little of Isabel, only that she was “troubled” and reportedly had a drink problem. She spent her last years in sheltered accommodation and died in 1980, aged 59.

Dorothy’s favourite photograph from her honeymoon period shows Roy looking up at

short. “I feel Roy should be there. He would have gone on to do so many things.”

Jack Cowart, a former museum curator who knew the couple well and now runs the foundation, describes her as a “perfect foil” for Lichtenstein. “She allowed him space and time to practise his art the way he wanted. They were always in sync with each other,” he says. So when Lichtenstein was toiling in his studio, Dorothy taught in her local high school, learnt haute cuisine in France, wrote a cookery book and rode horses. Dorothy’s face and figure belie her age — she is 73. Although she has had boyfriends, she has never remarried and lives alone in the house the couple bought in 1969, a spacious clapboard home by the ocean.

And Lichtenstein is never very far away. From her bedroom window she can see his aluminium sculpture (*House III*, 1997) parked on the lawn. In her living room hangs one of his paintings (*Landscape*, 1974), while her

kitchen dresser holds a porcelain tea service he designed in 1984 for Rosenthal. All cobalt, yellow and dotty, it’s part of a limited edition worth an estimated £15,000. She uses it? “It doesn’t go in the dishwasher.”

The garage houses his studio, preserved just as he left it. By his easel, a book about Matisse lies open; the shelves hold his paints and brushes. A *Peanuts* cartoon is stuck to a pinboard, while two tabloid newspaper

DOROTHY RECALLS AN INSTANT MUTUAL ATTRACTION — BUT HE WAS WITH ANOTHER WOMAN

lunch — fruit salad and yogurt — with Dorothy. “He never wanted to waste a minute,” she says. “He felt that he had been given permission to play in the sandbox.”

For Lichtenstein, the headline in *Life* magazine was only the first in a series of pranks. Throughout his career he borrowed images from great artists to create witty and coded visual puns. Both *Haystacks* and *Rouen Cathedral, Set 5*, dated 1969, are his dotty reworkings of Monet, while his *Still Life with Goldfish* series (1972-1974) is a hymn to Matisse. But perhaps the most enduring artistic influence of his life was Picasso. Lichtenstein's *Frolic* (1977) is an entertaining meditation on the Spanish master's *Bather with Beach Ball* (1932), while his *Femme D'Alger* (1963) is his take on Picasso's work of the same name from 1955. Sometimes, as in *Artist's Studio "Look Mickey"* (1973), inspired by Matisse's depictions of his studio, Lichtenstein sneaks in a version of one of his own paintings.

Many critics see these appropriations as a form of improvisation derived from music, like variations on a theme or a choral fugue. “He

wanted to take an idea and twist it. In jazz, you go away from the basic melody and you are riffing on it,” explains Dorothy. “So's there's an ironic playfulness at work, these are riffs on a theme. And Roy was always very serious about his playfulness.” His *Artist's Studio "The Dance"* (1974) derived from Matisse's *La Danse* (1910) even incorporates a musical staff. All this makes him not so much the man who put pop into art, but the man who put art into pop.

“Throughout his life as a painter, he had a profound engagement with art history,” says Sheena Wagstaff, co-curator of the exhibition and chairman of the modern and contemporary department at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. “We could see this as a tribute, though ambivalent, from one artist to another.” As Lichtenstein once put it: “The things I have parodied I actually admire.” As a young art student, Lichtenstein had even written some poems paying tribute to Cézanne, Gauguin, Picasso and Van Gogh, referring to them as “the Wonderful Wizards of Art”.

Yet one of the most popular Lichtensteins in the exhibition promises to be not a parody

of anyone, except perhaps his own comic book style. *Engagement (The Ring)*, 1962, features a man placing a sparkling diamond on a daintily manicured finger. When the painting went on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington recently, security guards reported men going down on one knee, ring in hand, to propose to their girlfriends in front of it. “Roy would have loved that,” says Dorothy. He may have promised his soul to science and his heart to Dorothy, but Roy Lichtenstein left his art to all of us ■

TIMES+

Lichtenstein: a Retrospective is at Tate Modern from February 21 to May 27, sponsored by Bank of America Merrill Lynch. Times+ members can buy two-for-one tickets until February 21 — call 020 7887 8998 and quote '24timesplus'



The curator's perspective on the Tate Modern retrospective, plus a slideshow of images: thesundaytimes.co.uk/lichtenstein