Roy Lichtenstein

Born: October 27. 1923

Active: ca. 1945 - 1997

Died: September 29, 1997

Interesting facts about Roy Lichtenstein

Lichtenstein's work is often characterized by his use of Ben-Day dots. These dots were hand-painted in Lichtenstein's' work, but he also used stencils to maintain size and spacing.

Ben-day and halftone dots were mechanical effects meant to create art which

Liechtenstein standing in front of his most well-known work, "Whaam!" Note the size of the work. The original inspiration was only a couple inches tall and wide.

looked more natural and hand-crafted. Lichtenstein's work, therefore, was the opposite; handcrafted art which tried to look mechanically created.

Lichtenstein also worked in sculpture, some jewelry, and taught art at various points in his career.

Lichtenstein's college education was interrupted by WWII. He volunteered for the Army Air Force, hoping to be a pilot. While waiting for training, he was assigned to latrine duty. However, his drawing skills caught the eye of his commanding officer, to asked him to hand-enlarge the cartoons in the military paper *Stars & Stripes.* These drawings caught the eye of Irv Norwick, another officer at the camp, who moved Lichtenstein from latrine duty to drafting and designs for the military. Years later, Norwick himself would become a comic book artist, and their work paths would cross again. Lichtenstein used Norwick's work as a base for many of Lichtenstein's large canvases. Norwick drew the original panel which inspired Lichtenstein's "Whaam!"

Because most of Lichtenstein's most famous work was re-workings of comic panels, many people question whether or not Lichtenstein was an artist, or a copyist (copycat). If you copy, even on a grand scale, another work, who is the actual artist? Lichtenstein himself never credited the artists who created the panels he copied (though to be fair, at the time, neither did the comics credit the artists who created them). With the advent of the internet, more people are putting the clues together, linking some of Lichtenstein's works with their comic inspirations. As you look at his work, and the panels which inspired it, what do you think?

Ben-Day Dots:

Named for American illustrator and printer Benjamin Henry Day Jr., (1838 – 1916), Ben Day dots are a means of using evenly spaced dots in a field to create extra colors in the four color process. Dots may be large or small, closely spaced or more distant, but they are the same size in the area in which they are used. Because the dots don't change their size or spacing, they give the impression of a flat plane of color.
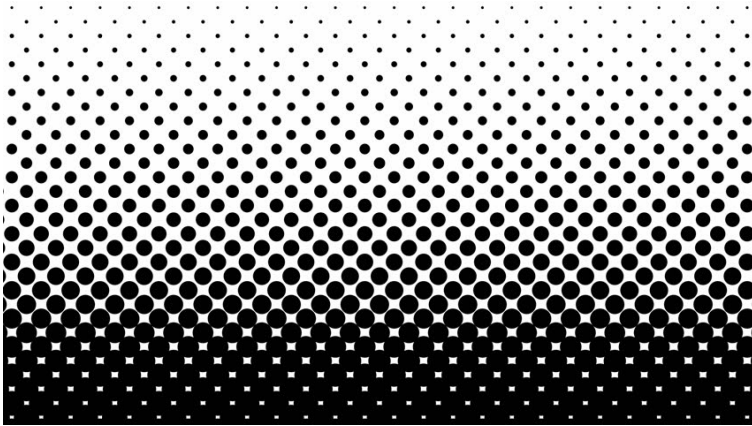
Halftone Dots:

Half-tone dots are different from Ben Day Dots because Half Tone Dots often change sizes and spacing to give the impression of increasing or decreasing shadows and highlights.

Pop Art:

A contraction of the phrase, "popular art", as opposed to fine art. *Popular* comes, via French, from the Latin word *Popularis,* meaning, "of the people, general, common." Popular art drew inspiration from common, everyday objects and media, including advertisements, comic books, and items one might find around the home. Sometimes, these items were created with a twist: blown up or shrunk down, unusual color schemes, or created on an unusual "canvas" (e.g. the walls of buildings, or on a second piece of art). Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup series (right) is one of the more well-known Pop Art series.
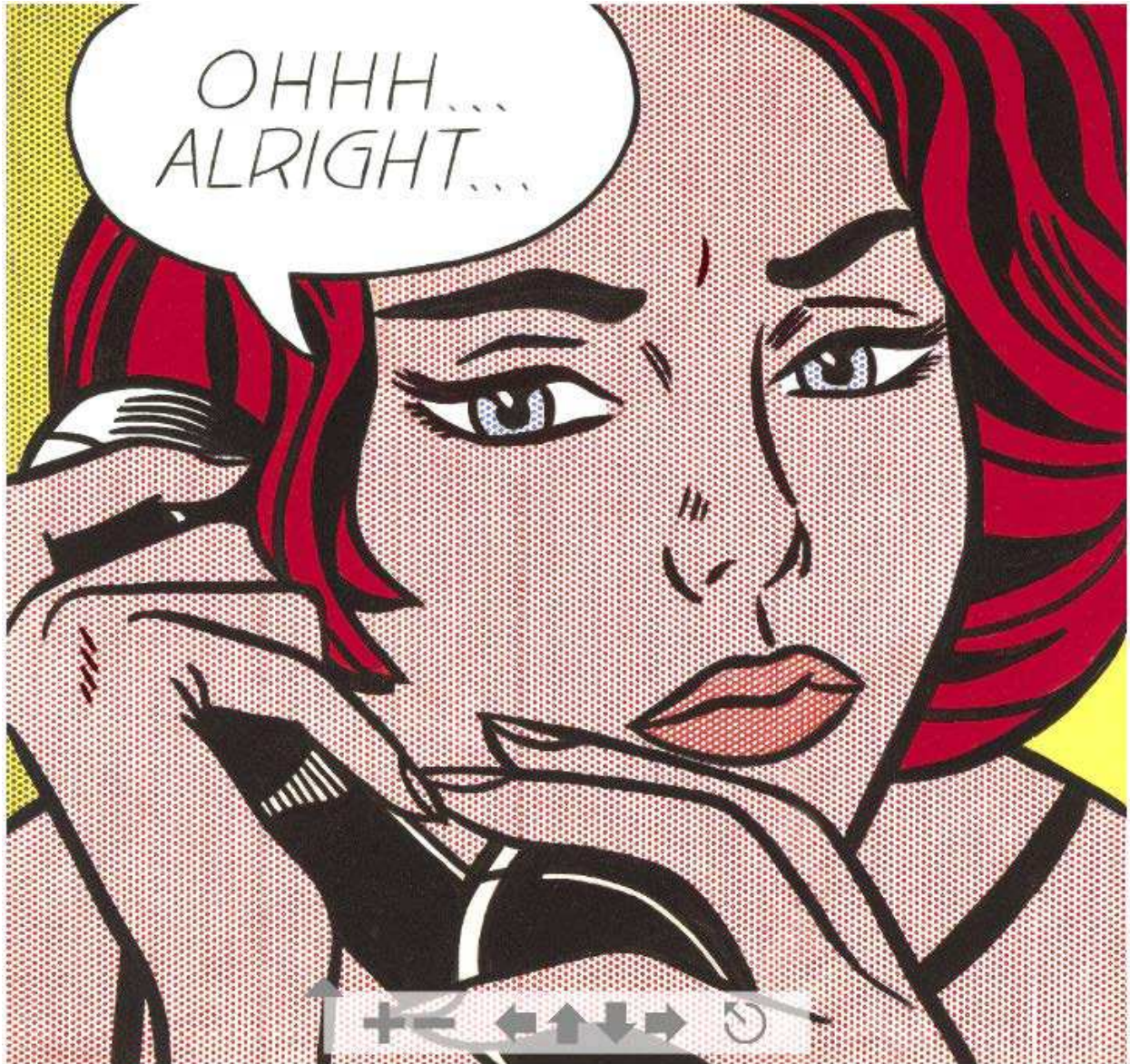
"Ohhh…Alright" Roy Lichtenstein, 1964, Oil on Canvas; 36 in x 38 in. Photo from Christie's website.

This piece, formerly owned by actor Steve Martin and CEO Steve Wynn, sold in 2005 at Christie's for $42.6 million, a record for Lichtenstein's work at that time. You can see three different ways to use "red" in this piece to create red hair, dark pink lips, and pale pink skin. (See Details) Lichtenstein drew inspiration for this piece from the comic to the right, ("Secrets of the Heart" Issue #88, June, 1963-image from Wikipedia.) Many claimed Lichtenstein didn't create works-just copied directly form the source material without crediting the original artists. Since Lichtenstein was blowing a 2-inch square original to three feet-plus square, he responded that his work required many touches and refinements to translate to a large canvas, making it art.

Details from *"Ohh…alright"* show how Lichtenstein used different dot sizes and layers to create color differences. The dark pink of the lips isn't created by white dots on a red background. It's created by two red dots nearly overlapping each other, an open space (where the white paper shows through) and then two overlapping red dots again.
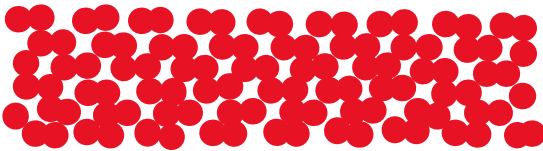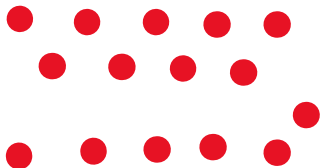

Here, you can see the same double pattern as above.

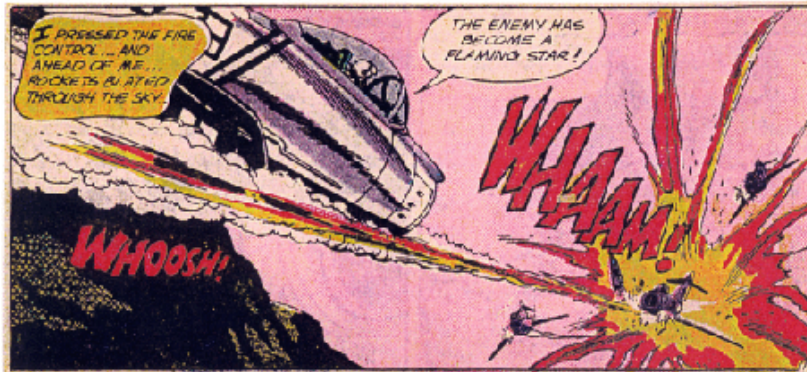Single Dot patterns, like this one, allow for "lighter" colors from distance viewing

Spreading the same size dots out even more will make the red seem even paler from a distance.

"Whaam!" Roy Lichtenstein, 1964, oil on canvas. 67 x 160 inches. By Source, Fair use, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5673474

This is arguably Lichtenstein's best known work, based on a comic panel originally drawn by Lichtenstein's former military officer, Irv Novick, in DC Comics All-American Men of War Comic #89 (Feb. 1962.) The resulting diptych[1] is huge: almost six-feet high and over thirteen feet long.

(Above: the original panel Lichtenstein used as inspiration. Note some of the differences between it and the final piece. To the right, the original sketch for "Whaam!" which was donated to London's Tate Gallery. It shows the piece was originally going to be a single image, not a diptych.)

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[1] Diptych: From a Greek word meaning "two-fold" a diptych is a two-paneled work, joined in the center. The finished piece is often meant to be opened and viewed as a singular work. In the ancient world, a diptych was a wooden cover, joined at the hinge and covered with a thin piece of wax inside. This allowed a writer to write, erase, and write again. It was also the ancient world's school and notebook. The format of a diptych book eventually evolved to the art world's two-paneled piece, which could be closed and safely moved from place to place.

"Bedroom at Arles" On the left, by Vincent Van Gogh, (1888); on the right, by Lichtenstein (1992) Lichtenstein also copied Monet's Cathedral series, using his dots and bright colors. Some ask whether this was just a variation on Lichtenstein's earlier works, or an update on Van Gogh's original work (note the modern chairs in Lichtenstein's piece, and there are a couple other differences.) This leads to the question, is this art, or just a copy? (Which also asks, 'what is "art"?')
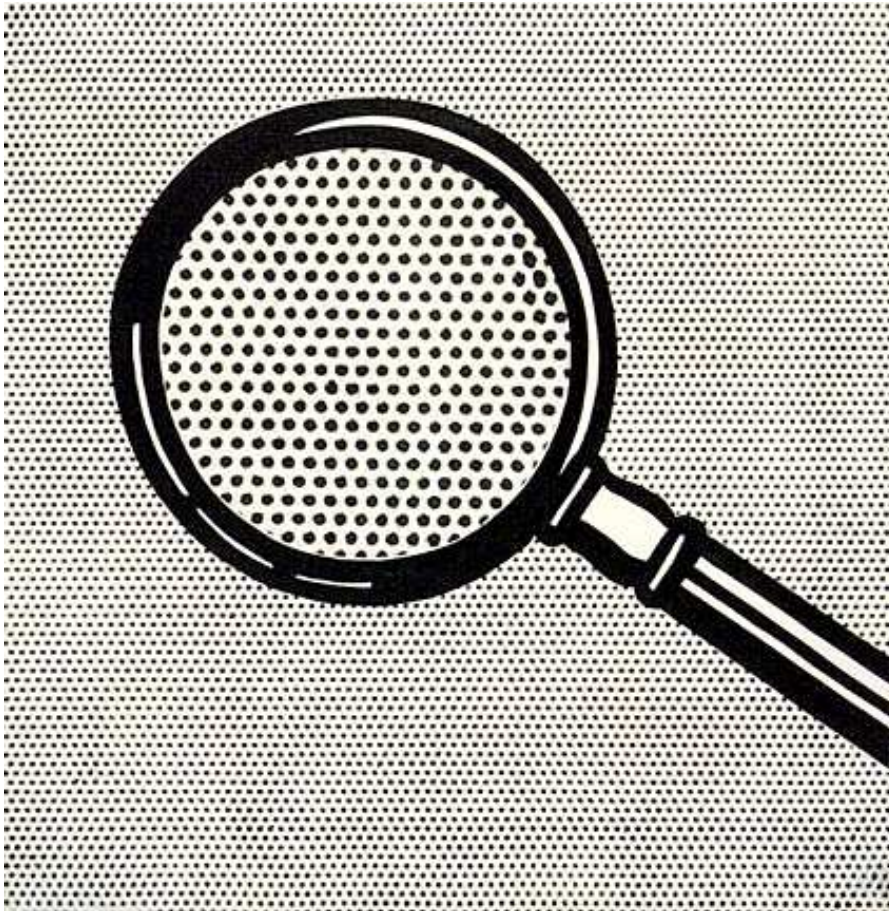
"Magnifying Glass" 1963. 40.6 x 40.6 cm Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz, Liechtenstein

This piece has no comic inspiration; it appears Lichtenstein was poking fun at his own use of Ben Day dots.

Take Home:

Ben Day Dots are a way to make combinations of colors (red dots over solid yellow will appear orange from a distance, blue drawn over yellow will appear green, and blue over red will appear purple.) Fifty years earlier, another artist, Georges Seurat, also experimented with this type of visual blending.

Look at some high quality images of Georges Seurat's work, and Lichtenstein's, and see what similarities and differences there are between them. How do both artists use this type of dot to create their art?

Books:

Getting to know the World's Great Artists: Lichtenstein by Mike Venezia

Getting to know the World's Great Artists: Seurat (for comparison to Lichtenstein)

Online Gallery:

The Roy Lichtenstein foundation keeps a database of his art at their online gallery: http://www.imageduplicator.com/

Podcast:

NPR did a podcast about Lichtenstein's art, called "One Dot at a Time, Lichtenstein Made Art Pop"

Videos:

London's Tate Gallery has a YouTube Channel. The name of the channel is "Tate", and they did a 10-minute retrospective of Lichtenstein's art entitled: 'Roy Lichtenstein: Diagram of an Artist". (Published 1 Feb 2013)
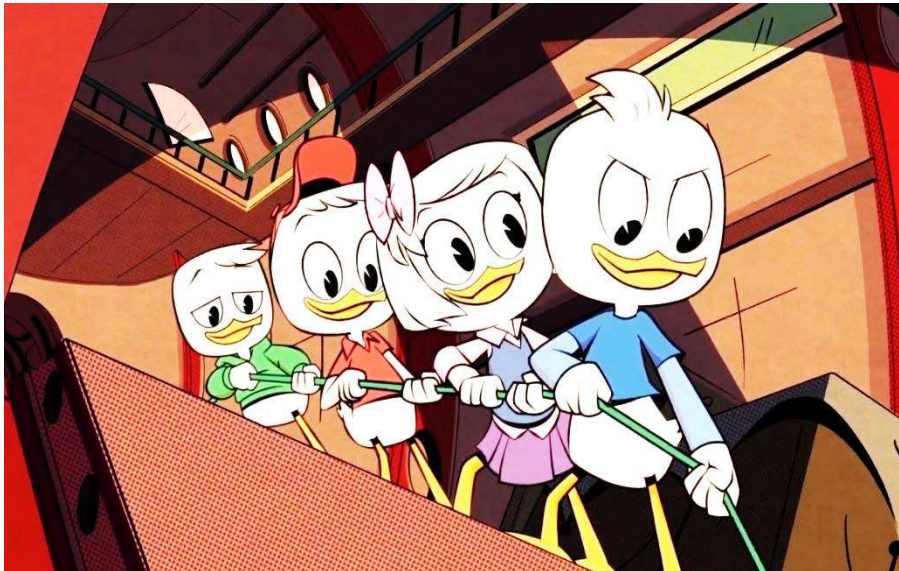
The new re-boot of Ducktales by Disney features Ben Day dots in the backgrounds as an homage to the comic-book era and the kind of adventures which characterizes Ducktales. (Promotional image from Disney, contrast and color enhanced to best show Ben Day dots in lower left, plus two other locations.)