When ‘New Art’ Made New York the Culture Capital

Artists in the early 1960s drew from a heady mix: Mad magazine and Marilyn; the civil rights movement and the death of a president; queer bodies and “Pieta.” It’s all at the Jewish Museum.


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When I was a kid in the early 1960s, my Eisenhower-Republican physician-father always had the latest copies of his favored subscription publications on his home office desk: Time, Life, the Journal of the American Medical Association, and Mad magazine.

To me, Time and Life pegged him an engaged citizen; JAMA, as a conscientious professional. But Mad? With its Alfred E. Neuman mascot and anarchic, sacred cow-skewering humor? It signaled some whole other kind of reader, one with a taste for cultural weirdness akin to the one I was developing.

That taste ran through the early ‘60s, a manic era and a hinge moment between the Cold War and Vietnam, Civil Rights and Black Power, repression and liberation; beatnik and hippie; Ab-Ex and Pop. It’s the era documented in the smart, split-level show called “New York: 1962-1964” at the Jewish Museum, an institution that, we learn, played a significant role in the cultural shifts.