

Before Andy Warhol Went Pop – “Ephemera”

Sweet cats, coy angels, and shoes, shoes, shoes, shoes – these were some of the things that Andy Warhol favored as subjects, long before his name was affiliated with the Campbell soup can and portraits of celebrities. These darling depictions filled pages of his earliest illustrated books which he produced in the 1950s. He self-published them and gave them to potential clients to promote his work. These were often filled with quirky drawings and handwritten texts. They all were collaborations of some kind, with writers who sometimes contributed words, photographers who passed along images for Warhol to trace and many friends who were willing to color images at his parties. Collectively they were known as his ephemera. In addition, Andy Warhol was a compulsive collector. His collection included objects such as exhibition announcements, posters, record covers, flyers and news clippings.

Warhol's work shows a sense of humor. One look at the pussy cat “One Blue Pussy” and you just have to laugh. And what about “Happy Bug Day” – his titles alone are fun.

One of the most interesting pieces of ephemera is “Tattooed Woman Holding a Rose” (c.1955). If one looks closely at this lithograph you can see logos and brand names as tattoos covering her body. These images read like a sales pitch to potential customers and they were. Warhol even included his phone number among the tattoos so that customers could contact him. This interest in the commercial aspect of his art started early and continued and grew throughout his career. We can look at this particular piece as a forerunner of our wearing logos and brands on our own clothing today. In addition, we can see at this early date in his career his awareness of how to sell not only his art but how to sell himself. This only grew and became even more important as he matured as a man and as an artist.