

Comparison of Hokusai's *Eagle in a Snowstorm* with *Bald Eagle from the Endangered Species Series* by Andy Warhol

The silkscreen print, *Bald Eagle*, is part of a folio of ten large (38"x38") images of endangered species which also includes *African Elephant*, *Bighorn Ram*, *Black Rhinoceros*, *Giant Panda*, *Grey's Zebra*, *Orangutan*, *Pine Barrens Tree Frog*, *San Francisco Silverspot Butterfly*, and *Siberian Tiger*. In 1983, when Warhol produced this series, all of these animals were endangered.

As a starting point for the series, photo research was done on a number of endangered animals. Warhol took into account the status of each animal when making his final selection; some were chosen on the basis of their popular appeal, or in the case of the bald eagle, symbolism and national significance. He then transferred the photographs to silkscreen and printed each one in a series of overlaid colors. According to Martina Batan of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery in New York City, Warhol considered the prints to be portraiture, and in fact, referred to the images as "animals wearing make-up."

Beyond this aspect, Warhol responded to the fact that these animals were endangered. For the first time in his career, he set aside a portion of the edition to donate to nonprofit organizations, such as the National Wildlife Foundation, the World Wildlife Fund, the Audubon Society, Greenpeace, and various zoos and natural history museums. Each organization could then use a print to generate funds for its project.

Some interesting parallels can be drawn between the life and work of Andy Warhol (1930-1987) and that of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), especially by comparing Warhol's *Bald Eagle* print and Hokusai's painting, *Eagle in a Snowstorm*. Both artists worked from nature--Hokusai from direct observation and Warhol from photo documentation. However, the intent of each artist was not simply to provide a realistic portrayal but to create a symbolic portrait of various qualities associated with the eagle. Both birds' heads are shown in profile with their beaks uplifted. This conveys the qualities we associate with the bald eagle, nobility and strength. Both birds are threatened--Hokusai's eagle by the forces of nature, Warhol's bald eagle by the forces of man.

Hokusai has painted the sweeping wind as it whips the eagle's feathers into disarray. The long curving brush strokes and strategically applied gofun (egg white and oyster shell) "snow" draw attention to and reinforce the raging storm. Interestingly enough, the feathers of Warhol's bald eagle are ruffled, not smooth, and he has applied strokes of hot color around the upturned head in much the same way as Hokusai overlaid gofun. These are both flat, decorative techniques which show movement. They complement and do not distract from the overall realistic portrayal.

Both artists worked with printmaking techniques, Warhol with silkscreen and Hokusai with woodblock prints (although *Eagle in a Snowstorm* is a painting, it shows some print characteristics). The cartoon-like effect of black lines surrounding areas of flat color shows up in the work of both artists. Additionally, both Warhol and Hokusai were well

known for work in other fields. Hokusai was a poet, and Warhol experimented in film and other media.

Although he also painted landscapes and animal scenes, Hokusai is considered to be a ukiyo-e artist, one who depicted the "floating world" of popular culture and its characters, including famous actors of the time. Andy Warhol's silkscreens are usually associated with famous people, including actors, and the sophisticated popular culture of the city. His decisions to print these portraits of endangered animals and to set aside some of these prints to benefit wildlife reflect a concern with the natural world. In Hokusai's time, perhaps people did not yet have much cause to worry about vanishing species of animals; however, in Japan there always has been a great reverence for nature.

Despite the fact that these two artists were separated by almost 150 years and lived on opposite sides of the globe, both Warhol and Hokusai responded to the popular culture of their time. Two very different representations of an eagle provide the opportunity to compare and contrast methods, historical and cultural backgrounds, intent, point of view, and beliefs about art.

Questions to Consider

Which culture does each image represent? What evidence can you give to support your answer?

What parallels can you find between the two images?

What differences can you find between the two images?

Resources:

Forrer, M. (1991). *Hokusai, Prints and Drawings*. Munich Prestel-Verlag.

Ratcliff, C. (1983). *Warhol*. New York: Abbeville Press.

Martina B. (1996). Interview at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery, February.

Take 5 Eagle in a Snowstorm teacher packet and reproduction, available from Crystal Productions, Inc. Call 1-800-255-8629 for free catalog.