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**RICHARD HAMILTON (1922–2011)**

British painter and printmaker Richard Hamilton is best-known as a progenitor of Pop Art. While mass media and consumer culture remained key points of investigation, ultimately Hamilton’s significance as a modern artist came from the deep technical and conceptual complexity of his work, which took as its touchstone the art, ideas, and legacy of Marcel Duchamp. Hamilton’s ecumenical approach to style and medium was not constrained by conventional hierarchies that separated fine art from commercial and popular culture. Throughout his career, readymades and photography were important sources, and he experimented with new technologies such as Polaroid instant cameras, computers, and inkjet printers. He often worked serially, exploring and exporting ideas across different media, with some projects spanning years, such as with his illustrations to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. He was a slow and deliberate painter, and from the 1970s, worked on a just small number of canvases, while remaining prolific in prints and multiples. Underlying his diverse oeuvre was his fixation on understanding how things were made, which led him to recreate artworks by Duchamp and to master other artists’ styles. He collaborated with other artists, most extensively Dieter Roth, and master printers.

Richard William Hamilton was the youngest of three children born in London to working-class parents. He had formal fine art training at the Royal Academy Schools (1938–40; 1946) and the Slade School of Fine Art (1948–51). Additionally, Hamilton learned engineering draftsmanship and worked in design and advertising offices. In 1947, he began illustrations to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a series that remained unfinished fifty years later. In 1951 his first one-artist exhibition, *Variations on the Theme of a Reaper*, showed seventeen intaglio prints in which he explored the mechanical structure along with problems of perspective and motion. In the early 1950s, Hamilton was an avid participant in the discussions of the Independent Group, centered at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, which led him to organize exhibitions and make collages and catalogues. For the exhibition *This Is Tomorrow* at Whitechapel Gallery in 1956, he assembled *Just What Is it that Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?* from mass-media images, creating an early visual definition for Pop Art. The following year, he elaborated in a letter, "Popular (designed for a mass audience), transient (short–term solution), expendable (easily forgotten), low cost, mass–produced, young (aimed at youth), witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, big business." Consumer culture, television, and celebrity were major themes into the 1960s in works such as *Hommage á Chrysler Corp* (1958), *Interior II* (1964), and in the *Fashion Plate* series (1969).

Hamilton first encountered Duchamp’s work as a student at Slade; they met in 1959. In 1966, Hamilton organized a retrospective of Duchamp’s work at the Tate Gallery. Questions of originality and reproduction were central areas of analysis throughout Hamilton’s work. He foregrounded the importance of “decision making rather than manipulative skill,” as he wrote in 1984, although he always retained a sharp interest in aesthetics and the surfaces of his artworks. Hamilton helped transform essentially commercial and reproductive techniques, such as screenprint and collotype, into artistic mediums by intervening at every stage of production and collaborating with master printers like Chris Prater. With an edition of 5,000,000, Hamilton’s most widely known work must be the 1968 cover to The Beatles’ eponymously titled album, which, thanks to Hamilton’s blank design, became known as “The White Album.” The 1967 drug arrest of Rolling Stones’ front man Mick Jagger and the gallerist Robert Fraser was the subject in *Swingeing London* and *Release*. He continued to investigate conventions of kitsch, image-making, and distinctions between high and low culture, such as in *Soft Pink Landscape* and *The Critic Laughs* (both 1971–72). He remained interested in analyzing figures and interiors often manipulated with photography or computers, to explore constructions of art and realities.

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WORD COUNT, including references: **747**

IMAGE SUGGESTIONS:

Richard Hamilton, *Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?* 1956, collage, 26 x 25 cm; Kunsthalle Tübingen

Richard Hamilton. *Release*. 1972. Screenprint and collage. 68.2 x 85.8 cm. Tate Modern, London.

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