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### *Dollar Sign: Decades in the Motion*

Andy Warhol's *Dollar Sign* series from 1981 reflects his love and fascination with money, but it was not well received by the public. It transparently conveys his materialism, and the work was interpreted as Warhol bragging about his wealth. This reception represents the economic circumstances of the 1980s and Warhol's changing relationship with Pop Art and the public. The *Dollar Sign* series reflects the artist and his lifelong desire for money. However, much of Warhol's work reflected on capitalism but the overt reference to financial culture was too much for some people to appreciate. In their book *Andy Warhol: Making Money*, Deborah Harry and Vincent Fremont explain that many people in the 1980s did not appreciate the *Dollar Sign* series. However, they point out that ten years after the artist's death in 1987, this work was included in more exhibitions and gained acceptance for its representation of the symbol of money.<sup>1</sup> This change in acceptance parallels the growth of popular culture distributed in the media. The public had become more accustomed to seeing imagery of symbols and ideas as well as overt references to money as seen in the *Dollar Sign* series. These prints are visually appealing because of their attention to detail and unique flashy layouts, and they contain the constant theme of American consumerism seen in other works throughout Warhol's lifetime.

Many of the prints in the *Dollar Sign* series are twenty-by-sixteen-inch silkscreens, with three large dollar signs in bright and bold colors layered over each other on a solid ground. Each of these symbols is composed with slight variations. In the Rhode Island College print, we

<sup>1</sup> Deborah Harry and Vincent Fremont, *Andy Warhol: Making Money* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2010).

see loose lines and thick brush strokes in a combination of cools and warm: a lavender ground, pink first layer, aqua second layer, and an orange layer on top. An unfinished effect is created by the layering of screens, representations of brushstrokes in different widths, and rough textures of paint filled in the top two layers of dollar signs. While the symbols are layered, and multiplied, within the RIC print, it is one of multiple and various prints that Warhol produced in mass production just as currency is made.

This series represents a part of Warhol's life in the 1980s, indicating his identity and his beliefs, through symbols and constant repetition. The making of *Dollar Sign* expressed a time in Warhol's life and career of literal expression as his work was more lucrative. From 1980 to 1982, Warhol explored money through drawings, paintings, and screen prints of dollar bills paving the way for the *Dollar Sign* series. Close friends have said that Warhol was a hard worker. He had longed to become successful and to live a luxurious life like ones advertised through films and magazines. He loved having and making money just as much as he enjoyed getting rid of it and spending it on antiques and souvenirs. Therefore, the dollar sign series was personal.

Warhol grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was raised by immigrant parents in a world opposite to the luxurious and famous life he was able to achieve in his career. After college he moved to New York City where he worked as a commercial artist and soon created a space called the Factory to create "fine art." As a mature artist, Warhol turned to dollar signs as the raw subject for paintings and prints to be hung in museums and apartments.

Warhol's thoughts about money were complicated. In *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, he wrote about social stigmas associated with carrying money. He believed that the bill contained fear and power which made people jealous or created tension between people.

Thoughts of people not deserving money, even if they had worked hard for it prompted Warhol's philosophy on society and money, which made *Dollar Sign* a significant part of his life.<sup>2</sup>

*Dollar Sign* is a literal expression of Warhol's fascination with and eventual reality to achieve and maintain a materialistic lifestyle, a blatant display that put off some viewers.

Throughout his whole life Warhol longed for fame and fortune, which he was able to obtain through his mass-production of artworks, many that were outrageous and unique at the time.

*Dollar Sign* is the most direct link between art and wealth that Warhol was able to achieve. It seems to reference the reality that only people who had money could obtain his artwork, an obvious connection angered the public and critics. Many thought Warhol was mocking their economic status by creating a series of paintings that stood for materialism, capitalism, and consumerism. Warhol had already written about the relationship between money and art in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*. He stated, "I like money on the wall, say you were going to buy \$200,000 painting. I think you should take that money, tie it up and hang it on the wall."<sup>3</sup>

Though Warhol achieved material success, his lifestyle was not relatable to many members of the general public who would view his work.

Warhol created other paintings related to the desire to accumulate wealth and goods as part of elite society around the same time as the *Dollar Sign* series. One example is *Committee 2000* from 1982, one print of which is also in RIC's collection and exhibited in LIKE-NESS. They have similar visual qualities and techniques with layering of colors and hand drawn lines, a style Warhol had been using in other artworks at the time. *Committee 2000* shows champagne flutes and confetti as if part of an elegant, high society celebration. In their subjects, both *Dollar*

<sup>2</sup> Andy Warhol, "Economics," in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: (from A to B and Back Again)* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006, originally 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Warhol, *Philosophy*.

*Sign* and *Committee 2000* allude to money, materialism, and an elite group. *Committee 2000* was commissioned and more subtle to the context. However, *Dollar Sign* was not a commissioned work and reflects more of Warhol's interests. Yet, they both display ideas of art and wealth, which was part of Warhol's identity.

While Warhol was financially prosperous in the early 1980s, many in America were hurting. Happy commercials and TV broadcasts before the 1980s showed an American Dream, but soon came economic fluctuation. When Warhol was finishing the *Dollar Sign* series, the United States was in the middle of a major economic recession. Millions of Americans were out of work. According to one historical account, "Businesses closed, families lost their homes and farmers lost their land."<sup>4</sup> Many lost hope for the American dream. The economic reality allowed critics and the public audience to reject *Dollar Sign* because of the symbol itself.

Fifteen years later, the situation had changed. A close friend of Warhol stated, "In November 1997 the *Dollar Sign* painting and drawing exhibition opened at Larry's Beverly Hills gallery."<sup>5</sup> Larry Gagosian was the first art dealer to exhibit Warhol's *Dollar Sign* series and give it the spotlight that Warhol imagined this series would have. Warhol's initial intent for this series was for it to be exhibited in museums and for the public, which did not happen during his lifetime. After more than a decade, the economy was stronger and the public's perspective had changed. A new generation of media and Pop Art enthusiasts began to change ideas about art and wealth.

<sup>4</sup> "The 1980s," History.com, A&E Television Networks, August 23, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/1980s/1980s>.

<sup>5</sup> Debbie Harry, and Vincent Fremont, *Making Money* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2010).

Warhol's *Dollar Sign* prints reflect his love and fascination for money, but did not get a good review from the public when they were initially made. The series conveys Warhol's materialism and many felt he was bragging about his wealth, something distasteful in the economic slump of the early 1980s. The public did not appreciate this work until decades later. Interest of the public shifted gears and allowed for *Dollar Sign* to become an accepted work of art that will find more appreciation for generations to come.



Andy Warhol, American artist  
Dollar Sign, 1981  
Silk Screen



Andy Warhol, American artist  
Dollar Sign, 1981  
Silk Screen



Andy Warhol, American artist  
Committee 2000, 1982  
Silk Screen