ROY

LICHTENSTEIN

SCULPTURE

Roy Lichtenstein
Sculpture

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Photograph by Kenneth E. Tyler

Lichtenstein's New Sculpture

by Richard Morphet

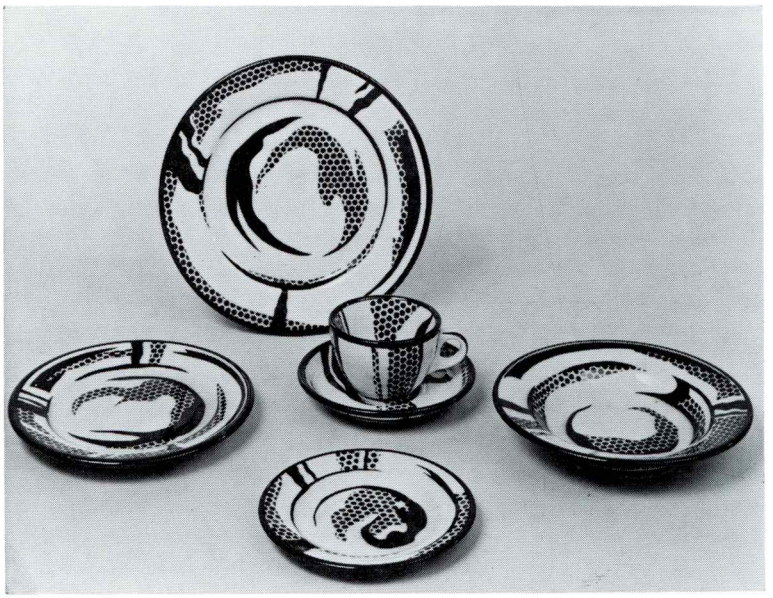
Lichtenstein's new sculptures are classic manifestations of a quality at the heart of all his work, that of enigma. In his work enigma always operates through other qualities, having to do with material and form, that are commonly regarded as its antithesis. Whatever its medium, any one of his works exhibits a strange personal blend between these, in which the following three attributes are invariable components. First, a bold, open, buoyant, 'tough', 'right-first-time', lean but outgoing American form-making sense that one associates with such different (and in truth, like Lichtenstein, so controlled) visual creators as Pollock and the designer of the Coke bottle. However complex its internal ordering, the image is presented (implicitly it is *asserted*) with the feeling of something exceptionally untramelled, a kind of 'Whaam!'-ness that speaks for itself. (Part of the present works' expressive strangeness derives from the application of this quality to such sedate, inert domestic objects as teapot or dressing table mirror). Second, a meditative appraisal of the beauty, balance and internal relationships of the individual work. This is a silent, unassertive but no less crucial ingredient compounded of ironical amusement and of a sophisticated awareness of the classical formal tradition in European art which at the same time as mocking and inverting Lichtenstein is also, to an extent, covertly but lovingly restating, however improbable this may seem. Third, an unvarnished attitude towards the materials of which the work is made. These are presented not as sensuous *tours de force* (though taken as a whole his works so often have this quality) but as unconcealed, straightforwardly handcrafted or semi-industrial facts. The presence of the materials of a work by Lichtenstein as things in themselves is insistent, and adds a contrasting expressive ingredient to those already discussed. Any one of his works declares that whatever it may signify it is certainly a thing that has been *made*, and made in this particular way. By being teamed with this combination of strong physical and formal preoccupations the enigma of a work's meaning, and of its role as representing something, is made more insistent.

In Lichtenstein's work a precedent for these new sculptures of everyday utensils and vessels is his *Dinnerware Objects* and other ceramics of the mid 1960s. There, the kinds of visual

sign which we accept freely on the printed page (as signifying the fall of light on an object from a particular angle in a particular light) rendered both themselves and the objects enigmatic by being transposed, 'frozen', onto actual cups and saucers. On the printed page, these marks had served to make the cups comprehensible. In the *Dinnerware Objects*, it was as though the cups existed only in order to present the marks — Drink from me only with thine eyes. Thus one subject of the work became these marks' lyrical decorative autonomy, a perception enhanced (especially in view of the 'absurdity' of their running all the way round each cup, including inside it) by the spectator's knowledge that they were in fact invented by Lichtenstein.

In the new sculptures, Lichtenstein carries this sense of the autonomy of forms further than he has previously done in representational sculpture (the *Modern* sculptures were already 'abstract', though whatever the point in the abstract/representational spectrum at which a Lichtenstein appears to stand, it always calls such antitheses into question). Here the real physical form of the 'represented' vessel is dispensed with altogether. What we see instead is solely the lines and shapes which a graphic artist, wishing to denote the object's appearance from a single viewpoint, might produce to indicate the presence of the object as registered purely through the fall of light on different substances. As the *Dinnerware Objects* showed us, none of these forms, not even the visual outline of a vessel, is present in the type of object 'represented'. All are perceptions of eye and brain, and are therefore both intangible and momentary. Yet here they are physical and permanent, making a separate reality, assertive as *a new thing*, in all Lichtenstein's unfailing ways.

To the general truth that these sculptures represent in solid form what is not there in the ultimate original, there is perhaps one exception — the 'supporting' elements of teapot- and mirror-stands and the shades on the lamps. But this exception only serves to thrust forward in every way the paradox that something intangible, supported or directed by the solid stand or shade, has itself been realised in no less solid and lasting a form. These resistant reflections, beams of light and emissions of steam have their precedent in Lichtenstein's enamel on steel *Explosions* of 1965. They have earlier precedents in, for example, Cubist sculpture and in carved and gilded shafts of light in the Baroque. But the concentrated formats he chooses, and the degree to which, implicitly, he stresses the absurd, mean that Lichtenstein gives greater emphasis to the fact that



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what is solid in real life is here void, and vice versa. Of the original entity, each sculpture is a kind of negative mould. But when we ask ourselves how the independent *construction* we see relates to the type of utensil or vessel which somewhere along the line was its original model, we find ourselves in a puzzling limbo. For where in the *Dinnerware Objects* the cups had the form of cups and the reflections were so obviously graphic phenomena, here graphic representation has become a *rival* physical entity, its subservience to earlier models denied by its unyielding distinctness as a thing, tall and thin, and equally itself from the side (from which view it represents nothing). We are inclined to ask not whether these sculptures are distant dependents from real glasses and pots, but whether real glasses and pots may not be these sculptures' sculptural ghosts, concentrated conceptual essences of the complicated sculptural presences that we see.

Although in a way the sculptures are amusing, more interesting is this mysterious kind of referring backwards and forwards that, in all their 'banality', they set in train. They exist in two of the kinds of space we occupy, the world of the things we encounter in daily experience and the real physical space which we and they share. The competition they set up between what, ultimately, they image and their own verifiable presence is a restless interplay. Relatively abstract though they are, both our minds and our instincts persist in relating

them to the notional originals of which, though they are absent, the sculptures somehow mediate the insistent reality. Yet while their abstractness is only relative — indeed in a way they stamp out their recognisable imagery almost blatantly — their relationship to the originals, as shapes and entities in space, is one of denial. They form a parallel and, in effect, independent reality with which the spectator has to come to terms in its own right.

These works' links with Cubism are at once absurd and relevant. The figurative subject is matter of fact, often concerned with drinking and its vessels. Through intervening conventions and conceptual processes the form of an initial motif is fragmented, reordered and partially reinvented, being presented to us in a shallow plane. Our familiarity with both motif and conventions enables us to 'read' the image at a glance, the merest representational hint, a squiggle or stripe, standing for a definable aspect of a real thing. The sculptures thus have an element of pastiche. But just as Lichtenstein's 'Surrealist' paintings, or a neo-neo-Cubist relief such as *Peace through Chemistry*, are saved from being elegant exercises by the independent formal (not to say also psychological) activity they reveal, so the very blatancy of the absurdity of the straight void/solid reversal in these sculptures leads the viewer directly to a blunt examination of them as physical objects. A similar focus is induced by the very sharpness of the transition from the late-Leger-like black-outlined universality of each image to the suddenness and totality of its collapse as an image when viewed in the round. In the moment of this loss of illusion, the sculpture is perceived as a curious composition of variously coloured elements. It is as though Lichtenstein had set up this pointed experience of the collapse of a deception to demonstrate the elusiveness of nature to any representational process. For these sculptures suggest that while on the one hand to represent something by something else that is wrought is a quest at once compulsive and hopeless, yet on the other to embark on making an abstract work unrelated to representation is no guarantee of attaining a superior abstract reality.

The pre-existing artefacts which Lichtenstein represents in these sculptures are absolutely ordinary. But the implied dichotomy between the semi-real mirror- and teapot-stands and the 'mere' ossified conventions — the tangible fictions — of reflection and outline which, in representational terms, they exist to support serves only to sharpen our examination of these objects that have so assertively been presented, as it

were on pedestals, for our contemplation, singled out like vessels from a bygone culture (and they do, indeed, we find, curiously express the particular culture from which in fact they spring). The four unsupported *Glass* sculptures represent not only ordinary things but shapes that are themselves of unusual simplicity — mere transparent cylinders which contain transparent substances only. Yet the configurations through which these various images of the simple take shape before us are of irregular and florid complexity, compounded by changes of colour that seem arbitrary in the close-up the sculptures' scale compels, and by diverse shallow recessions, eccentric interstices and improbably hairsbreadth contiguities on which the maintenance of the structure as a whole depends. Conditioned, in approaching these sculptures, by the representational function they seem to assert, and observing all the trouble that has been taken (indeed laid out for inspection) to achieve their final complex form, the viewer is tempted to ask 'For what?' For not only does the sculpture itself quickly reveal — indeed assert — that its representational subject is not palpable reality but mere reflections and signs, but further, being almost two-dimensional, it appropriately (in view of its subject-matter) dissolves away before the walking viewer's very gaze (suggesting, since it is also of ludicrously excessive size in relation to its notional original, a dream-like experience like that of Alice when she drank from the bottle in Wonderland). 'All' it is a sculpture of *nothing*, a simple sham. Even viewed head-on, it has a calculated inertness, respresentationally, that forms part of its peculiar expressiveness in terms of modern life.

The result is that the sculpture finally declares itself as the mysterious, vigorous and essentially inventive aesthetic construct that, under cover of its ironical, socially-observant representational alter-ego, it always was. It does not, of course, slough off its image-making preoccupations; the counterpoint between their intersecting layers and the vividness of the sculpture as a thing in itself is part of its content as a work of art. But in its availability to being directly experienced as a sculptural object it stands on equal terms with other sculptures of its period which have no illusionistic role.

Sculptors like Lichtenstein, Caro and Judd are motivated by strikingly dissimilar aspirations for the experience of form that sculpture can afford. The future is bound to identify the distinctiveness of each artist's contribution, no doubt to the advantage of each. It would not, however, be surprising if the work of all these artists, roughly contemporaries, also exhibit-

ed, to some extent, a shared sensibility peculiar to their generation. One way in which this seems to be so is in the relationship between a sculpture's initial presentation to the viewer's perception as a thing in the world and the quite different nature of his or her experience of it once this first perception is passed. The work of all three artists displays interest in the ordinary or matter of fact — Lichtenstein's commonplace subjects, Judd's elementary boxes, Caro's sculptural elements of girder or steel off-cut familiar from many an industrial environment. The works of all three expose their means of construction — with different degrees of stringency it is true, but with a shared aversion from dissimulation in this regard. In every case, much trouble is verifiably taken to arrive at the finite end-product which, also in every case, exhibits a kind of 'dumbness' and 'silence' deriving only in part from the fact that it presents 'mere' cups, boxes or pieces of metal without a function of use. In each case, however, the effect made available for the viewer is extraordinary. It is that of a space, a contained world, a material complex, which in experience is anything but dumb, in fact presenting an articulated revelation of the vividness of form in space.

Lichtenstein's sculptures do not share the grandeur which Caro and Judd, in their different ways, often employ. Their scale is more akin to that of some of Picasso's iron sculptures and of certain constructions by Gonzalez and David Smith, their wit closer (though culturally transmuted) to Picasso, their implicit attitude to the work of all three one of detached affection. Like all the artists mentioned, Lichtenstein produces sculptures which assert both their own abstract properties and the inevitability, the potency, of associations from our general experience of the world whenever we contemplate a work of art however abstract. At once highly generalised and absolutely specific, referring the viewer in a complex circuit from one level of perception to another, they are like a meditation on the ambiguities not only of undertaking representation in art but also of making a work of art at all, in the fluid and fragmented but knowing and observant Western culture of today.

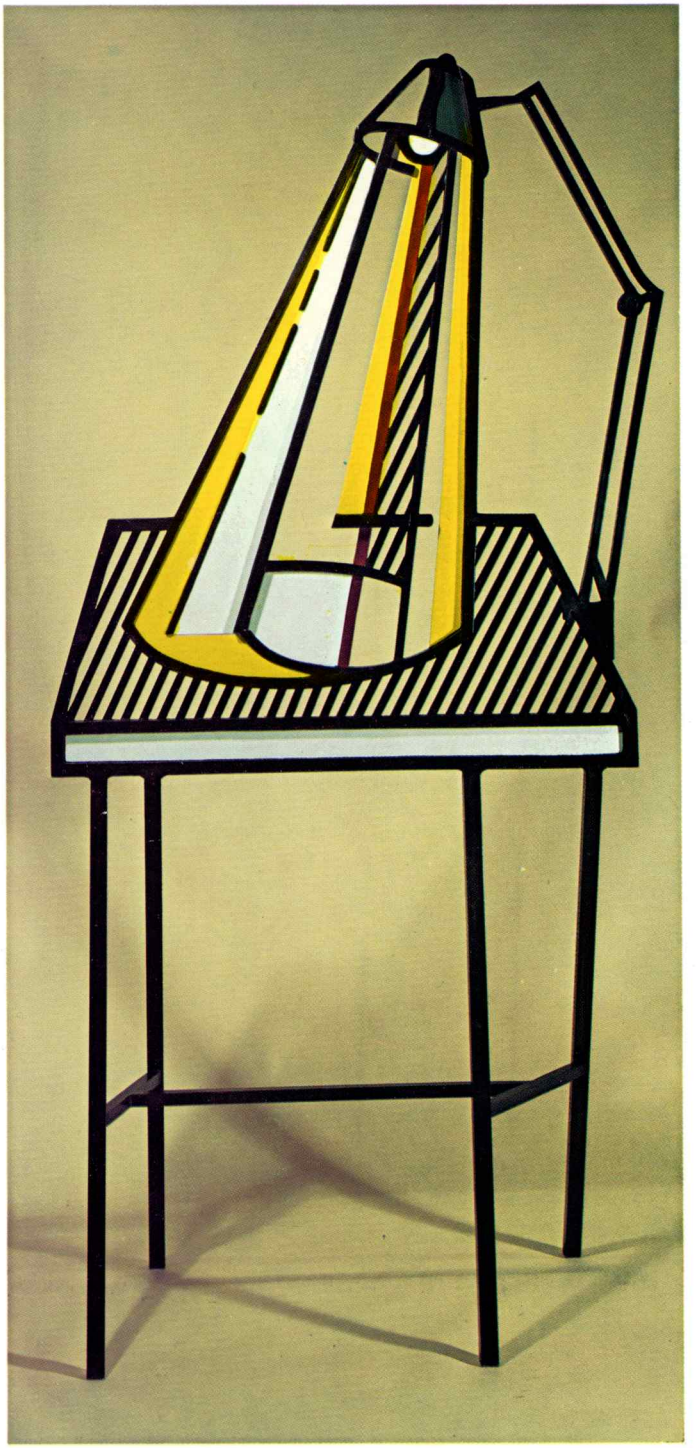
PLATES

2. CUP AND SAUCER II

4. GLASS II

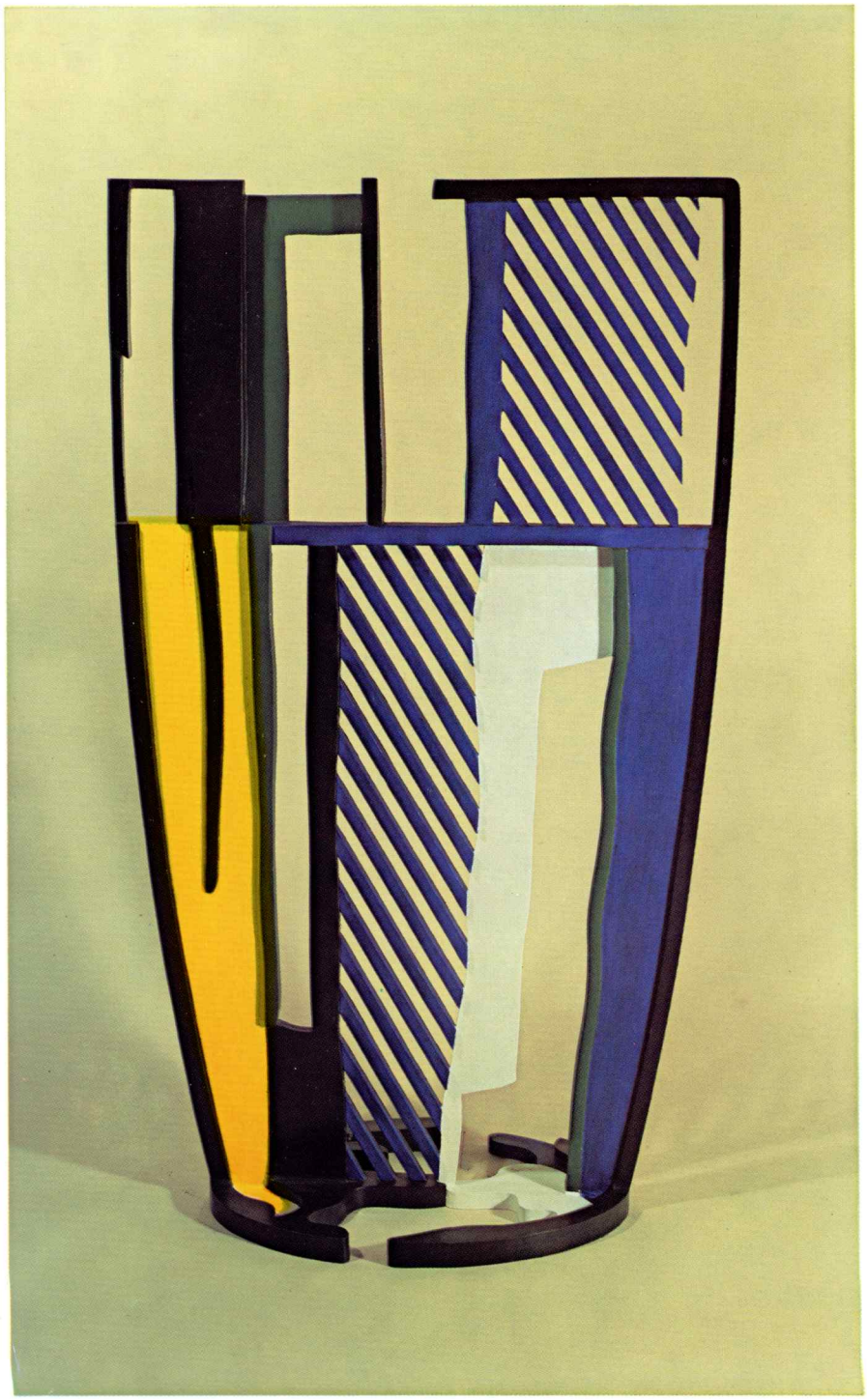
7. MIRROR I

12. TEAPOT ON STAND



11. LAMP ON TABLE

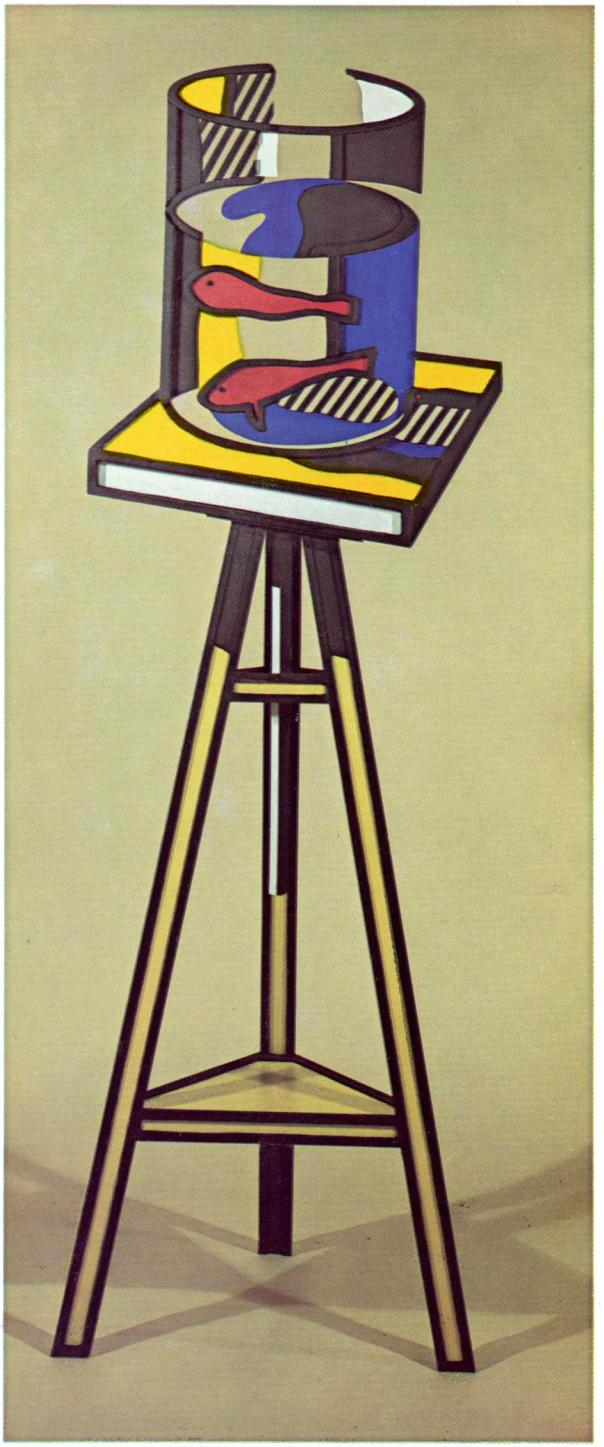
8. MIRROR II



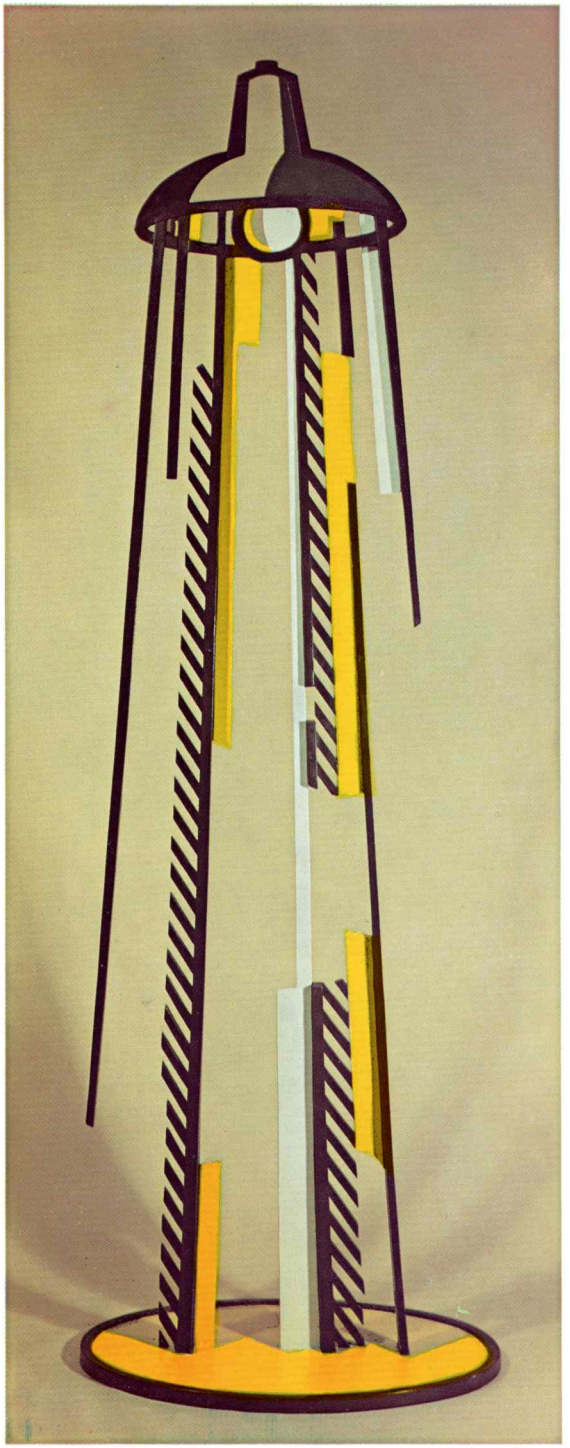
6. GLASS IV

5. GLASS III

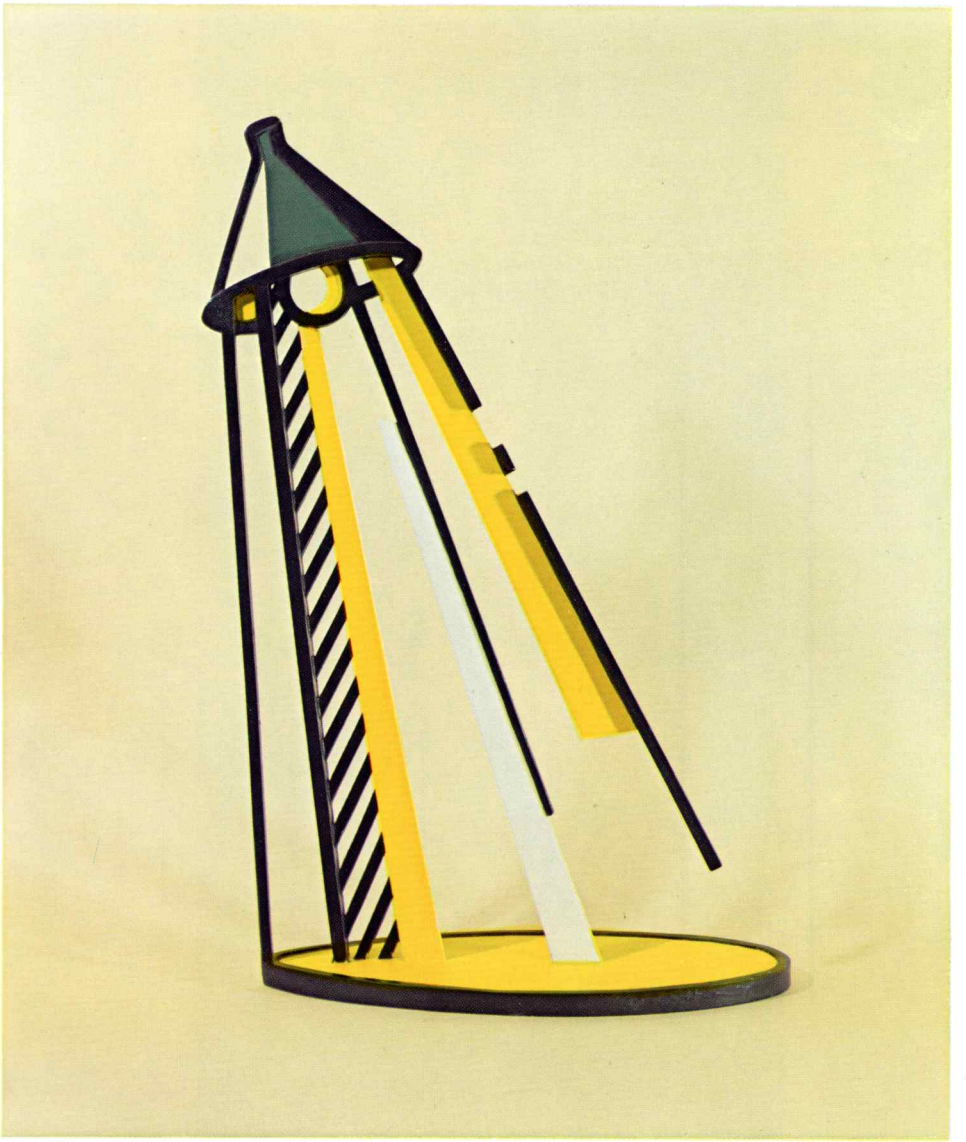
1. CUP AND SAUCER I



13. GOLD FISH BOWL



10. LAMP II



9. LAMP I

3. GLASS I

14. PICTURE AND PITCHER

Catalogue

Measurements are given as follows:
height by width by depth

1. CUP AND SAUCER I
   1977
   signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
   painted bronze
   $29\frac{1}{2}$ x $18\frac{1}{4}$ x $6\frac{5}{8}$ inches
   75 x 46·5 x 17·5 cms

2. CUP AND SAUCER II
   1977
   signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
   painted bronze
   $43\frac{3}{4}$ x $25\frac{3}{4}$ x 10 inches
   111 x 65·5 x 25·5 cms

3. GLASS I
   1977
   signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
   painted bronze
   $22\frac{1}{8}$ x $12\frac{3}{4}$ x $7\frac{1}{8}$ inches
   56 x 32·5 x 18 cms

4. GLASS II
   1977
   signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
   painted bronze
   $37\frac{7}{8}$ x 22 x $13\frac{3}{4}$ inches
   96 x 56 x 35 cms

5. GLASS III
   1977
   signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
   painted bronze
   33 x $19\frac{1}{2}$ x $12\frac{1}{2}$ inches
   84 x 49·5 x 32 cms

6. GLASS IV
   1977
   signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
   painted bronze
   $49\frac{1}{8}$ x $29\frac{3}{4}$ x $14\frac{3}{4}$ inches
   125 x 75·5 x 37·5 cms

7. MIRROR I
1977
signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
painted bronze
$44\frac{1}{2}$ x 25 x $11\frac{5}{8}$ inches
113 x 63·5 x 29·5 cms

8. MIRROR II
1977
signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
painted bronze
Note: illustrated in the catalogue is the painted wooden maquette for this bronze
$59\frac{3}{4}$ x 30 x 12 inches
151·5 x 76 x 30·5 cms

9. LAMP I
1977
signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
painted bronze
$28\frac{1}{2}$ x $17\frac{3}{8}$ x $8\frac{3}{8}$ inches
72·5 x 44 x21 cms

10. LAMP II
1977
signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
painted bronze
$86\frac{1}{4}$ x $27\frac{5}{8}$ x $17\frac{5}{8}$ inches
119 x 70 x 44·5 cms

11. LAMP ON TABLE
1977
signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
painted bronze
74 x $34\frac{3}{4}$ x 18 inches
188 x 88 x 45·5 cms

12. TEAPOT ON STAND
1977
signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
painted bronze
$67\frac{3}{8}$ x 31 x 19 inches
171 x 79 x 48 cms

13. GOLD FISH BOWL
1977
signed, numbered and stamped with foundry mark
painted bronze
Note: illustrated in the catalogue is the painted wooden maquette for this bronze
$77\frac{1}{2}$ x $25\frac{1}{2}$ x $18\frac{1}{4}$ inches
197 x 65 x 46·5 cms

14. PICTURE AND PITCHER
1977
signed
painted fabricated aluminium
$95\frac{3}{4}$ x 40 x $23\frac{1}{2}$ inches
243·5 x 101·5 x 59·5 cms

Note: With the exception of No. 14, PICTURE AND PITCHER, all sculptures are cast in bronze as an edition of three by Tallix, Inc., Peekskill, New York. The aluminium piece, No. 14, PICTURE AND PITCHER, fabricated by Lippincott Inc., North Haven, Connecticut.

The wooden maquettes, illustrated as No. 8, MIRROR II, and No. 13, GOLD FISH BOWL, constructed by Carlos Ramos, Bridgehampton, New York.

Colour photography by Eric Pollitzer, New York

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