

# MarketWatch

## Philip Pearlstein, 93, on the moment money revolutionized the art market and created a rift with Andy Warhol

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*The realist painter says child care expenses prevented him from living close friend's Studio 54 lifestyle*



'Models and Blimp', 1991, by Philip Pearlstein

By  
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Philip Pearlstein is one of America's leading realist painters and is still going strong at the age of 93. That a [new exhibition](#) of his modern realist nudes has just opened at London's Saatchi Gallery, and his work regularly shows at the [Betty Cunningham gallery](#) in Manhattan testifies to that.

But why did he grow apart from his one-time close friend and roommate Andy Warhol who, like Pearlstein, hailed from Pittsburgh? Turns out the answer has plenty to do with money and artistic rivalry.

Pearlstein and Warhol met as art students at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. They moved to New York in 1949 where they lived together for three years.

“Andy and I had very similar backgrounds, although he was very religious,” Pearlstein recalled. “We had no money. Andy was not Andy Warhol then, he was Andy Warhola. He was talented and intense and eccentric, but he was also charming and funny.”

### **A rift emerged when Pearlstein’s career took off**

“We remained very close friends until when my career took off as a painter. I wouldn’t say Andy became jealous, but he wanted that kind of career too.”

In 1949, Warhol and Pearlstein sublet a second-floor front room in a four-story building on Manhattan’s West 21st Street from Franziska Boas, a modern dancer. The atmosphere was not always harmonious.

“She didn’t like me,” Pearlstein said of Boas. “She thought I was holding him back from being himself. She assumed there was a sexual relationship which there was not.”

Pearlstein painted Warhol and contributed drawings to an unpublished cookbook that Warhol wrote. Warhol was also in the wedding party for Pearlstein’s marriage to fellow artist Dorothy Cantor.

### **Pearlstein found early success before Warhol**

But their friendship never recovered, Pearlstein says, from Warhol asking him to show his drawings to the Tanager Gallery in New York, only for the gallery to reject them on the grounds that they showed men kissing which was considered a taboo subject in the late 1950s.



Artist Philip Pearlstein

“He never really forgave me for the gallery not giving him a show,” says Pearlstein. Family life further thawed their friendship: “When my wife and I had three children, Andy stopped visiting us. They were outside of his interests though he was close to his own nieces and nephews.”

“At that point he was becoming very famous and having that big night life. We couldn’t afford babysitters, so we never got involved in it. But on occasion I would still run into him.”

The fact their friendship waned doesn’t alter his admiration for Warhol. “It’s amazing that

two kids from the lower class of Pittsburgh who knew each other, and even shared living quarters for a while, became well-known and made it,” he said. “The 20th century belongs to Andy and Picasso is the runner-up!”

### **The moment the art market came into existence**

Pearlstein says he can pinpoint the precise moment when the modern art market came into existence: “Money wasn’t an issue in the late 1950s, there was no art market. Art as an

investment started with the sale of art by Robert Scull,” the taxi tycoon. The collector sold off 50 contemporary paintings at a [celebrated auction](#) at Sotheby Parke Bernet in 1973.

“That’s when people realized they could make money collecting art and then sell it and later give it to museums as a tax deduction. New galleries like Pace based their market on that idea and did extraordinarily well,” Pearlstein said. “Go after the young artists and some of will them achieve promise and the price will go up. By that time, I was a middle-aged artist, so my price never went up that far.”

Scull embraced Warhol but not Pearlstein. “He came into the gallery, said he knew my work and he told me why he would never buy it,” Pearlstein said. “After that I depended on teaching for earning a living, and the portraits became a sideline. The work never really sold well until many years later, and at moderate prices.”

### **The time Pearlstein painted Richard Nixon**

But Pearlstein did still pick up glamor portrait commissions. He painted Henry Kissinger, national-security adviser under President Richard Nixon and later secretary of state, for a Time magazine cover commission in 1979. “He didn’t want to be painted,” said Pearlstein. “He thought I was going to take a photograph and leave, not spend two days together. He was nice, but also difficult.”

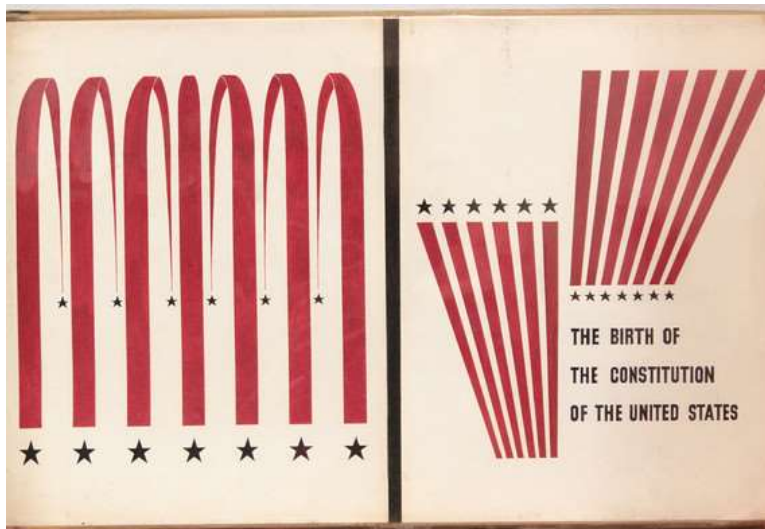
“He insisted he had to be able to read while posing but what he brought out to read as this great big dossier, practically the size of a card table, and his head kept moving because he was a fast reader.” Kissinger’s wife then objected to him taking his tie and jacket off and, to compound matters, the subject frequently walked away from the sitting: “This was before cellphones and he kept getting interrupted and jumping up to have these long telephone calls.”

Pearlstein credits his time in the army for kickstarting his interest in figurative painting. “I was so surprised I was still alive,” he said. “But because I’d never been in combat during the Second World War they assigned me to be a sign painter with an engineering unit using German prisoners of war to rebuild the road between Florence and Rome. For me it was a terrific visual arts education.”

### **How his art changed after serving in the army**

“When I came home from the army I was fascinated by how my body had changed from being a chubby kid to this mini-Superman. The body became the main element for me, not just a picturesque object stuck in the middle of a painting.”

His focus changed from abstract expressionism to nudes, which has continued to this day. “The



young artists who survived like me were those who moved away from abstract expressionist painting,” he said. “I work from life. It’s exciting because you’re never sure of what you’re looking at. The models are always changing.”

Recently he’s been thinking back to one of his earliest drawings, a depiction of the U.S. Constitution. “I was having trouble finding a job and

The US constitution, by Philip Pearlstein

the chief item in my portfolio was the United States Constitution,” he said.

“I got the idea from the training aids in the army,” he said. “I designed a pamphlet and did a couple of charts based on the constitution. But it was right at the beginning of McCarthyism and when I went to see art directors, they looked at it and said, “What are you? A Communist?” They slammed the portfolio shut and opened the door for me to leave their office!”

“It was too political. But now they look very up to date, like studies for a production of “Hamilton!””