

P R E S

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Ed Ruscha, President, 1968-72

**ARTIST**

Ed Ruscha (b.1937)

TITLE

President

MEDIUM

Oil on canvas

DATE

1968-72

SIZE

20 x 24 in : 50.8 x 61.0cm

INSCRIPTIONS

Signed and dated on the reverse

PROVENANCE

Private Collection

Sotheby's New York, their sale, 3 May 1995,
lot 355

Gagosian Gallery, New York

Collection of Ronald Perelman, New York
Private Collection

EXHIBITED

Pace Gallery, New York, *Art for McGovern*,
20 Sept – 21 Sept 1972

Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre,
Mumbai, *Pop- Love, Fame, Power*, 1st Dec

2023 - 11th Feb 2024, illus. pp. 94, 95 & 117

LITERATURE

Robert Dean, Erin Wright, and Juan E.
Gomensoro, *Edward Ruscha: Catalogue
Raisonné of the Paintings*, 2005, cat. no.
P1972.09, illus. p.42-43,

REFERENCE

AC25-25

Ed Ruscha's career-long focus on semiotics and the power of connecting words and images to form new meaning has earned him a singular position in the pantheon of twentieth-century art. Ruscha's *President*, executed from 1968-1972, is a special landmark of this journey. The background was painted in August of 1968 while the word 'President' was completed in August 1972; in a letter to Leo Castelli dated September 8, 1972, Ruscha wrote that he was giving the painting to a fundraiser at Pace Gallery for the 1972 McGovern campaign. The work situates within a series of around 10 works executed from 1971 to 1973 featuring single words set in small type Stymie Ex Bold, with each individual letter set further apart than in standard typography. The small font type and drastically expanded character spacing gives an illusion of levity or suspension, while also awarding each letter a charged autonomy that resists legibility, disrupting the act of reading and comprehension and presenting each character as abstract pictures as much as letters. The resulting proclamation "P R E S I D E N T" is both textual and imagistic, both demure and brazen, emanating from its neutral surrounding as a self-affirming beacon of America. Taking a highly charged word and further complicating it through his technical artistry and visual contextualization, Ruscha's *President* is a paradigm of the artist's signature marriage of text and image to convey words as physical, optically and intellectually stimulating pictorial objects.

Initially inspired by the synthesis of Pop and Conceptualism pioneered by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, Ruscha began creating text paintings in the late 1950s. These early compositions brought together the regimented and rule-laden world of printed matter with the expressive freedom of painting. As the artist was beginning to establish his signature focus, scale and proportion became incredibly important as a basis for communication. With his early focus on single words, Ruscha's ability to shift the formal qualities of his subject matter helped the artist create nuanced, deeply profound pockets of meaning out of monosyllabic utterances. Words in Ruscha's paintings would become distorted as well as grow and shrink in

endless permutations as the artist worked through the building blocks of communication. Critic Peter Schjeldahl has said, in relation to Ruscha's works from this period: "Coming up on any Ruscha word picture is like hitting a rock in the road, a distinct bump... Now that I am looking, a subtle confusion sets in. A Ruscha word picture delicately frustrates the drive of reading, which is the will to comprehend a complete meaning, by presenting the word in a visual manner clamorous with seemingly complementary but actually disruptive suggestions of its own... The effect is uncanny and provocative. My surrender to the experience brings a feather-light intimation of beauty: uncanniness as pleasure, provocativeness as satisfaction" (Peter Schjeldahl in Exh. Cat., New York, Robert Miller Gallery, *Edward Ruscha Stains 1971 to 1975*, 1992, n.p.).

President is a powerful example of Ruscha's appropriation of existing vernacular imagery, the given word being so charged and fraught in contemporary lexicons. Connoting power and regality, politics and contention, and attitudes ranging from respect and reverence to disdain and farce, the word 'President' bears multifarious potential meanings that contribute to the impact, complexity and intrigue of the artwork, getting to the crux of Ruscha's oeuvre. The prevalence and laden nature of the word resonates with Ruscha's understanding of it; as he stated: "Words have temperatures to me. When they reach a certain point and become hot words, then they appeal to me... Sometimes I have a dream that if a word gets too hot and too appealing, it will boil apart, and I won't be able to read or think of it. Usually I catch them before they get too hot" (the artist cited in Exh. Cat., London, Hayward Gallery (and travelling), *Ed Ruscha: Fifty Years of Painting*, 2009, pp. 46-47).

By objectifying the written word into his distinguished lexicographic painting style, Ruscha became the trailblazing 'Pop Artist of the West coast' and all round purveyor of American cool. His canonical influence continues to inspire artists today and his cultural impact is reflected in the numerous retrospectives and major museum shows of his work.

Ed Ruscha

Ed Ruscha is an American painter, printmaker and photographer, living and working in Los Angeles.

Ruscha first came to prominence there in the late 1950s with small collages that he made which were influenced by those of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Soon he began to refine his collages, isolating and recombining words and images in increasingly subtle and unique ways. Words, in paintings, are often very awkward things to incorporate harmoniously and there are very few artists, notably Picasso in his cubist works, who have succeeded happily. By making single words and phrases the subject of his work, Ruscha mastered his intentions.

Because he drew upon sources from the real world and the imagery of commercial culture, Ruscha's work is associated with Pop art. In 1962 Ruscha's work was included, along with Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Robert Dowd, Phillip Hefferton, Joe Goode, Jim Dine, and Wayne Thiebaud, in the historically important and ground-breaking New Painting of Common Objects, curated by Walter Hopps at the Pasadena Art Museum. This show historically is considered one of the first Pop art exhibitions in America.

Ruscha had his first solo exhibition in 1963 at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. In 1966, Ruscha was included in Los Angeles Now at the Robert Fraser Gallery in London, his first European exhibition. Ruscha joined the influential Leo Castelli Gallery in New York in 1970 and had his first solo exhibition there in 1973. Also in 1970 Ruscha represented the United States at the Venice Biennale as part of a survey of American printmaking with an on-site workshop. He constructed Chocolate Room, a visual and sensory experience where the visitor saw 360 pieces of paper permeated with chocolate and hung on the gallery walls. The pavilion in Venice smelled like a chocolate factory. He had begun to use unconventional materials in his graphic work of that period: he drew with gunpowder and painted and printed with foodstuffs and with a variety of organic substances such as blood and the medicine Pepto-Bismol.

He was also well known for the books he published of his series of deadpan photographs. Such work was influential for the development of conceptual art, although Ruscha's pieces have a characteristic low-key humour.

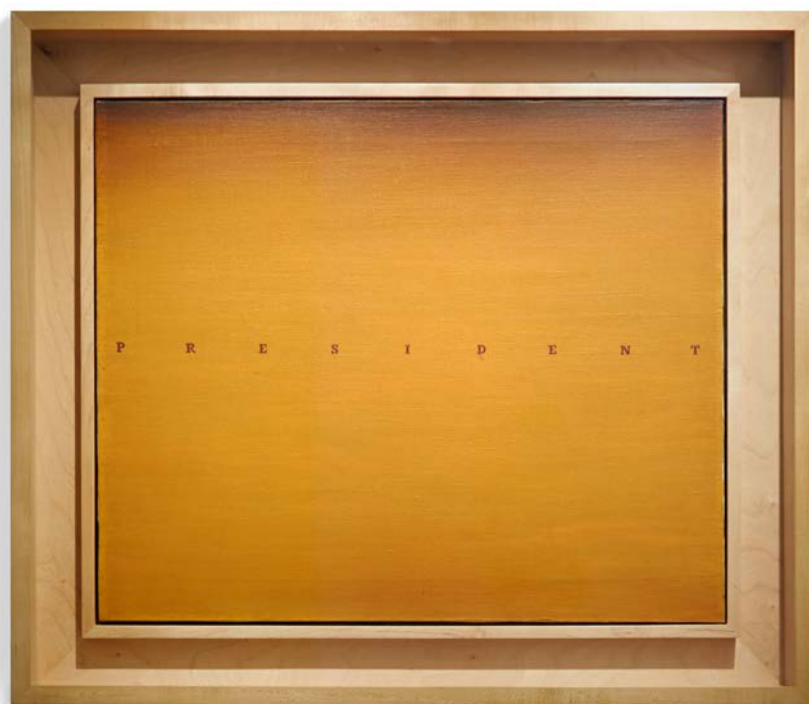
By the 1980s Ruscha's work was characterised by a further exploration of the image, painting mountain ranges and ships emphasising or partly obscuring a word or evocation of a phrase: all references and cross-references to Hollywood, the American brand and global popular culture.

In 2001, the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, a branch of Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, acquired the entire archive of Ruscha's 325 prints and 800 working proofs. The museum bought the archive and negotiated for impressions of future prints for \$10 million, with funds provided by San Francisco philanthropist Phyllis Wattis. Another major collection of Ruscha's prints was compiled by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

In 2003, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles acquired the Chocolate Room, then worth about \$1.5 million. In 2004, the Whitney Museum acquired more than 300 photographs through a purchase and gift from the artist, making it the principal repository of Ruscha's photographic oeuvre.

Ruscha is represented by 33 of his works in the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art owns 25 important Ruscha paintings, works on paper, and photographs; and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden has 21 Ruschas in its permanent collection.

Private collections holding substantial numbers of Ruscha's work include the Broad Collection the UBS Art Collection and the Achenbach Foundation.



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www.archeus.com

All enquiries:
Brian Balfour-Oatts
brian@archeus.com
US: 1-212-652-1665
UK: +44 (0)7979 695079