

Andy Warhol's Pittsburgh

The working-class background of the iconic queer artist

By H. William Bain

"I am from nowhere," Andy Warhol was known to say when asked where he grew up. With these four words, he often gave the impression of a strained relationship with his hometown of Pittsburgh, the working-class city that fostered his talents as a child and gave rise to many of the themes that recurred throughout his work and defined his career. Through most of his adult life, Andy Warhol (1928-1987) remained notably mum on his roots in the Eastern European communities of Pittsburgh, the same that historically ground the town with a salt-of-the-earth charm.

Today, Pittsburgh stands as a paradigm of urban renewal, shedding its reputation as the Smoky City and officially claiming the title of "America's Most Livable City." In fact, Pittsburgh is quickly becoming a haven for "gay nesting" among settled Eastern same-sex couples. But in Warhol's halcyon days, the disparity between his glamorous lifestyle and a city often used as shorthand for blue-collar values was striking. Historically, any time Hollywood needs a dose of working-class grit, its locale of choice is invariably Pittsburgh: *Flashdance*, *Hill Street Blues*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Queer as Folk* (though the latter was shot in Toronto). It is ironic that the same words often used to condemn Pittsburgh also read as a list of the qualities that Warhol championed with his work: industry, mass production, and market culture. Warhol, who glorified all things American, must have recognized the town as a girder of American culture. He also would have been aware of greater Pittsburgh's pedigree in the world of arts and letters, yielding such luminaries as Nellie Bly, Willa Cather, Martha Graham, Gene Kelly, Jimmy Stewart, and Gertrude Stein.



Andy as a college student, ca. 1945

Born Andrew Warhola, he was a sickly child, contracting St. Vitus' dance, which frequently confined him to home. His coal-miner father, Andrej, often was called away from home for work; he died when Andy was just 13. As sole caregiver, Andy's mother, Julia, shared her love of art with the child unable to interact with the outside world, creating for him a "kitchen workshop" where he first discovered his drawing skills. Here also, Andy's brothers introduced him to a crude form of printmaking and, later, basic photography, both media of which he expanded the limits as an adult. You'll find **Andy's Boyhood Home** (3252 Dawson St.) in Pittsburgh's university section of Oakland. Nearby are the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, Carlow University, and Chatham University; Duquesne University is in an adjacent neighborhood. The humble brick house has been privately owned for many years, but plans are being made to restore the home to appear as it did during Warhol's childhood and open it as private housing for art students.

Throughout his childhood, Andy's family attended Mass each week at **St. John Chrysostom Byzantine Catholic Church** (506 Saline St.; 412-421-0243). One can look at the icons of saints adorning the sanctuary of this church and see their influence on his ideas about iconography in pop art and how they inspired the artist's signature device of a single image repeated with slight variations. Meanwhile, his obsession with fame and show business can be traced back to another weekly pilgrimage—his ritual of attending Saturday matinees with his best girlfriend, Margie Girman. The duo religiously collected promotional photos of the stars of that day's movie, little Andy's most prized possession being an autographed still of Shirley Temple, his childhood heroine. Visitors to Pittsburgh will find a majestic theater nearby at the **Benedum Center** (719 Liberty Ave.; 412-456-6666), built in 1927 and restored to its original splendor as Warhol would have seen it. The Benedum's Grand Lobby mirrors, marble and woodwork, brass rails, and all but one of the more than 90 crystal chandeliers, torchieres, and sconces are original.

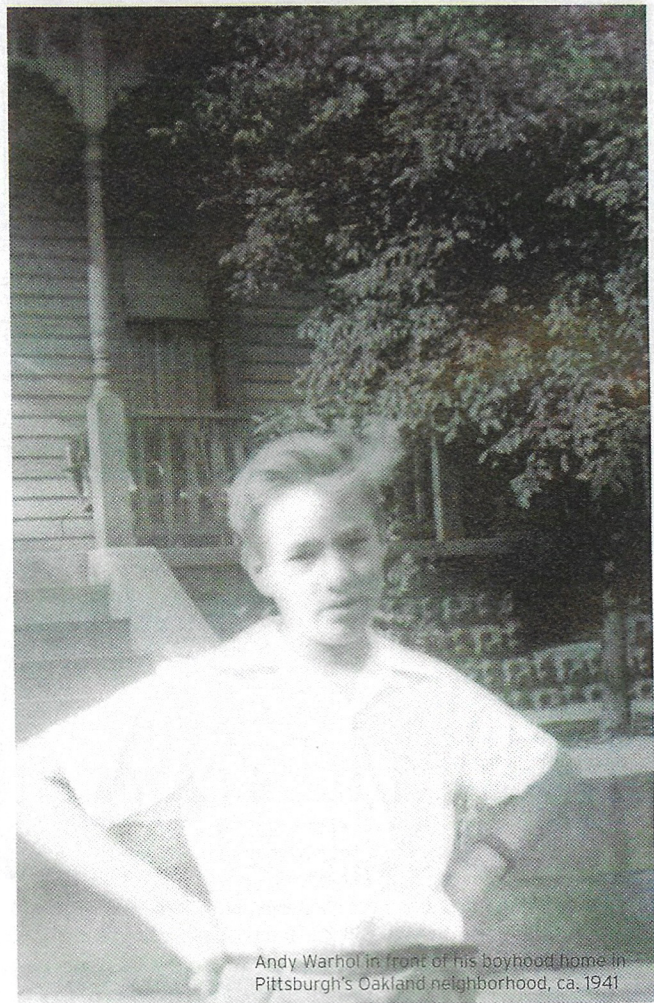


The Benedum Center

It was while studying in the commercial art program at Carnegie Institute of Technology that Warhol first began to develop his ideas about the relationship between capitalism and art. Now called **Carnegie Mellon University** (5000 Forbes Ave.; 412-268-2000), this Pittsburgh institution is recognized as one of the world's top arts and technology schools. It saw Andy's first foray into commercial art as a student in its graphic arts program as well as his first interactions with other gay people. Here Andy discovered the blotted-line technique of ink drawing, the signature element of his commercial artwork that launched his success as a graphic designer in New York. Carnegie Mellon also borders on Shadyside, a mainly residential area where many gay couples now settle. While Pittsburgh lacks a true gay area, one can find several gay bars here, and it's not uncommon to see shops flying the pride flag.

Not far from Carnegie Mellon, you will find the **Carnegie Museum of Art** (4400 Forbes Ave.; 412-622-3131), which houses a number of Warhol's works. Called the world's first museum of modern art, it was envisioned as a showcase for the "Old Masters of tomorrow" by its founder, Andrew Carnegie, in 1895. The museum became a forerunner as a collector of French Impressionism, PostImpressionism, and important works from the late 20th century. Today, it hosts the Carnegie International, North America's oldest exhibition of contemporary art from around the world.

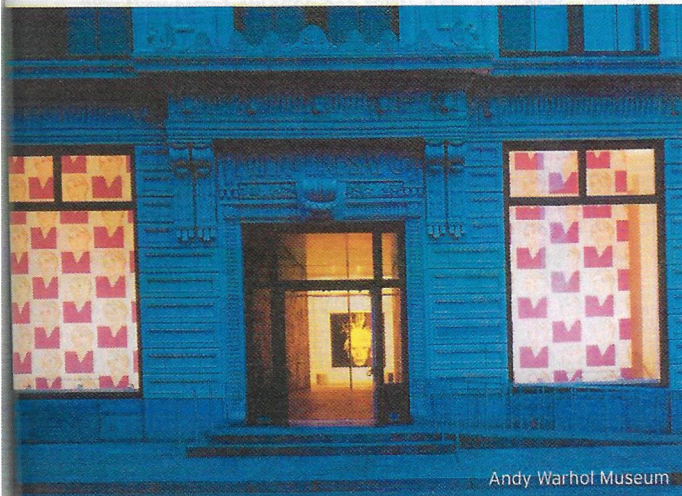
Shy and introverted, Warhol passively let the world focus on his high-profile pop persona while maintaining a private side that very few knew. Only after his death did his closest friends share stories of Andy attending church daily and volunteering incognito at a soup kitchen. The details of his sexuality he kept under wraps, as well as his rather unglamorous Pittsburgh upbringing. So it may be a bit ironic that the city is now ground zero for Warhol art, thanks to the **Andy Warhol Museum** (117 Sandusky St.; 412-237-8300), one of the most extensive museums dedicated to a single artist in the world. Opened in 1994, it houses more than 12,000 of his works, including homoerotic drawings, portraits of gay icons, and films that explore the connection between voyeurism and desire, like *Blow Job* and *My Hustler*, as well as important documents, records, and source material. Together with the **Mattress Factory**



Andy Warhol in front of his boyhood home in Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood, ca. 1941

(500 Sampsonia Way; 412-231-3169), an avant-garde art museum exhibiting room-sized installations, the Warhol plays an integral part in the contemporary art scene touted by Pittsburgh's urbane gay set.

Many of Andy's most famous quotes are about death, and especially his: "I always thought I'd like my own tombstone to be blank. No epitaph, and no name. Well, actually, I'd like it to say *figment*." While his tombstone at **St. John the Baptist Byzantine Catholic Cemetery** (Route 88 & Connor Rd., Bethel Park) is more specific than he mused it would be, those who make a pilgrimage to the artist's final resting place will find just a humble grave marking. Often, Warhol devotees visiting the grave site will leave cans of soup, boxes of Brillo pads, or crayons. It proves that Pittsburgh, the Renaissance City, is a hallowed destination for those seeking to better understand one of the 20th century's most creative forces. □



Andy Warhol Museum



Get your hands on Andy's guys: Chronicle Books publishes a set of 30 postcards (4 by 5 3/4 inches) of Warhol's homoerotic works. More Andy postcards and books are available at the gift shop of Pittsburgh's Warhol Museum.

TOP IMAGE: FOUNDING COLLECTION, THE ANDY WARHOL MUSEUM; PITTSBURGH; BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY LOCATION; BOTTOM RIGHT: ANTHONY VERDE