campbell’s soup can 1
Acrylic, Liquitex, silkscreen on canvas, 92 x 61 cm
Aachen, Neue Galerie – Sammlung Ludwig

When Warhol first exhibited his pictures of Campbell’s soup cans in July and August 1962 – thirty-two all told – he presented them in the way tinned foods are offered for sale in a supermarket, in orderly, evenly spaced rows. Quite in keeping with the guidelines of “product placement”, in other words, commercially oriented aesthetic considerations. The site of the demonstration, however, was no ordinary supermarket in Los Angeles, but the Ferus Gallery, a pioneer in the propagation of Pop Art. The paintings cost 100 dollars each, compared with 29 cents for the original. In terms of technique, the pictures were a semi-mechanical product – a mixture of painting, silkscreen and a stamp process, practiced partly manual and partly industrial in nature. Although a superficial glance revealed no differences between the individual, 50.8 x 40.6 cm images, they in fact differed in a key detail, each representing a different kind of soup, an individual taste beneath the monotonous of the packaging.

The exhibition represented a conscious provocation, triggered not only by the mundane motif and its stereotyped depiction, but by the parallels purposely suggested between art gallery and supermarket, art trade and food trade. For Warhol, who had studied sociology, the social context in which a work of art is presented was as important as its specific subject, and the subject itself invariably reflected its social background. Campbell’s soups, Coca Cola, Kellogg’s Cornflakes and Bisto detergent, industrially produced commodities of American civilization, lent the dignity of art by Warhol, shaped the life of the American middle class, of which he was part, as much as sex and death.

Campbell’s Soup Cans, a later, enlarged, and isolated version of the tomato soup can, might convey the erroneous impression that Warhol was out solely to apotheosize the idiom of popular culture. In fact its social effects were equally important to him. What made America fabulous, Warhol once explained, was that it established a tradition in which the richest consumers basically bought the same products as the poorest. You could watch television and drink a Coca Cola, and you knew the president drank Coke, Liz Taylor drank Coke, and there you were, drinking Coke, too. A Coke was a Coke, concluded Warhol, and no amount of money could buy you a better one.

This insight perhaps explains why he set out to achieve something similar in the field of art. With the aid of standardized production methods, Warhol infused art with the magic of the perpetually same. After photography had entered the cultural scene as the “great leveller” (Jonathan Crary), Warhol followed its cue in the field of art.