

FROM EVERY SIDE

No Single Face

The day I was called “saccharine sweet”. On leadership, perception and Roy Lichtenstein.



Roy Lichtenstein, Barcelona Head, designed 1991, installed 1992, realised by Diego Delgado.
Artwork © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Photograph © Angela McCormack, Passeig de Colom, Barcelona, January 2026.

Some things you only understand once you have seen them from every side.

AN ESSAY

The Day I Was Called “Saccharine Sweet”

What happens when we read people as carelessly as we read images?

There is a sculpture in Barcelona that I never photograph the same way twice.

Roy Lichtenstein’s Barcelona Head sits quietly beside Port Vell, greeting thousands of people every day. Tourists photograph it from the front, smile, and continue towards the waterfront. Most never walk around it.

I understand why. From the front it already feels complete.

A bold Pop Art face.

Red Ben-Day dots.

Primary colours.

Confident black outlines.

You assume you’ve seen it. Then you walk around the back.

The face disappears.

The sculpture becomes fragments.

Steel. Mosaic. Negative space.

Suddenly you realise the front wasn’t the sculpture. It was only one viewpoint.

That thought stayed with me for months. It reminded me of something someone once said to me.

“You’re saccharine sweet.”

Not as praise. · As criticism.

Every principal has been misunderstood.

Every teacher has judged a colleague too quickly.

Every leader has experienced resistance to change.

A headmaster once described me as saccharine sweet. He did not mean I was kind. He meant my kindness could not possibly be genuine.

For years I assumed the criticism was about leadership. That effective leaders were expected to be tougher, more distant, less accommodating, and that perhaps I had misunderstood what leadership required. Only much later did I realise the comment had very little to do with leadership at all. It was about perception.

That distinction matters. To describe someone as kind is to make an observation about behaviour. To describe them as saccharine is something altogether different. It is to question authenticity itself. Artificial sweetness. Manufactured warmth. A performance designed to conceal something underneath.

Looking back, I don't think he was describing me. He was describing the story he had constructed about me. The difference between those two things sits at the heart of visual literacy.

That same thought returned unexpectedly while I was standing beside Roy Lichtenstein's Barcelona Head.

For decades Lichtenstein was accused of making fake art. His paintings borrowed the visual language of comic books, advertising and commercial printing. Critics dismissed them as derivative, mechanical and lacking originality. "Anyone could do that" became one of the defining criticisms of Pop Art.

Yet those criticisms revealed something fascinating. They told us almost nothing about Lichtenstein. They revealed a great deal about the assumptions people brought with them.

The critics thought they were judging the artwork. They were only exposing the framework through which they had chosen to see it.

THE MESSENGER BECOMES THE MESSAGE

If someone consistently shares ideas, they become threatening. If they remain optimistic, they become naïve. If they stay generous, their generosity becomes suspicious. It is often easier to question the messenger than to wrestle with the message.

That is exactly what happened to Lichtenstein.

*People looked at comic books. They stopped looking.
“That’s not art.” “He’s copying.” “Anyone could do that.”*

The comic strip wasn’t the point. The point was asking why one visual language belonged inside newspapers while another belonged inside galleries. Who decides? On what basis? What counts as authentic? Those questions made people uncomfortable. So they criticised the surface. Not the idea.

I recognised that strategy immediately. I had seen it before. Only this time, the artwork was a person, not a print in a gallery but a three-dimensional form.

BEING EARLY IS LONELY

I have spent more than twenty-five years working in schools. Most of that time was not spent teaching art. It was spent helping people change: new curriculum, new technologies, new assessment, new ways of thinking.

Long before collaboration became educational jargon, I was encouraging teachers to open their classroom doors. Long before creativity appeared on lists of future workforce skills, I was arguing that Visual Art was essential, not optional. I advocated for STEAM before many schools had heard the acronym. I shared resources rather than protecting them. More recently, I embraced artificial intelligence while many educators were still deciding whether it belonged in schools at all.

*Being early sounds exciting.
Usually it isn’t. Usually it feels lonely.*

Change is rarely about information. It is about identity. When a leader says, “Here is another possibility,” people sometimes hear, “Everything you have been doing is wrong.” Those are not the same sentence. Emotionally, they can feel identical.

THE INVISIBLE WORK

The strange thing about leadership is that people rarely see the invisible work. The conversations after school. The extra planning. The systems you quietly improve. The difficult discussions behind closed doors. They see the outcome, then build a story to explain it.

Art teaches us to slow down before we do that. Visual literacy begins with a remarkably simple idea.

Look again.
Ask another question.
Walk around the sculpture.
Learn the context.
Notice what changes.

Leadership deserves the same discipline.

KINDNESS ISN'T THE OPPOSITE OF STRENGTH

For a long time I thought the answer was becoming tougher. Less available. Less patient. Less generous. I am grateful I didn't. I would only have become the monster they were already conjuring.

Experience has changed me. I have stronger boundaries. I ask harder questions. I make decisions more quickly. The kindness stayed, not because it always works, but because it reflects the kind of leader I want to be. The mistake wasn't leading with kindness. The mistake was expecting everyone to interpret kindness the same way. They won't, just as they won't all interpret the same artwork the same way. Leadership isn't controlling how people see you. It is remaining authentic even when they don't.

WHAT ART HAS TAUGHT ME ABOUT LEADERSHIP

I no longer think this story is really about a headmaster. Or about Roy Lichtenstein. Or even about me. I think it is about perception. Every day we build stories from fragments.

One meeting. One email. One conversation.

One photograph. One glance. One label.

Then we convince ourselves we have seen the whole person. Visual literacy asks us to do something much harder. It asks us to become suspicious of our own certainty. To look again. To move. To question our first impression. To stay curious.

The sculpture in Barcelona has never changed.

Only my position has.

Perhaps leadership works the same way.

Perhaps people do too.

A WORK, BRIEFLY SEEN

What Is Barcelona Head?

A giant Pop Art face on the old harbour, designed by one hand and built by another.

Most people know it as El Cap de Barcelona. Its English title is Barcelona Head. Roy Lichtenstein designed it in 1991, commissioned by the City Council for the 1992 Olympic Games, and it has stood at the end of Passeig de Colom, by Port Vell, ever since.

Lichtenstein drew the idea. He did not build the thing itself. The fourteen-metre sculpture was realised by the Catalan sculptor Diego Delgado, working from Lichtenstein's small painted maquette, which now lives in the MACBA collection. The hand that imagined it and the hand that made it were not the same. That feels worth noticing in an issue about who gets remembered.

It belongs to a series Lichtenstein called his brushstrokes, the painted gesture turned solid, a three-dimensional tribute to painting. Look closely and his whole vocabulary is there: red dots in relief borrowed from the comic page, bold black outlines, flat primary colours. It is also a gift to the city. The mosaic skin is a deliberate nod to Antoni Gaudí, whose broken tiles cover Barcelona. Pop Art shakes hands with Catalan Modernisme, the comic strip with the cathedral.

IN CONTEXT

What Are Ben-Day Dots?

Ben-Day dots are the tiny coloured dots that old comics and newspapers used to build colour cheaply. Named after the printer Benjamin Day, they were a mark of mass production, of the throwaway and the everyday.

Lichtenstein took that humble printing trick and blew it up to gallery scale. If a comic panel becomes a painting, what exactly makes something art? The dots on Barcelona Head are that same question, standing on the waterfront.

A SHORT TIMELINE

- | | |
|------|---|
| 1923 | Roy Lichtenstein is born in New York. |
| 1961 | He begins his comic-strip paintings, Ben-Day dots and all. |
| 1991 | Designs Barcelona Head for the Olympic city. |
| 1992 | The sculpture is installed at Port Vell, realised by Diego Delgado. |
| 1997 | Lichtenstein dies, aged 73. |

A PERSONAL NOTE

Every Angle Tells a Different Story

Three visits in under a year. I never photographed it the same way twice.

Roy Lichtenstein designed Barcelona Head for the 1992 Olympic Games, a tribute to the city and to Antoni Gaudí, its mosaic skin echoing his broken tiles. The fourteen-metre sculpture was built by the sculptor Diego Delgado. I photographed it across three visits, in April and July 2025 and again in January 2026, mostly in passing, from a cab or on foot, catching it from whatever angle the city offered.



The photograph everyone takes. Photograph © Angela McCormack, Barcelona, January 2026.

A PERSONAL NOTE, CONTINUED



BEHIND



OBSCURED



WALKED PAST

Same sculpture, caught from different sides as I moved through the city. Three completely different stories, and only one of them is the photograph most people leave with.

It is the same with people. You're too nice. You're too generous. You're too kind. Perhaps. Or perhaps they were standing in exactly the same place as everyone else.

Organized perception is what art is all about.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

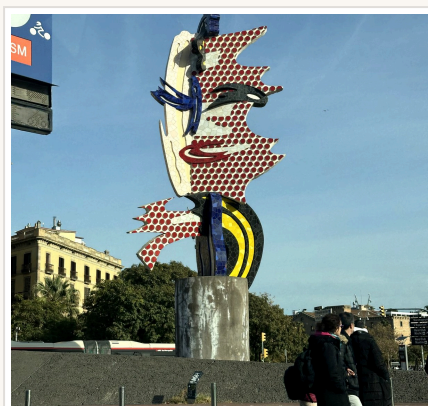


People walk past the artwork while looking somewhere else. Most keep walking. Only a few stop. Only a few look from another angle.

THE REAL SUBJECT

The Evidence

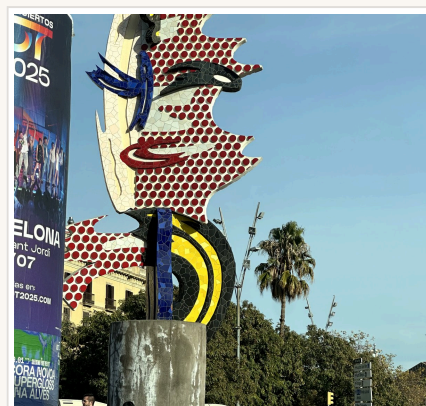
These photographs were never really about the sculpture. They are about perspective.



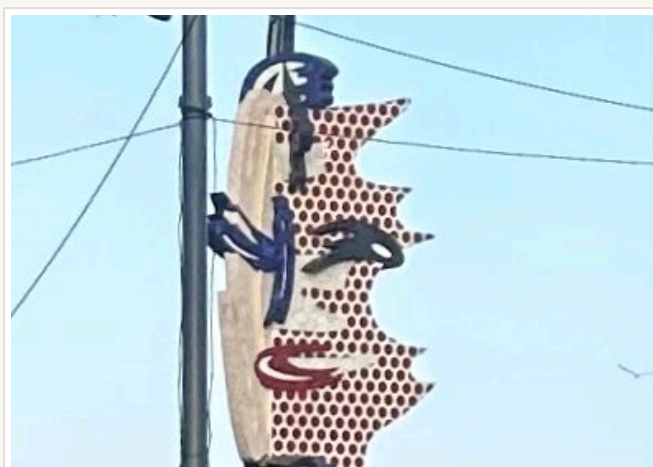
SEEING



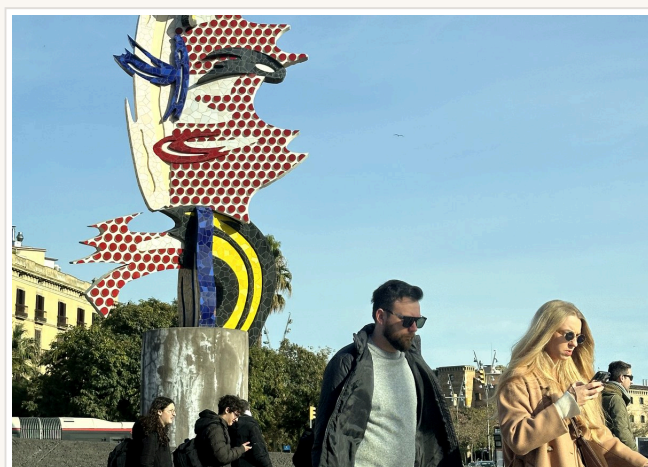
LOOKING BEHIND



LOOKING BESIDE



NOT SEEING



WALKING PAST

What we notice. What waits behind. What stands beside. What we miss. What we walk past. The same sculpture, five ways. Put side by side, they stop being holiday snapshots and start being an argument.

The photographs are not decoration. They are the proof. We decide who someone is from a single angle, then walk on, certain we have seen the whole thing.

A selection from this series will be offered as fine art prints in time. Subscribers will be the first to know.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Look Closer

Slow down and look before you reach for the caption. Sit with the sculpture first. Walk around it. Then ask.

THE UNDERSTANDING ART METHOD

The SEEU™ Framework

Spot. Examine. Explore. Understand. A way to read any image, and to understand why it matters.

SPOT

What catches your eye first? The dots, the colour, the sheer scale of it?

EXAMINE

What choices can you find? The outlines, the mosaic, the brushstroke that becomes hair.

EXPLORE

What changes when you learn it honours Gaudí, or when you walk around the back?

UNDERSTAND

How has your reading shifted? What meaning are you now building?

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

- 1 Where does your eye travel first, and why there?
- 2 Why might Lichtenstein have hidden a face inside a field of dots?
- 3 What does the sculpture look like from behind, and who ever bothers to check?
- 4 What did you assume about it before you knew its story?
- 5 How did learning that it honours Gaudí change what you see?

Images do not contain meaning. Meaning emerges when image, context and viewer meet.

CLOSING

Questions for Looking, and for Leading

The next time you meet a person the way you meet an image, pause.

Ask who made them what they are. Ask what happened before this moment, and what you might be missing from where you stand. Five small questions, and a person opens up like a door.

Look at people the way you would look at a good sculpture. Walk around them. Give them more than a single angle. It asks more of us than a glance, and it is always worth it.

FURTHER LOOKING

[Roy Lichtenstein](#)[Pop Art](#)[Antoni Gaudí](#)[El Cap de Barcelona](#)

NEXT ISSUE

When Seeing Isn't Believing: AI Images, Deepfakes and the New Visual Literacy. Next issue.

If this issue made you look twice, send it to someone who leads, or who has ever been told they were too kind. If it found its way to you, you can subscribe at understandingart.substack.com.