



FIG. 1 *Inside Fort Laramie* (after Alfred Jacob Miller, 1837), 1955. Oil on canvas. 30 × 36 in. (76.2 × 91.4 cm). Private collection

## ROY LICHTENSTEIN'S WILD WEST

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For most people familiar with the work of the artist Roy Lichtenstein, it comes as a surprise that before gaining status as a leading figure in the Pop art movement for his signature comic book–style canvases, his first artistic efforts often reworked and alluded to iconic paintings of the American West. His paintings of the 1950s frequently featured Native American figures or abstract renderings of pioneer wagon trains or settler versus Indigenous conflicts that had been depicted by nineteenth-century artists (p. 113). The choice of subject is as much of a surprise as his early painting style itself, which shows the heavy influence of European modernism. We seem far from the smooth, flattened surfaces and contemporary themes of the comics and graphic romances of his post-1960 work. But those knowledgeable about his development as an artist have been aware of his earlier works and their style and themes since the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> These works exist in both private and museum collections and have even been the occasional subject of interest by curators over the decades. In 2005, the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey mounted an exhibition titled *Roy Lichtenstein: American Indian Encounters*, which not only revisited works from his formative years but also considered the occurrence of Native American motifs in his later works.<sup>2</sup> But we are still left to ponder his subject matter in these early works and how it might link to the seemingly unrelated contemporary comic book “snapshots” for which he is best known.

It is by no means a given that an emerging artist in the 1950s would turn to the art of the American West in his formative years and beyond art school. Coming of age as an artist in the late 1940s, Lichtenstein could not help but be aware of the works of early Abstract Expressionists, including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Rauschenberg, and their works would not have pointed him to the art of George Catlin, Charles (Carl) Wimar, or Frederic Remington, even if Pollock, among other contemporary artists, had seen the celebrated *Indian Art of the United States* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1941. I must admit that, as a scholar of Native American visual culture and the art of the American West, I was surprised to come across these early paintings by Lichtenstein and to learn that they represented not just two or three experiments with a theme but dozens of works, including paintings,

<sup>1</sup>

A thorough study of Lichtenstein's early work by Ernst Busche exists in German and was published in 1988. The author was able to interview Lichtenstein and includes anecdotes and commentary from the artist that would not otherwise be known. See Ernst Busche, *Roy Lichtenstein: Das Frühwerk, 1942–1960* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>

Gail Stavitsky and Twig Johnson, *Roy Lichtenstein: American Indian Encounters*, exh. cat. (Montclair, NJ: Montclair Art Museum, 2005).