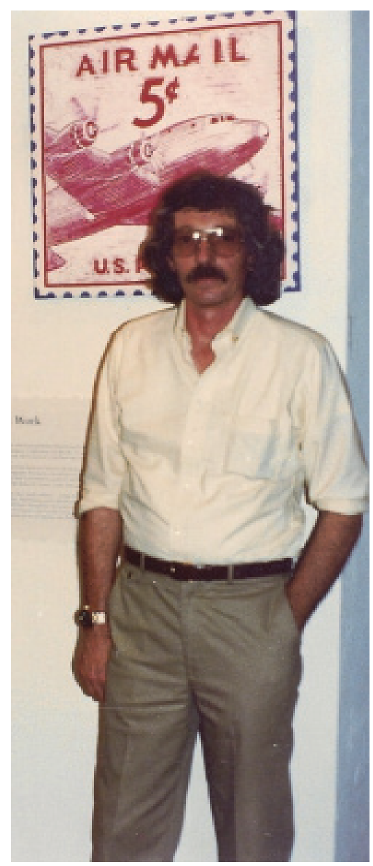
Pop Art Icon Robert Dowd: Currency as Art

By Rick Melamed

We paper money enthusiasts like to think government issued currency can also be categorized as works of art. While the images contained on the actual notes often have a compelling artistic component, most people would just consider them money. But in the hand of an accomplished artist, the theme is reversed: money changes from a financial instrument to a captivating work of art. Robert Dowd (1936-1996) a renowned pop artist made a career by turning regular everyday items into something memorable. Just as his contemporary Andy Warhol did with Campbell soup cans and Brillo boxes, Dowd did the same for U.S. currency. Robert was a shy, thoughtful gentleman. He was a voracious reader, an intellectual who had a brilliant career exploring the complex relationship between people and money. On the surface, money is just a piece of paper that has no intrinsic value like silver and gold coins. Currency's value is based in our trust of the government. Taking that relationship a big leap beyond, Dowd extends our trust onto the canvas. If we assign value based on faith (of a piece of paper money), does that faith extend to a painting of currency? What on the surface appears to be just a simple work of art, is actually something much deeper. Dowd's art is a real paradox open to many interpretations. Some are whimsical, some are profound – they're mostly colorful…and all are wonderful.

Robert Dowd (on the right) was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1936. After his discharge from the U.S. Marines in 1957 he entered the Society of Arts and Crafts/Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, Michigan where he studied painting. In 1958-59 he began drawing common objects, including *"STOP"* signs. In 1960, he moved to San Francisco and began painting images of postage stamps. In 1961, Dowd moved to Los Angeles and began work on his extensive series of currency paintings. By 1962 he gained fame with his pictures of money. Robert painted a full range of currency: large sized, small sized and fractional. His artwork was embraced by the art community and made its way into galleries and museums. In 1962, Dowd married fellow artist Mara Devereux. It was a strong marriage and both their careers prospered. She was with Dowd until he died in 1996. Devereux, who is still alive at 97, said in 2013: *"Robert was the one who told me, made me realize, I am a free spirit. He wanted me to express that. I had never been told that before him. And he was a genius."*



In the 1960's the pop artists grew in popularity and became the defining art movement of the period. Along with Dowd's contemporaries (e.g. Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Jim Dine, Phillip Hefferton, Edward Ruscha, Wayne Thiebaud), the common and colorful images of everyday things became mainstream and "Pop Art" usurped abstract expressionism as the most popular art form in the public's eye. Gone were formless drip paintings of Jackson Pollack replaced by paintings of items familiar and instantly recognizable. A painting by Andy Warhol of (200) one-dollar bills sold for $43.8 million a few years ago. High art indeed!

The $10 *"BUX"* painting on the first page and the $5 *"CASH"* painting shown on the left are examples of Dowd's grasp of one of the most basic parts of everyday life. Money has a universal reach, but beyond the financial institutions and banks that are driven by the abstract meaning of money, Dowd has redefined it to the street level. For the common folks, it is not about the concept; it is about the actual, physical money - cold hard cash. The term *"CASH"* is as basic as it comes. But then again, Robert simplifies the concept even further by shortening the 5-letter word *"BUCKS"* to 3 letters: *"BUX"*.

SHREDDED ART SERIES

By reducing money into fragments Dowd was mimicking the government's practice of shredding old worn money when it was taken out of circulation. While the shredded money no longer has any purchasing power, Dowd still viewed it worthy of artistic interpretation. Shown below is a reconstructed $5, $10 and $50 bill. The out of sequence positioning of the note strips could be viewed as a metaphor of life. After all, isn't life a series of random events?

Asked why he loved to paint money as a cultural image, Dowd was quoted:

"Money is a powerful blend of American literature, document and symbol. Forget that it illustrates a complete monetary system of unimaginable proportions or that it represents destinies of nations and men. What we are dealing with here is a marvelous form of American literature of epic proportions in the proud tradition of P.T. Barnum and tabloid journalism."

DOWD MASTERPIECE: LINCOLN $5 TOMB

This somber painting of Abraham Lincoln was purposely composed as a tombstone. Entitled *Lincoln $5 Tomb* – it portrays Lincoln as a victim. Dowd snuffed out the former president's eyes and mouth implying his life was suddenly taken from us. The aura of death is further reinforced by the black background. The misspelling United States to *"NIED STAT OF A"* and Five Dollars as *"FIVF DOLAP"* could possibly point to confusion of life in the United States at the time of Lincoln's assassination. The depiction is poignant and heartfelt and considered one of Dowd's masterpieces.

Lincoln was a favorite subject of Dowd; he painted his portrait often. Robert frequently omitted letters and numbers. The painting on the left drops the final "E" in STATES. The image on the right is missing "T" in UNITED, the "E" in FIVE, the "E" in FEDERAL, one numeral in the serial number, etc.

DISASTER AT THE TREASURY PAINTINGS

The pair of *"Disaster at the Treasury"* paintings is another example of Robert's wit. The grand neoclassical Treasury building exudes a powerful authority. But in the hands of Dowd, he deconstructs that authority as the building is laid siege by a fire and a tornado. It does not seem like a coincidence that the "IN GOD WE TRUST" motto is partially obliterated by the twin disasters. The handwritten description at the bottom of each painting reflects his liberal viewpoint. With the calamities at the Treasury building, the power temporarily moves from the government to the common people. A dream scenario for the anarchists of the late 1960's is realized.

The caption on the bottom of <u>"Fire at U.S. Treasury (1968)":</u> *The great U.S. Treasury fire: 12:42 p.m. fire broke out on the top floor of the Treasury Building, sending clouds of black smoke into the Washington sky. A major threat to our nation's money supply was averted when hundreds of on-lookers dashed into the building, jammed their pockets full of new bills and ran for safety. Many are still running."*

The caption under <u>"Tornado at U.S. Treasury (1968)":</u> *A deadly tornado ripped through the U.S. Treasury Building yesterday destroying the structure. Officials said the twister sucked up one hundred million dollars and it's believed the money is swirling around in the "eye" of the tornado. Towns in the storm's path report people are standing in open fields with bushel baskets"*

THE SECRET SERVICE AND FBI TAKE AIM AT DOWD AS A COUNTERFEITER

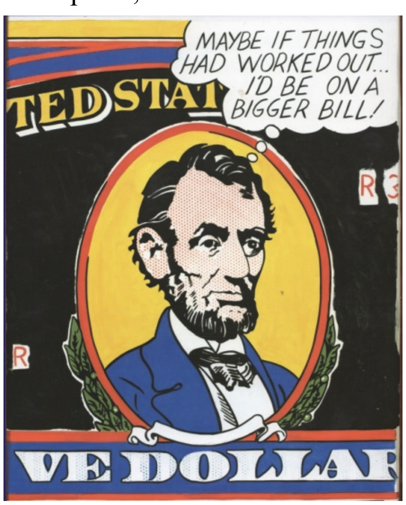
Creating currency paintings came at a steep cost to Dowd. The height of Robert's popularity in the 1960's came at a time of social unrest. The FBI and the Secret Service viewed the growing anti-establishment movement with suspicion sparking claims that by painting pictures of money, it implicated Dowd as a counterfeiter. Dowd was caught in the crosshairs as he was investigated and persecuted by the government agencies. What was ignored was the art community's assertion that Dowd's right of freedom of expression was being suppressed. It seems laughable by today's sensibilities that paintings of currency could be considered counterfeit. But things were different 60 years ago and unfortunately for Dowd his fascination with painting currency caught the attention of the Secret Service who was working with FBI on the investigation. Dowd explains that in 1963, two agents from the Secret Service knocked on the door of his studio. They took him to the Federal building in downtown LA, where they sternly read to him a litany of counterfeiting laws that he was breaking. From Dowd: *"They were attempting to intimidate me with all these threats. It was really a matter of them attempting to tell me that if I continued to paint money, that I would be arrested for counterfeiting; that I was breaking the law. They did have some work of mine that they had confiscated as contraband. They told me they were going to museums and collectors and confiscate all the paintings out of the collections. My situation as a young artist, struggling at that point, was that I certainly didn't need any major problems added onto my life at the moment, in terms of survival and trying to do my work".* During the period he was investigated, Robert found that many of his paintings he had in storage were ripped to shreds, missing and/or destroyed. The paintings were a year's work and were intended for a gallery showing. Dowd suspected the FBI was involved but nothing ever came of it. Dowd stopped painting currency and switched to postage stamps (though he did continue to paint currency privately).

DOWD'S HOMAGE TO GREAT ARTISTS

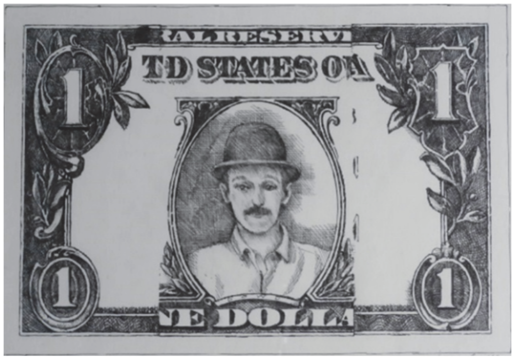
Dowd's veneration for Vincent Van Gogh is wonderfully executed on this pair of $1 bill paintings. Stylistically Dowd copies the style of the great post-impressionist master with sublime nuance. The first image in the upper left is the actual Van Gogh self-portrait. The others are $1 FRN's with Van Gogh's self-portrait inserted in George Washington's usual spot.

The admiration of the great masters continues. In this painting, Dowd appropriates Picasso's iconic *Portrait of a Woman with a Hat* for the note's portrait. Considered one of Picasso's last masterpieces – it was created in 1962, when he was 81 making it contemporaneous to the $1 Picasso bill painting. In keeping with the vibrant theme, Dowd employs bright, cheery colors in the note's background.

The great post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin (a contemporary and friend of Van Gogh) is beautifully executed by Dowd in yet another $1 bill painting. On the right, *Self-Portrait with a Yellow Christ*, an 1890 Gauguin materpeice, is front and center in this Dowd depiction. Note the use of orange in the seal and serial numbers. It is a central color theme of Gauguin's work that Dowd used in his rendering.



In the painting on the left, Robert pays his respect and reverence to pop art icon Roy Lichtenstein. Even for those who are not knowledgeable about modern art should be familiar with Roy Lichtenstein's style. His work defined the premise of pop art through parody. Inspired by the comic strip, Lichtenstein produced precise compositions in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Lichtenstein worked in primary colors and often included Ben-Day dots, all the same size and used mostly as a cheap way of rendering color in comic books. The painting shown on the right, *Reverie*, is classic Lichtenstein which Dowd employs on his Lincoln $5 bill. The caption: *"MAYBE IF THINGS WORKED OUT...I'D BE ON A BIGGER BILL*!" is Dowd using Lichtenstein's often sullen introspection of comic book characters in his depiction of Lincoln.



Dowd has a little fun and gives himself an ego boost with this disarming self-portrait. Looking quite dapper in a vintage bowler hat, crisp oxford shirt and neatly trimmed mustache, Robert is the picture of serenity. Note his name under the portrait. As he has done frequently in the past, Dowd executed this painting as part of his 'folded money series'.

Robert inserted a portrait of Albert Einstein on this 'folded series' painting of a $50 Federal Reserve note. It is cleverly titled *E=MC 50".* America's greatest general, U.S. Grant, has been replaced by history's greatest physicist. Some could argue that Einstein turned science into art. Note the $E=MC^2$ equation (Theory of Relativity) below the portrait.

DOWD ON FRACTIONAL CURRENCY

Much of Dowd's currency painting was just a straight artistic interpretation. Shown are 4 different fractional notes. The first is a 3¢ 3rd issue fractional. The background behind Washington is decidedly dark; hence, it is an Fr. 1227 - dark portrait note. The rendering is quite accurate with some green shading. The 4th issue 10¢ Liberty fractional is faithfully reproduced albeit in a softer manner. With the 5th issue 25¢ (Walker) and 50¢ (Crawford) Fractional, Dowd took more artistic liberties. The portrait and seal have the feeling of a charcoal drawing

OTHER DOWD CURRENCY PAINTIGS

First row: The \$10 Hamilton note is another example of Dowd omitting numbers and letters. The \$50 FRN of Grant in another in his 'folded currency note' series. On the \$20 FRN, Jackson's portrait opens to reveal a bank with money pouring out…implying an endless amount of cash available at the bank. 2nd row: Undated \$100 FRN and 1900 \$10,000 gold note. 3rd row: 1840 \$1,000 Bank of the U.S. note; 1934 series \$100,000 gold certificate with the portrait of Woodrow Wilson. 4th row: Impressionistic rendering of a \$1 FRN back apltly entitled *Half Dollar*; 1990's era colorful \$100 FRN – note the ubiquitous bar code in the upper left corner.

In this final painting, Dowd produced a softer rendering of the iconic 1896 $1 Educational Note. The top is Dowd's work entitled *$1 Silver Dollar*. The bottom is the actual U.S. issued note. Dowd subtly omits many elements such as the names of famous Americans within the reef of laurel leaves, the stars on History's sash, the text on the Constitution tablet, the titles under Tillman/Morgan's names, or any of the printing above/below "ONE SILVER DOLLAR." Also notice how UNITED STATES of AMERICA" morphs into UNITED STAES AMERICA." You can sense Dowd pushing the limits, challenging us to notice what is missing.

If pop art is defined as taking ordinary popular culture and imbuing it with a deeper meaning, then Dowd has certainly succeeded. He understood the the abstract value placed on a piece of paper (currency) is complex. The messages contained in his paintings are thoughtful and worthy of deeper contemplation. His paintings of money stand the test of time and while he was not as famous as Warhol or Lichtenstein, his contribution to the artistic community are nonetheless important and have a lot to say about the world around us. There is no arguing that Robert Dowd was a pop art icon. Unfortunately he died of advanced kidney disease at the young age of 60. Being an independent artist, he never had health insurance and could not afford a kidney transplant or the dialysis treatments that could have prolonged his life. A sad ending for a artisically productive life. He passed away in Los Angeles in 1996.

Much thanks must be extended to the Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art and Pepperdine University for their seminal work on Robert Dowd – Pop Art Money (2009). Also to the late Michael Zakian, author of the Dowd Catalogue. Finally to my son David who aided me on the editing of this article.