



Johns, Jasper (b. 1930)

by Jeffery Byrd

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Known for his iconic yet cryptic paintings, Jasper Johns is a key figure in the transition from Modernism to Post-Modernism. He has created art with a level of detachment that runs counter to the egocentric position dearly held by the Abstract Expressionist painters one generation his senior and helped to establish a philosophy in which the viewer rather than the artist is at the center of the creative process.

Johns was born on May 15, 1930 in Augusta, Georgia and was raised by various relatives after his parents separated. He briefly attended college at the University of South Carolina, then moved to New York.

Johns was drafted into the United States Army in 1950. Following a tour of duty that included a six-month stay in Japan, where he developed an intense interest in Japanese art, he returned to New York and worked in a bookstore, unsure if he wanted to be a painter or a poet. After meeting painter Robert Rauschenberg, he decided to focus on painting.

The two young artists moved into the same building and saw and discussed each other's work on a daily basis. Together they created art based on recognizable images of the outside world rather than the self-expressive abstractions favored by the Abstract Expressionists. Johns created *Painting with Two Balls* (1960) as what seems to be a witty spoof of the overt macho posturing of the New York School.

Johns is best known for his paintings of easily recognizable images, such as the American flag, targets, or maps of the United States. Johns selected these subjects with great detachment, choosing things that he did not have to design himself. He has frequently stated that this mode of selection freed him to think of other aspects of the work, although he does not elaborate on what these other concerns might be.

His interest may be in the intricate surfaces he is able to create through the encaustic process. This ancient method of suspending pigment in wax allows Johns to create rich layered surfaces in which he includes a variety of collaged materials.

Johns also painted a series based on numbers using common commercially available stencils. Stencil alphabet letters also appear in works such as *Tennyson* (1958), which has little to do with the literary figure except that his name appears stenciled across the bottom of the monochromatic gray canvas.

Although Rauschenberg was somewhat more established when they met, Johns was the partner who received the most attention for his work early on. Indeed, he became famous in the art world almost overnight, following a solo exhibition at the prestigious Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958; all the paintings exhibited in this show were sold, including four that were purchased by the New York Museum of Modern Art. This disparity in success may have led to the painters' separation in 1961, but none of this is immediately evident in their art.

Through Rauschenberg, Johns met composer John Cage, whose interest in Zen Buddhism also had a great impact on the two. Johns designed sets and costumes and served as an artistic adviser to the dance

company helmed by Cage's lover, Merce Cunningham. He collaborated with Cunningham and Cage on the ballet *Un Jour ou Deux* (1973).

The suppression of autobiography that binds the work of Johns, Rauschenberg, and Cage does not lend itself to the expression of explicit gay content. While Rauschenberg seems to have made bows to the initiated (by including images of gay icon Judy Garland, for instance), Johns has made only oblique references to gay poets Hart Crane and Frank O'Hara in his titles. His images have always remained enigmatic and grew increasingly puzzling during the 1970s and 1980s.

Johns' crosshatch paintings, such as *Weeping Women* (1975), are totally non-objective compositions of repeated lines that seem to have been created through a Cage-inspired system randomly determining the overall design of the work.

The *Tantric Detail Series* (1980-1981) features a pair of testicles. This image does not seem particularly erotic, however, since it is paired with a skull and seems more appropriately grouped in the art historical tradition of the *vanitas*, which emphasizes the vanity and transience of all human endeavors when seen from the light of eternity. Such a reading of the image is consistent with the artist's concern in his later work both to catalogue and deconstruct many art historical traditions.

Now in his seventies, Johns enjoys an honored place in the pantheon of American artists. Not only has he received numerous honors and accolades, but his paintings, which regularly sell for astounding sums, are eagerly sought by collectors and museums around the world.

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Jeffery Byrd, Professor of Art at the University of Northern Iowa, is a performance artist and photographer whose work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions and journals. He has performed at New York City's Lincoln Center and Alternative Museum, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, Chicago's N.A.M.E. Gallery, and Cleveland's Performance Festival.