

Teacher Resource
KS1 / KS2

Jasper Johns

‘Something Resembling Truth’

RA

Royal Academy of Arts

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‘Take an object / Do something to it / Do something else to it’

Jasper Johns sketchbook note, 1963–64

Introduction

‘One hopes for something resembling truth, some sense of life, even of grace, to flicker, at least, in the work.’ Jasper Johns, 2006

Born in 1930, Jasper Johns is considered to be one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. Over the course of his 60-year career, he has re-examined and repurposed a set of images including flags, targets, numbers and maps, motifs that have become his own visual vocabulary. Through his interrogation of these everyday things, Johns challenges us to rethink how we perceive the world, and art itself.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Johns's renditions of flat symbols and signs introduced a counterpoint to the large, gestural canvases of the Abstract Expressionists who dominated the New York art world and for whom self-expression was paramount. Drawing attention instead to things which were so familiar that they were 'seen but not looked at, not examined', Johns challenged the notion, which lay at the heart of Abstract Expressionism, that the main purpose of art was to communicate one's inner self.

After establishing himself as a painter and sculptor in the 1950s, in 1960 Johns began making lithographs. Printmaking soon proved to be an ideal tool for an artist concerned with repetition and re-examination, providing Johns with a means to manipulate over and over again the motifs that informed his paintings. Similarly, he used sculpture as a means of questioning 'things the mind already knows', as he has put it, casting torches, ale cans and objects from his studio in bronze, wittily reformulating everyday objects as precious works of art.

Johns is private, introspective and profoundly contemplative by nature. From his early career, he has been reluctant to reveal too much of himself in his work, creating art that is impersonal and objective. That said, over the course of his life he has gradually given more of himself away through the use of an increasingly personal iconography, a process he has referred to as 'dropping the reserve'. His most recent paintings, and those he continues to work on, can be read as moving meditations on life, loss, memory and the passage of time.

Exhibition organised by the Royal Academy of Arts, London in collaboration with The Broad, Los Angeles.

Read more



Encaustic on canvas, 105.1 x 154.9 cm
 Private collection © Jasper Johns / VAGA,
 New York / DACS, London 2017. Photo: Jamie Stukenberg
 © The Wildenstein Plattner Institute, 2017

Flag 1958

Jasper Johns began painting the American flag in the 1950s and by 2002 he had created around a hundred different versions of it in paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures. By using this pre-existing symbol with its familiar stars and stripes as his subject matter, Johns is able to question what a painting is and how it differs from what it represents. Johns painted this Flag from 1958 using encaustic, a mix of liquid wax and paint that dries extremely quickly. The result is a highly textured surface on the canvas, where you can see every single brushstroke.

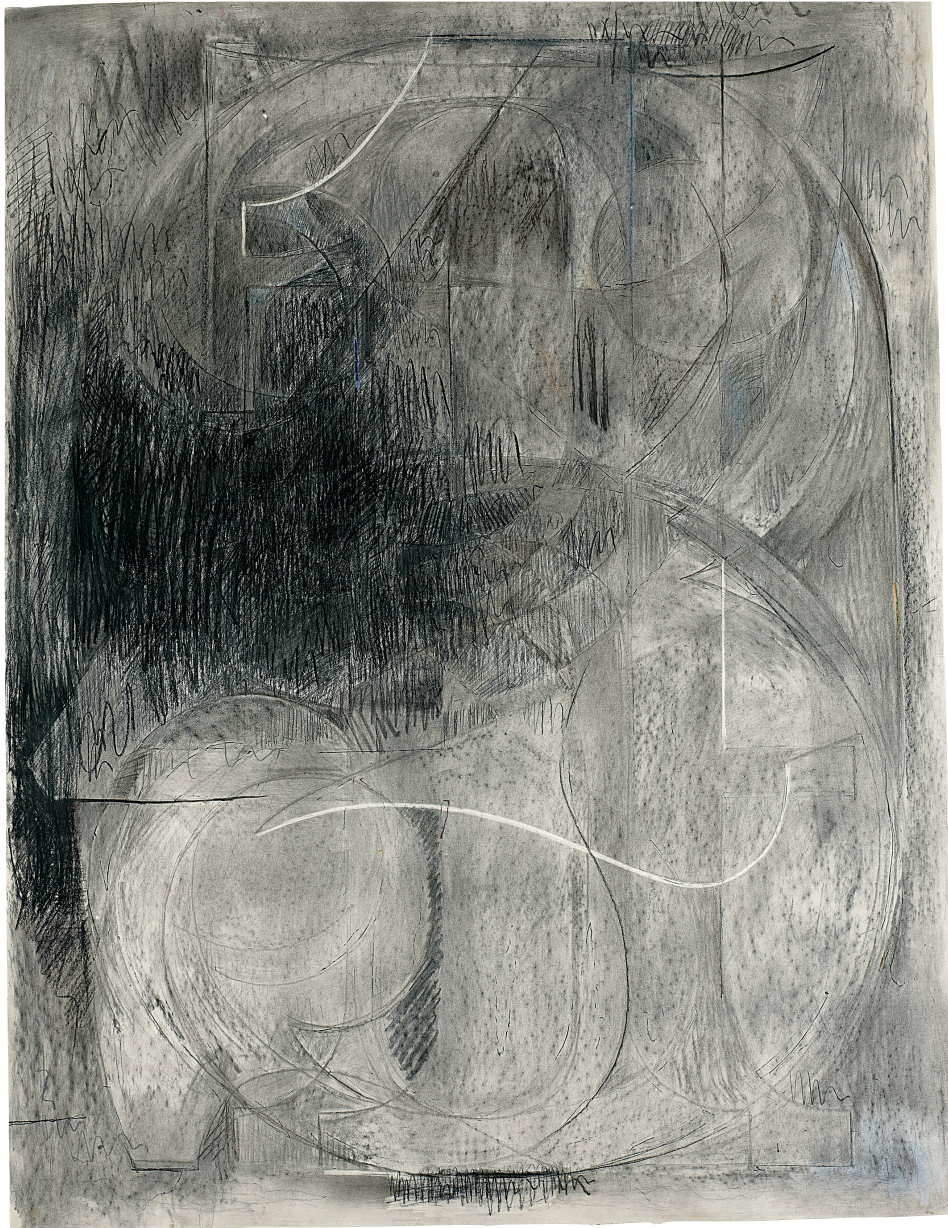
What signs, symbols, patterns or colours can you see on Jasper Johns's Flag?

How is a painting of a flag different from an actual flag?

Different flags all over the world have different meanings, and flags do not always represent countries. What other uses can you think of for a flag?

Key themes

Signs and symbols
Everyday objects
Around the World
Identity
British values



Charcoal and pastel on paper, 137.5 x 105.7 cm
 Private collection © Jasper Johns / VAGA, New York / DACS, London 2017.
 Photo: courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

0 through 9 1961

Numbers play a big part in Johns's visual vocabulary. He created different compositions in different sizes to explore the shapes and patterns numbers could make. Sometimes, the numbers are very small-scale and laid out sequentially to cover a canvas, or made into a flat sculpture. In this large drawing he layered the numbers one on top of the other.

In this work, through his choice of scale and layering, Johns reduces the numbers to their shape and form. As a result, you see abstract, fragmented shapes and lines rather than the numbers themselves. By making the individual numbers hard to see, Johns makes the overall composition more important than the value or meaning of the numbers, rendering this familiar numerical vocabulary unfamiliar.

Look carefully at this drawing. What numbers can you see?

What does Johns do to disguise or hide the individual numbers?

What do you use numbers for? (Discuss examples of using numbers in day-to-day life, counting, dates, birthdays, addresses, phone numbers, currency)

What does Johns use numbers for?
 Why do you think Johns was interested in drawing numbers?

Key themes

Language
Signs and symbols
Scale
Layering
Numbers



Encaustic on canvas, 190.5 x 127 cm
 © Jasper Johns / VAGA, New York / DACS, London.
 Photo: Courtesy the National Gallery of Art, Washington

Spring 1986

Spring is one of four paintings known collectively as 'The Seasons'. The paintings are all filled with references to Johns's earlier work and to the artist himself. In the centre of *Spring* is an outline of a man and below, one of a boy, which could be self-portraits. Paintings, including one with Johns's distinctive cross-hatching motif, are tied loosely with rope and stacked against ladders in the background. Johns uses visual tricks called *trompe l'oeil* (optical illusion) including vases that could be two faces in profile and a duck that could also be a rabbit. These visual tricks confuse us and keep us guessing, while at the same time revealing aspects of Johns's life.

This series of paintings dates to the mid-point of Johns's career and the four seasons of the year clearly serve as an allegory for the different stages of human life. Johns painted *Spring* at a time of transition in his life as he moved to a new studio and home, which is perhaps why we see the ropes and ladders keeping his possessions together.

Look carefully. Find the outlines of a man and a boy, the ladders and paintings. Find the visual tricks, vases made up of two facing profiles and the duck and rabbit.

Johns uses objects to give us information about himself. If you did a self-portrait of yourself what objects would you include to tell us more about you?

Key themes

Self-portraiture
Seasons
Individual identity



Painted bronze, 34.3 x 20.3 cm
© Jasper Johns / VAGA, New York / DACS, London 2017 /
Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Painted Bronze 1960

At first glance, this sculpture is something you might find in an artist's studio; a Savarin coffee can that is holding a mix of messy, well-used artist's brushes. When you look more closely, or even when you read the title of the work, you may realise that despite appearances, it is in fact not a real coffee can, but a painted bronze sculpture of the same thing. The artwork could be seen as a can used to hold paintbrushes, as a found-object sculpture using a real can and real brushes, or, as what it really is, a cast bronze sculpture that is painted to represent brushes in a coffee can. *Painted Bronze* challenges how we perceive and understand objects and works of art and raises the question of: 'What constitutes a piece of art?'

How is this different from a painting of a coffee can full of paintbrushes?

What other tools do artists use?

Why did Johns choose to make a sculpture of his brushes pot?

Do you think this belongs in an art gallery? Why?

Key themes

Titles
Artists' tools
Sculpture
Artists' studios

Further reading

www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/jasper-johns-beginners-guide

Anna Testar, Exhibition in Focus guide: Jasper Johns: 'Something Resembling Truth', Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2017

Roberta Bernstein (ed.), Jasper Johns, exh. Cat, Royal Academy of Arts, London, in collaboration with The Broad, Los Angeles, 2017

www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jun/24/edvard-munch-jasper-johns-sex-death-between-the-clock-and-the-bed

www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/in_depth/jasper_johns_regrets_walk_through-52234

www.theartsdesk.com/visual-arts/jasper-johns-regrets-courtald-gallery

Art activities for the classroom KS1 / KS2

Work of art	Related themes and Curriculum links	Activity outline	Resources and materials	Learning outcome
<i>Flag</i> , 1958	Themes Identity British values Signs and symbols Around the world Everyday objects Curriculum links Geography Art and design	<p>Present a mix of flags, discuss the different colours, symbols and signs found in flags and in other areas daily life.</p> <p>In groups, pupils can design a flag for their school, or a club they belong to. Think about shapes, colours, signs and symbols and what they mean and why they are including them. Make a design on paper with a pencil first, and then work it into a painting.</p>	A4 white paper, pencils, coloured pencils or felt tips, paint, coloured paper or tissue paper and scissors.	Explore the meaning of different signs and symbols, understanding how to mix different media to create a finished work. Understand find ways to represent group identities.
<i>O Through 9</i> , 1961	Themes Scale Layering Numbers Language Signs and symbols Curriculum links Art and design Maths	<p>Ask the pupils to choose four of their favourite numbers, or four numbers which mean something to them. Using a pencil, stencil the numbers onto an A4 piece of white paper so they overlap. Encourage pupils to be creative with their compositions, overlapping all the numbers one on top of another but moving some slightly to the side to vary the end result. Get them to think about the composition and the rhythm of the abstract shapes and pattern they create with the lines that overlap.</p> <p>Discuss: Can you still see the numbers? How are they disguised? What shapes can you see?</p> <p>Ask pupils to choose two complementary colours and colour in the different shapes they have created. Show a colour wheel and talk about primary, secondary and complementary colours.</p>	<p>A4 white paper, pencils, pens and paint or coloured pencils.</p> <p>Create or supply stencils of numbers which are as big as an A4 piece of paper.</p>	Discover pattern and how familiar shapes (numbers) can become abstract through layering. Explore complementary colours and what primary or secondary colours are.

Art activities for the classroom KS1 / KS2

Work of art	Related themes and Curriculum links	Activity outline	Resources and materials	Learning outcome
<i>Spring</i> , 1986	Themes Self-portraiture Individual identity Seasons Curriculum links Art and design Personal and social education	<p>In small groups ask pupils to talk about:</p> <p>What represents you? Think about things you like to do and objects that represent your hobbies. Draw one thing that represents you.</p> <p>Then, ask them to use images from magazines and collage to create a self-portrait, adding images that represent them. Add paint on top of the collage.</p>	Newspaper or magazines, paint, A3 paper, glue.	Understand what a self-portrait is and how things we do or objects can be used to represent us as individuals in art.