

Teacher Resource

KS3 / KS4 / KS5

Jasper Johns

‘Something Resembling Truth’

RA

Royal Academy of Arts

23 September – 10 December 2017

‘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.

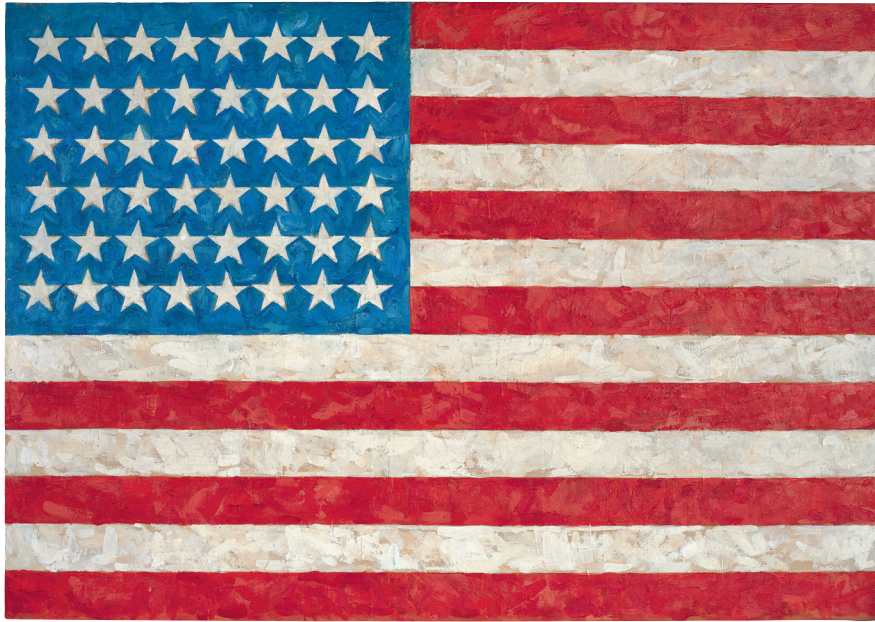
In the 1950s and 1960s, Johns's renditions of flat symbols and signs introduced a counterpoint to the large, gestural canvases of the Abstract Expressionists who dominated the New York art world and for whom self-expression was paramount. Drawing attention instead to things which were so familiar that 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's the difference between a flag and a painting of a flag?

Does this flag's location (in a gallery) make it more or less important than an actual flag, which is hung from a flagpole in public or in someone's house?

Johns insisted that his depiction of the American flag was never politically motivated. Do you think a flag is political? Why do you think this?

How does Johns's use of encaustic remind you that this is a painting of a flag, not an actual flag?

Go further

Investigate the creation of the US flag. How might this work have been viewed when it was painted in 1958?

Read more about the significance of the US flag [here](#).

Does the fact Johns's work is a painting of the flag, not a fabric flag, alter how we should treat it?

Key themes

Signs and symbols
 Everyday objects
 Identity
 Surface
 Politics



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.

Describe what you see in this painting.

What are the different visual illusions you can see?

What suggests this painting is about the passing of time?

What does the painting suggest about the connotations of spring?

Go further

Johns partly modelled his work after Picasso's autobiographical painting titled ***Minotaur Moving His House (1936)***

How is this work similar and how is it different to *Spring*?

Look at the other paintings by Johns in 'The Seasons'. How do they differ and how are they similar?

Key themes

Self-portraiture
 Seasons
 Introspection



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 not in fact 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 toys with our perception and our idea of what constitutes a piece of art, all the while referencing artists such as Marcel Duchamp, who created comparable works including *Fountain*. When Duchamp submitted a urinal as a piece of art to an open-submission show in 1917, he subverted the accepted norms of what constitutes art.

What is the effect of the title of this artwork *Painted Bronze*?

In what ways is this sculpture different from a painting of an artist's paintbrushes?

Could you still consider it art if Johns had placed an actual paint pot on a plinth?

Why do you think Johns chose to make a sculpture of his paint pot and brushes?

Johns made this work when he was 30. To what extent could you say it was a self-portrait?

Go further

Look at *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp.

How does this work have a similar effect to Johns's *Painted Bronze*?

Look at *Nomad*, 2003 by Gavin Turk.

Like Johns, Turk has also used painted bronze to create his realistic sculptures. Discuss how you would feel seeing Turk's work in an art gallery. Would you consider them art?

Key themes

Titles

Artist's tools

The gallery space

Sculpture

Self-portraiture



Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 165.1 x 137.5 cm
Collection of the artist © Jasper Johns / VAGA, New York / DACS, London 2017.
Photo: Jamie Stukenberg © The Wildenstein Plattner Institute, 2017

Painting with Two Balls 1960

In the late 1950s, Johns moved away from the depictions of the flat signs and symbols that had brought him acclaim. He began to fill his canvases with a vibrant palette of energetic brushstrokes which seemed to be in dialogue with Abstract Expressionism, or 'Action Painting'.

Like many of Johns's works, the title of this painting describes what you are looking at: a painting with two balls inserted into it. Johns also inscribed the title, date and his name along the bottom of the canvas. Johns covered the surface, made up of three pieces of canvas, with bright, agitated brushstrokes in mainly primary colours. Underneath, we see pieces of newspaper collaged onto the canvas, emphasising its flatness. Then there are the two balls wedged into the painting, as if they have literally broken canvas open. By revealing the wall behind, Johns provides a disconcerting reminder that the painting is an object that exists in the physical world. He emphasises the physical presence of the canvas rather than what is painted on it, and asks us to consider what a painting is rather than what it represents.

How does Jasper Johns emphasise the physical properties of this painting? What is the effect of the primary colours, collage under the paint, and the split in the canvas?

Think about 2D versus 3D. Are paintings always completely 2D?

Does a painting always need a title? What does a title need to say about the work?

What is the effect of Johns's use of primary colours?

Go further

Look at *Deflated (Green)*, 2010 by Angela de la Cruz and *No Woman No Cry*, 1998 by Chris Ofili.

How do these two artists play with the idea of the painting as object?

Key themes

The painting as object
Manipulating the canvas
Abstraction
Colour
Materials



Between the Clock and the Bed 1981

'I think I began the crosshatch paintings as simple mathematical variations about how space can be divided.' Jasper Johns, 1988

The mesmerising crosshatching pattern you can see in this painting dominated Johns's work through the 1970s and early 80s. It originated from when he was on the motorway and had a fleeting glimpse of a pattern on a car. The pattern consists of small groups of parallel lines arranged in opposing directions with no two lines touching. The result is partly geometric, partly organic, and seems as though it could repeat infinitely. What appears as a repetitive decorative pattern, however, is in fact much more rigorous and varied. If the canvas were rolled into a cylinder, the edges of the crosshatchings would join up.

The crosshatchings often both reveal and conceal further layers of marks which flicker in and out of focus, provoking us to search the image for clarity, hinting at change on the horizon and the constant passing of time. Although *Between the Clock and the Bed* is a painting dominated by secondary colours – green, orange and purple – below there is a layer of crosshatchings in primary colours, red, yellow and blue. By burying the colours, the artist seems to suggest a surrendering of his long-standing reluctance to reveal himself in his art.

What do you see in this work?

Is your initial reaction to try and see something in this work? Why do you think that is?

This painting is in a room called Time and Transience – how does this work show the flow of time and space?

Go further

Look at Edvard Munch, *Self-portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed*, 1940-43.

Edvard Munch was around 80 years old when he made this painting. He portrayed himself standing in his house, flanked to his right by a grandfather clock and to his left by a bed, its bedspread distinctively patterned with red and black stripes. It is widely accepted that these items symbolised mortality and the passing of time, and that the self-portrait represents Munch coming to terms with his impending death.

Consider how old Munch was when he painted *Self-portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed*. How does Munch comment on the passing of time? How does Johns comment on it by referencing Munch's work?

Key themes

Passing of time
Pattern
Change
Perception



Regrets 2012

A torn, creased, paint-splattered photograph of the artist Lucien Freud inspired this painting.

Johns first created multiple drawings doubling, inverting and mirroring the photograph's image. He experimented with colours and a variety of marks from crosshatchings to smooth, inky brushstrokes.

In *Regrets*, the photograph's composition of a man sitting on a bed is doubled, with the flipped image placed alongside the original. The missing piece at the bottom left-hand corner is mirrored and now appears in the centre of Johns's composition as a large, abstract form resembling a tombstone. Johns first painted a complex grid of abstract forms filled with bright primary and secondary colours which he then overlaid with a network of black lines and shades of blue and grey. The original colours just peep through. The figure of the man on the bed is just about visible and the primary colours hint at his presence. The looming shape in the centre is filled with a grid-like structure, and above it a skull seems to emerge, its component shapes emphasised by crosshatchings. To the right, a lighter coloured rectangle is outlined in black. In the top right hand corner you can make out the word 'Regrets', with Johns's signature. He uses a rubber stamp of the word to decline to invitations, and the motif has made its way into the composition.

Find the mirrored image in the work. Can you see the man with his head in his hands?

Johns painted this when he was 82. How does knowing this change how you view the work? How is this work different from the flags and targets he painted in his early 20s?

Johns once said 'Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it' Discuss this in relation to *Regrets*.

Go further

Regrets is part of a series of works inspired by the photograph of Lucien Freud by John Deakin mentioned above. First Johns made a drawing of the photograph and he also produced aquatint prints, some of which are on display in the exhibition. Examine how Johns has manipulated the photograph over time.

How has it changed from the original to this painting?

Key themes

Ageing
Remorse
Materials
Photography
Process
Seasons and cycles
Abstraction

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-courtauld-gallery

Art activities for the classroom KS3 / KS4 / KS5

Work of art	Related themes and Curriculum links	Activity outline	Resources and materials	Learning outcome
<p><i>Painting with Two Balls</i>, 1960</p>	<p>Themes Painting as object Abstraction Colour Materials Manipulating the canvas</p> <p>Curriculum links Art and design Design technology</p>	<p>Ask students to spend 10 minutes making a painting (they could paint a portion of a page in their sketchbook, or a still-life).</p> <p>Once they have finished, ask them to manipulate the medium they used, the material they painted it on and think about they are going to display it.</p> <p>Could they scrunch or cut the material? Can they display it on the floor, or on the wall? Ask them to think about inserting or applying objects or other materials to the painting.</p>	<p>A2 Paper or cardboard, found 3D objects, glue, staple gun or glue guns, scissors and acrylic paint.</p>	<p>Explore a range of approaches and different materials.</p> <p>Use critical thinking to understand what the limitations of a painting are and how the medium can be manipulated or re-invented.</p>
<p><i>Regrets</i>, 2012</p> <p>(look at the series of the same name of aquatint prints in the exhibition)</p>	<p>Themes Ageing Remorse Materials Photography Process Seasons and cycles Abstraction</p> <p>Curriculum links Art and design</p>	<p>Have students find a photograph as their starting point that they can find in a newspaper, magazine (or print one out from the internet). Encourage students to think of a theme relating to the exhibition that relates to that image.</p> <p>Inspired by Jasper Johns's series <i>Regrets</i>, students will create a series of drawings inspired by the photograph, using different media and colour schemes. Get students to try using pencil, monoprinting, ink, pastels, collagraph and/or paint.</p>	<p>Photographs: from newspaper or magazines, or printed from the internet, coloured paper, paint and tissue paper.</p>	<p>Investigate the process of manipulating an image through experimenting with different media.</p> <p>Develop self-expression through a series of works on one theme.</p>

Art activities for the classroom

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Work of art	Related themes and Curriculum links	Activity outline	Resources and materials	Learning outcome
<i>Painted Bronze</i> , 1960	Themes Titles Artists' tools The gallery space Sculpture Self-portraiture Curriculum links Art and design	Discuss: do self-portraits have to be of people's faces or bodies? Have students go beyond the age of the selfie, and come up with 3 ideas for a self-portrait without using an image of themselves. Their self-portrait could be 3D or 2D. Ask them to explain why they would choose that object or theme to represent themselves before choosing one to develop into a final artwork	Sculpture materials; clay, found objects, cardboard, tape. Paint, collage materials, pencils, ink. Paper or cardboard.	Explore metaphors and symbolism in creating a self-portrait.