INTRODUCTION

This guide is for teachers bringing their middle and high school students to the exhibition An Art of Changes: Jasper Johns Prints, 1960–2018. It includes information about the artist and his work, discussion questions, and a list of additional resources for further research.

Use the guide to explore the exhibition with your students through deep looking, reflection, and interactive discussion. For the best experience, we recommend that teachers or tour group leaders read this content before visiting the Walker. Watch the welcome video at the bottom of this page to introduce the museum rules to your group.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jasper Johns (b. 1930) has been a central figure in the contemporary art world since the 1950s. Born in Georgia and raised in South Carolina, he moved to New York in 1948 and began his extensive career as a painter, sculptor, and printmaker. At his first solo exhibition in 1958, Johns dazzled the art world with his paintings of targets, numerals, and flags. Their unprecedented combination of textured surfaces and easily recognizable images established him as a fresh new voice in American art.

Although best known for his early paintings, Johns has also produced hundreds of prints since 1960. Using a wide range of printmaking techniques, including lithography, intaglio, and screenprinting, he explores the process of repeating, editing, and varying his source material and motifs. For the artist, images are always open to reconsideration, and he often returns to favorite subjects to rework them in a different scale, color, technique, or arrangement. Through these seemingly simple gestures of revisiting different signs and symbols with slight variations, Johns has spent a lifetime exploring the relationship between memory and visual perception.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

An Art of Changes celebrates Johns’s printmaking career through a selection of some 90 pieces drawn from the Walker Art Center’s complete collection of his prints as well as a small number of his paintings and sculptures. Beginning with his first lithograph, Target (1960), viewers can trace the artist’s exploration of common motifs as they are recycled, revised, or rendered differently over the course of six decades. The exhibition is arranged into four thematic sections (Signs and Systems, In the Studio, Surfaces, and Traces), showcasing familiar symbols and alphabets, abstract patterns borrowed from the environment, examinations of artists’ tools and materials, and later works teeming with more personal imagery.

“Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it. [Repeat.]”
—Jasper Johns, c. 1963–1964

Cover

“I’m merely concerned with looking and seeing and not much else.”
—Jasper Johns, 1964

ABOUT THE ARTWORK
- Johns began his career painting familiar symbols such as targets, numbers, the English alphabet, and the American flag, often considered the most iconic.
- He chose to explore these symbols because they are instantly recognizable and need no interpretation. Because he depicted familiar imagery, he did not need to invent his own subject matter. Johns has explained this created “room to work on other levels” and allowed him to explore the relationship between image, symbol, and meaning by experimenting with colors, textures, and printing techniques.
- Since 1955, Johns has made more than 100 artworks featuring the American flag in a variety of mediums, ranging from painting and sculpture to drawing and printmaking.
- In Flags I, two flags are shown sideways and backward. Johns printed the familiar red, white, and blue design over their complementary colors of green, black, and orange, which makes the image seem to vibrate.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
- Begin with a conversation about the American flag. What does the flag symbolize? What purpose does the flag serve? What thoughts and feelings does the flag bring up for you?
- Look carefully at the two flags in Flags I. What details do you notice? Compare and contrast them.
- How has Johns made these flags different from the real American flag?
- Now look at one or both of the green, black, and orange flag artworks. One is a painting from 1965 and the other is a lithograph from 1967–1968; both are titled Flags (fig. 3). Why would Johns choose to represent the flag in these colors? Do these different colors change the flag’s meaning?
- These works play with our perception of color. Tell students to find the white dot in the center of the green, black, and orange flag and stare at it for 15–20 seconds. When time is up, they should shift their gaze to the gray area and focus on the black dot in the center. They will experience a retinal afterimage of the flag in red, white, and blue.
- Indicate that there are only 48 stars on these flags. This is because these prints are based on Johns’s original painting from 1955, when there were only 48 states. (Alaska and Hawaii became states in 1959).

Give students some time to peruse the other artworks in the gallery. What motifs do they see repeated?
“At every point in nature there is something to see. My work contains similar possibilities for the changing focus of the eye.” —Jasper Johns, 1964

Find the grouping of prints titled *Savarin* and give students time to observe. Discuss the works using the prompts below, providing background information when relevant throughout the conversation.

**ABOUT THE ARTWORK**
• This section of the exhibition focuses on Johns’s studio and the materials he uses to create his work.  
• Taking inspiration from the tools and furnishings of his workspace, such as paintbrushes, canvases, rulers, brooms, lightbulbs, and even his own body, he delved into some of the questions an artist might consider when beginning a new piece. What kind of mark should be made, with what kind of tool? When an object is deconstructed, what is the relationship between the parts and the whole?
• In the 1977 print *Savarin* (fig. 6), Johns has depicted the repurposed coffee can that he used to hold his paintbrushes, with a crosshatch pattern in the background (cross-hatching is a word used in drawing or graphic design to describe the action of shading an area with intersecting sets of parallel lines).  
• Johns first used the Savarin can with brushes as a motif in a sculpture from 1960. He made the sculpture the same size as his real Savarin coffee can and painted it to resemble the original object.  
• The artist returned to this motif several times in the 1970s for a group of lithographs, a few of which are on view in this gallery.

**DISCUSSION PROMPTS**
• While the central image remains the same in all of the *Savarin* prints, the artist used different tools, colors, and mark-making techniques to create dramatically different moods. Based on what you’re able to observe, what are some of the ways that Johns has experimented with his approach to depicting this subject?
• Which elements remain the same in each print?

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“Sometimes I see it and then paint it. Other times I paint it and then see it. Both are impure situations, and I prefer neither.”

—Jasper Johns, 1959

Find the artwork titled Between the Clock and the Bed (fig. 8) and ask students to observe it for a time.

ABOUT THE ARTWORK
• This section of the exhibition looks closely at Johns’s use of patterns and shapes. Two new motifs dominated his work from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s: irregularly shaped polygons and patchwork clusters of parallel lines (like those in the Savarin lithograph from 1977). Both were abstract patterns that Johns re-created from memory after seeing them in passing in New York.
• This print was inspired by Edvard Munch’s Self-Portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed (fig. 9), which features similar crosshatch patterns. Johns has always cited the Norwegian artist as an inspiration, even stenciling Munch’s initials within one of his Savarin prints (after your discussion, go back into the last room and try to find the initials).
• In Munch’s original work, the grandfather clock represents time and the bed symbolizes death; the setting is Munch’s own home and studio. Johns represents Munch’s studio space in the upper right of Between the Clock and the Bed with an image of his own painting Usuyuki, which is also on view in this gallery.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS
• Look closely at this print and the image of Munch’s painting on the object label. Besides the title of this work, what other similarities can you spot?
• Here, Johns used the technique of appropriation (the act of taking a part or the whole of another individual’s work for one’s own use, typically without their permission). What do you think about artists borrowing from other artists like this? What exactly has Johns borrowed from Munch’s painting?
• Together, go look at the Usuyuki prints on view in this gallery. By incorporating this work into Between the Clock and the Bed, Johns is also borrowing from himself. Why do you think he does this?
“Generally, I am opposed to painting which is concerned with conceptions of simplicity. Everything looks very busy to me.”
—Jasper Johns, 1959

Find the series of four prints called The Seasons and let students observe.

ABOUT THE ARTWORK
• In the 1980s Johns began using a wide range of personal, autobiographical imagery in his work, including references to his childhood and family, objects from his home and studio, and his own artworks. These provided a rich new vocabulary for his reflections on universal human experiences such as birth, death, loss, and aging.
• These pieces are very different from his straightforward flags and targets of the 1950s. The artist was open about this shift, admitting in 1984 that he had finally “dropped the reserve,” allowing his emotions to surface. Despite the change in his subject matter, Johns continued to explore the nature of art itself by repeating and revising his motifs.
• The Seasons series includes four prints, one for each season of the year (fig. 10). Throughout the history of art, changing seasons have often been used as a symbol for the human life cycle. In this set of works, Johns uses this framework to reflect on his own life and career.
• Each of the four prints is anchored by Johns’s cast-shadow self-portrait that is accompanied by a jumble of his possessions and artworks. The artist’s shadow moves from left to right as the seasons pass, suggesting movement in space as well as time.
• Another artwork in this gallery, and the most recent work in the exhibition, Untitled (2018, fig. 10) includes a skeleton that appears to be in a similar stance to the figure that appears in each of The Seasons prints.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS
• What formal techniques has Johns used to represent the changing of seasons in these prints?
• What objects and artworks can you identify in the four prints that make up The Seasons? Why would Johns include these?
• The changing of the seasons is a strong reference to mortality. What do you think the artist is trying to say about death and aging with this series?
• Do you think that the shadowy figure in The Seasons and the skeleton in Untitled are the same figure? Why or why not? Why do you think Johns has represented such a similar figure in both?

“Generally, I am opposed to painting which is concerned with conceptions of simplicity. Everything looks very busy to me.”
—Jasper Johns, 1959


Jasper Johns, The Seasons (Summer), 1987

WHAT IS PRINTMAKING?
Printmaking is an art form that involves the transfer of an image created on wood, metal, or glass onto another surface, usually paper. One type of printmaking that is familiar to most people is the use of a rubber stamp dabbed on an ink pad. Printmaking allows an artist to create multiple copies of a design. There are several different types of printmaking, but the three that are most commonly practiced by Johns are described here.

LITHOGRAPHY
To make a lithograph (fig. 13), the printmaker draws or paints an image on a limestone block or metal plate using a greasy substance such as a wax crayon. A chemical mixture is then applied to the image in order to securely bond it to the stone or plate. Next, the surface is dampened with water, which moistens all the non-greasy areas. The printmaker applies an oil-based ink, which adheres only to the greasy drawing material. A damp piece of paper is laid on top of the inked surface and passed through a lithography press, transferring the design to the paper. The stone can then be re-inked and used to make multiple copies of the image. Lithography was the first technique Johns tried when he began making prints in 1960.

INTAGLIO
Intaglio (fig. 14) refers to a group of techniques, including etching, drypoint, aquatint, mezzotint, sugar lift, and spit bite, in which an image is incised into the surface of a metal plate. To make an etching, a plate is covered with an acid-resistant material. Using a pointed tool, the artist scrapes away parts of the substance to create an image. The plate is then immersed in acid, which bites into the metal where it was exposed. After the plate is cleaned and ink is rubbed into the grooves, it is passed through a press. The image can be made darker through additional acid baths, which deepen the lines so that they hold more ink. This basic process is followed for most other intaglio techniques, with variations in materials and tools. Johns often combine several intaglio processes in one print.

SCREENPRINTING
Screenprinting (fig. 15) is a relatively simple graphic process. A fine mesh made of silk, nylon, or another material is stretched tightly over a frame. The artist cuts a stencil, adheres it to the fabric, and presses ink through the mesh using a stiff rubber blade called a squeegee. One color is printed at a time, but multiple screens can be printed on top of each other to create more complex images. Screenprinting was developed for use in commercial products such as signage, clothing, and ceramics, but has also been widely used by visual artists.

PRINTMAKING TECHNIQUES
Illustrated explainers from the Met:
• Lithography
• Etching
• Screenprinting
• Engraving
• Woodcutting

INFORMATION ABOUT PRINTMAKING


RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

To further support engagement with this exhibition, we recommend the following references for teachers and students:

ARTICLES AND MORE INFORMATION ON JASPER JOHNS
- RA Magazine (Royal Academy London) article
AN ART OF CHANGES:
JASPER JOHNS PRINTS, 1960–2018
FEBRUARY 16–SEPTEMBER 20, 2020
WALKER ART CENTER

An Art of Changes surveys Johns’s printmaking practice through a selection of some 90 works in a variety of mediums. Viewers can trace the artist’s exploration of common motifs as they are recycled, revised, or rendered differently over the course of six decades. For information about in-gallery experiences, visit walkerart.org.

An Art of Changes: Jasper Johns Prints, 1960–2018 is organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Major support is provided by Martha and Bruce Atwater and Judy Dayton. Additional support is provided by Robert and Rebecca Pohlad and Annette and John Whaley.

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ABOUT THE WALKER ART CENTER
The Walker Art Center, located across from the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, is an interdisciplinary contemporary art center committed to supporting the creative expression of artists and the active engagement of audiences. Walker Education supports learning for people of all ages, abilities, and familiarity with contemporary and modern art.

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This project is made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.