

WALKER



How the Walker Art Center Acquired Every Print Jasper Johns Ever Made

By Joan Rothfuss
Feb 11, 2020



Jasper Johns working at Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York, 1966.
Photo: Ugo Mulas, courtesy Universal Limited Art Editions

Filed to Sightlines

In late 1987, the Walker's curator of prints and drawings, Elizabeth Armstrong, was contacted by the Lorence-Monk Gallery in New York with an extraordinary offer. It had a client who wanted to sell a collection of 317 prints by Jasper Johns—everything the artist had produced up to that point. No public institution in the world owned a complete collection of graphic work by this iconic American artist. Armstrong knew this was a rare opportunity, one that no museum would likely have again, so she took the offer to the Walker's director, Martin Friedman.

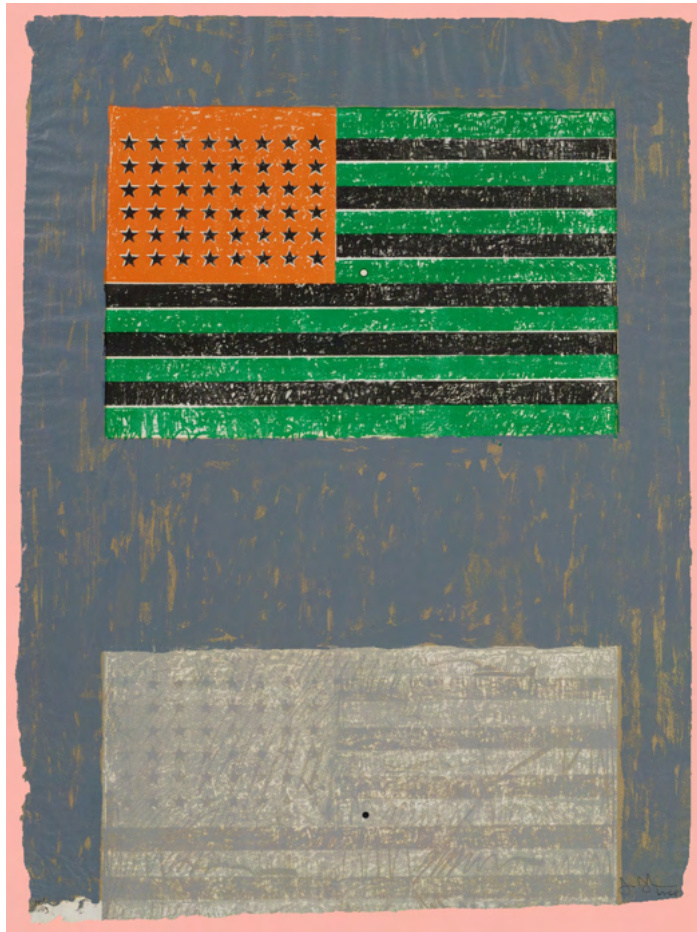
They agreed that the acquisition would make perfect sense for the Walker. It was true that Johns was best known as a painter; his canvases of flags, targets, and numerals had stunned the art world in 1958 and led the way for the development of Pop art. But printmaking had been an essential part of his practice since 1960, when he made his first lithograph. By 1987, many considered him the 20th century's most important practitioner of the medium. His prints were coveted by collectors, brought record prices at auction, and had recently been the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The Walker's collection already included 75 of his lithographs but lacked many of his most important prints, and had no examples of his efforts in intaglio, relief, or screenprinting. Armstrong and Friedman felt that if they passed on the offer the prints would only get more expensive and would eventually be out of the museum's reach.



Jasper Johns, *Target*, 1960, lithograph on paper. Collection Walker Art Center.
©Jasper Johns and ULAE/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



Jasper Johns, *Skin with O'Hara Poem*, 1963–1965, lithograph on paper. Collection Walker Art Center. ©Jasper Johns and ULAE/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



Jasper Johns, *Flags*, 1967–1968, lithograph on paper. Collection Walker Art Center.
©Jasper Johns and ULAE/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



Jasper Johns, *Fool's House*, 1972, lithograph on paper. Collection Walker Art Center.
 ©Jasper Johns and Gemini GEL/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

The timing of the offer was opportune in another way: the acquisition would support the Walker's recent push to become a leading center for the study of contemporary prints. In 1984, the McKnight Print Study Room had opened, along with two new galleries devoted to the exhibition of works on paper. This major commitment to the medium had immediately attracted gifts from a handful of prominent artists, including Sol Lewitt, who donated 239 prints; Claes Oldenburg, who gave 225 drawings, prints, and studies; and Robert Motherwell, who contributed 158 prints. Master printer Ken Tyler donated 570 prints published by his Los Angeles workshop, Gemini GEL. The Johns acquisition would add luster to an already distinguished collection. Armstrong and Friedman decided to pursue it. A price was negotiated, and funds were donated by Judy and Kenneth Dayton, longtime supporters of the Walker and devotees of Johns's work. In October 1988, a press release went out announcing the acquisition of 242 prints—the original 317 offered, minus the 75 already in the collection. It was noted that an arrangement had been made with the seller to supply the Walker with one copy of every print Johns made thereafter, ensuring that the archive would always be complete.



Jasper Johns hammering into embossing plate for *Four Panels from Untitled 1972* (1974) at Gemini GEL, Los Angeles. ©1974 Sidney B. Felsen



Jasper Johns drawing onto aluminum lithography plate for *0 through 9* (1977) at Gemini GEL, Los Angeles. ©1977 Sidney B. Felsen



Jasper Johns applying liquid tusche to lithography plate for *Periscope* (1978) at Gemini GEL, Los Angeles. ©1978 Sidney B. Felsen



Jasper Johns drawing onto aluminum lithography plate for *0 through 9* (1977) at Gemini GEL, Los Angeles. ©1977 Sidney B. Felsen

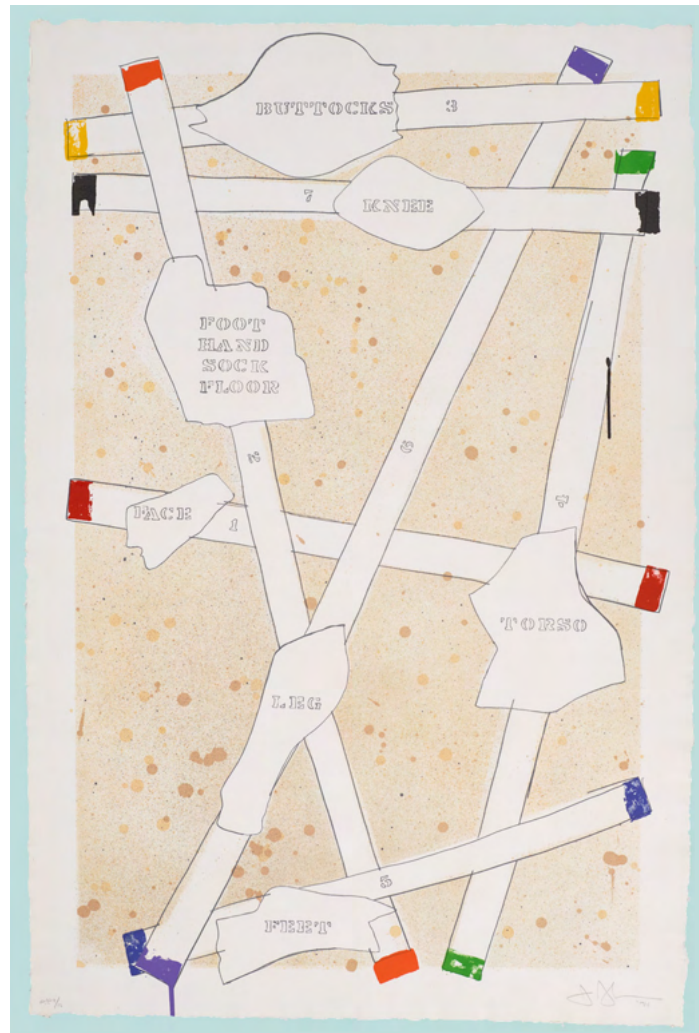
The seller, it turned out, was Johns himself.

According to an article in the *Star Tribune* about the acquisition, this fact wasn't revealed until after the deal was made. More surprisingly, the Walker was the only potential buyer contacted. Susan Lorence, co-owner of the gallery that had arranged the sale, explained that the Walker was chosen for its outstanding collection, programs, staff, and facilities. She also said that its location in the Midwest was a factor. This might have been Johns's preference. Growing up in rural South Carolina, he hadn't had the opportunity to see much art. Now that he was established, he was eager to make his work accessible to as many people as possible, especially young, aspiring artists. There were already significant holdings at museums in New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. With the placement of his prints in Minneapolis, audiences who lived between the coasts would have the opportunity to study both his imagery and technical process in depth.

Once the acquisition was confirmed, Johns made the Walker two generous offers. First, he proposed to donate 50 progressive proofs related to his 1979 lithograph, *Usuyuki*, which was among the prints acquired through the purchase. Study of the proofs would offer detailed information about his working method, adding another layer to the educational value of the archive. Those progressives are now part of the Walker's collection, along with 15 proofs for the intaglio *Bushbaby* (2004) the artist donated in 2005. "A group of progressive proofs shows how the various elements are put together to achieve the final work," Johns explained. "There have been exhibitions of this kind of thing, and I think they are useful explanations for students and interested public."



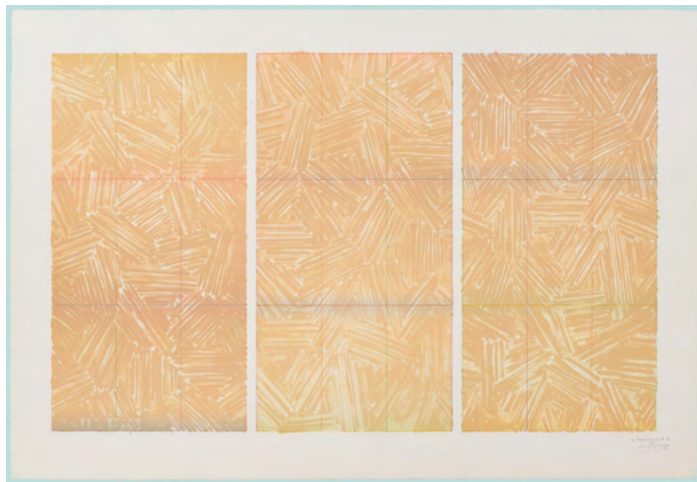
Jasper Johns, *Four Panels from Untitled 1972* (1973–1974), lithograph, embossing on paper. Collection Walker Art Center. ©Jasper Johns and Gemini GEL/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



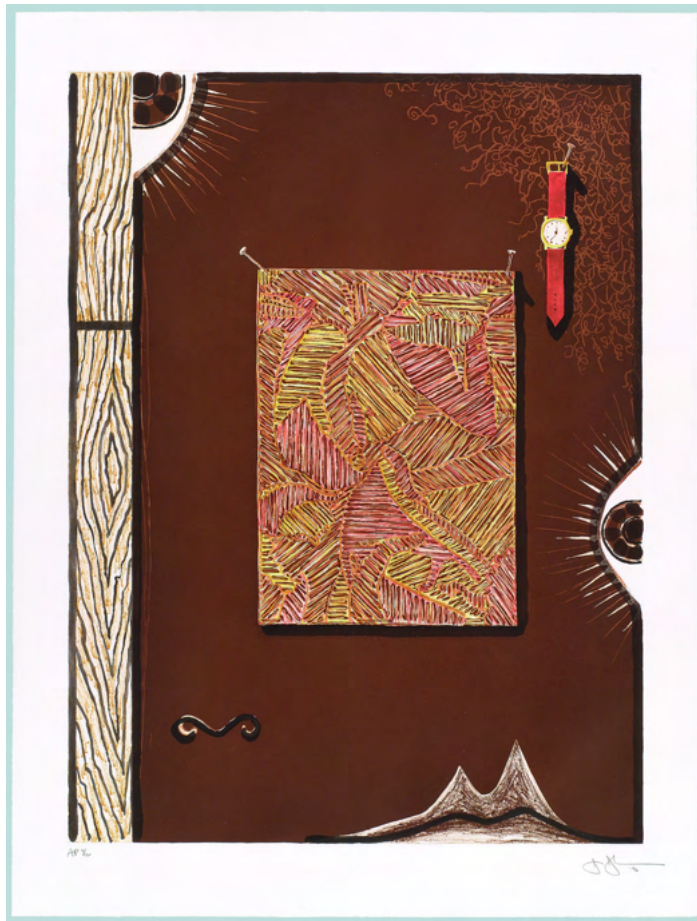
Jasper Johns, *Sketch from Untitled I*, 1974, lithograph on paper. Collection Walker Art Center. ©Jasper Johns and Gemini GEL/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



Jasper Johns, *Sketch from Untitled II*, 1974, lithograph on paper. Collection Walker Art Center. ©Jasper Johns and Gemini GEL/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



Jasper Johns, progressive proof #15 for *Usuyuki*, 1979, lithograph on paper.
Collection Waker Art Center. ©Jasper Johns and ULAE /VAGA at Artists Rights
Society (ARS), NY



Jasper Johns, *Face with Watch*, 1996, etching, aquatint on paper. Collection Walker Art Center. ©Jasper Johns and ULAE/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



Jasper Johns, *Bushbaby*, 2004, drypoint, etching, aquatint on paper. Collection Walker Art Center. ©Jasper Johns and ULAE/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 2018, intaglio with chine collé on paper. Collection Walker Art Center. ©Jasper Johns and ULAE/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

He also offered to place a painting on long-term loan at the Walker. At that time, the collection didn't include any of his canvases—a major gap in its representation of postwar American painting. He chose *Flags*, an oil painting of 1965, in which he used his most famous motif to create a visual game. If you stare at the white dot in the center of the top flag for fifteen seconds, then shift your gaze down to the black dot in the center of the gray flag, a retinal afterimage in red, white, and blue will appear. It is an entertaining perceptual exercise in which the only “correct” flag is the one created through the interaction of mind, eye, and the physics of light. Two years after he completed the *Flags* canvas, Johns made a version of it in lithography. Recycling is one of his favorite strategies. Not only does it relieve him of the need to invent new imagery, he is fascinated by what happens in the translation. “I like to repeat an image in another medium to observe the play between the two,” he said in 1964. In fact, his paintings are the source for nearly all the imagery in his prints. Sometimes he makes a close copy of an entire canvas, but more often he extracts a motif and doubles, mirrors, or rotates it, changes its color or scale, or transforms it in some other way. A single painting can become a source he returns to again and again. The four-part canvas *Untitled* (1972), for example, has spawned at least 25 prints in intaglio and lithography as well as an artist's book containing another 39 prints. One could almost think of his graphic works as offspring of his paintings: they bear a resemblance to the parent, but they are their own, fully realized individual beings.



Jasper Johns working at Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, NY, 1962. Photo: Hans Namuth, courtesy Universal Limited Art Editions

For this reason, it's possible for the Walker to fully explore Johns's aesthetic ideas through the prints alone. And it has done just that. *Jasper Johns: Printed Symbols*, a survey organized by Armstrong, opened in 1990. It presented the new collection for the first time by highlighting the various print workshops Johns had worked with. The show earned a rave review from the *New York Times* that emphasized the stand-alone nature of the print oeuvre. "[Johns's] efforts in the traditionally secondary media of drawing and printmaking have resulted in full-blown bodies of work ... with a self-contained, almost hermetic system of signs and symbols from which Johns has wrung every possible ounce of use and meaning," wrote critic Roberta Smith. After it closed in Minneapolis, the exhibition crisscrossed the continent, stopping at museums in California, New York, Texas, Missouri, Florida, and Quebec. Given his interest in sharing his work, the artist must have been pleased at the breadth of its reach.

On May 15 of this year, Johns will turn 90 years old. He is still energetically engaged in his work, and new prints arrive periodically from his studio. Most recently, we received two intaglios. *Target with Four Faces* (2017) was printed in black from a plate used in a 1979 work of the same name—the first time Johns had revisited an image in this unusual way. The second, an untitled work from 2018, depicts a skeleton in a porkpie hat surrounded by motifs used *The Seasons* (1986–1987), a series of prints in which the seasonal cycle becomes an allegory for stages in Johns’s artistic life. In the new print, the allegory is extended into the afterlife.



Jasper Johns, *Flags I*, 1973. Collection Walker Art Center. ©Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

With these latest additions, the Walker’s collection of Johns’s prints now stands at 414. About 90 of them are included in *An Art of Changes: Jasper Johns Prints, 1960–2018*, the second major survey to be drawn from the print collection. The exhibition, and the collection as a whole, give us access to one of the most inventive minds ever to have engaged with printmaking.

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 Pohlada and Annette and John Whaley.