SIGNS AND SYSTEMS

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

Johns began his work in printmaking in 1960. He turned to motifs he had already explored in painting, including targets, the American flag, numerals, and the English alphabet, describing them as "things the mind already knows." For his palette, the artist used another established system: the color wheel, which includes three primary hues (red, yellow, and blue) and three secondaries (green, violet, and orange).

Within these formal parameters, Johns did not need to invent his subject matter. Instead, he had "room to work on other levels," such as investigating the relationships between image, symbol, and meaning. Letters and numerals, for example, are marks we use to express concepts. When Johns uses them as motifs in his art, do we see them in a new way? In other works, he explores ways that the American flag in green, black, and orange could be different from the standard design in red, white, and blue.

SURFACES

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

Two new motifs dominated the artist's work from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s: patchwork clusters of parallel lines and irregularly shaped polygons. Both were based on abstract patterns Johns re-created from memory after glimpsing them in passing. He saw the parallel lines on a car painted with crosshatchings and the polygons on a faux-flagstone wall in New York. Like his flags and targets, the designs were appropriated rather than invented—or, as Johns put it, "taken ... not mine."

Four Panels from Untitled 1972 brings together these two patterns, along with an additional image depicting plaster casts of human body parts mounted on wooden slats. Johns recycled the motifs within this work in dozens of new prints, using favorite strategies such as doubling, reversing, and changing colors. While most of these pieces are abstractions, many have titles that suggest transformation, sexuality, and concealment—a few of the themes that Johns would explore more openly during the next three decades.

IN THE STUDIO

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

During the 1970s, Johns continued to explore how pictures create meaning. To do so, he turned to a fertile new source of imagery: his studio. Using 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? How does the addition of the written word change a work of visual art? The prints in this gallery propose various answers to these questions, while offering us the chance to focus on what it means to give special attention to the objects we use every day.

TRACES

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

In the early 1980s, Johns began using a wide range of personal, autobiographical imagery, including references to his childhood and family, objects present in his home and studio, and quotations from artworks—his own and those of others. These provided a rich new vocabulary for his reflections on universal human experiences such as birth, death, loss, and aging.

Dense, poignant, and even surreal, 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. Many of the prints in this gallery include visual puzzles and optical illusions, reminding us that meaning in art is unstable, and what we see depends on where we stand.