



Flag 1954–55 (dated on reverse 1954)
 Encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted
 on plywood, three panels, overall 42 ¼ x
 60 ¾" (107.3 x 153.8 cm)
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
 Gift of Philip Johnson in honor of Alfred H.
 Barr, Jr., 1973

Flag (1954–55) In late 1954 Jasper Johns destroyed virtually all of his previous work. He was twenty-four years old and had been living in New York since his discharge from the United States Army in May 1953. It was time, he remembers, “to stop *becoming* and to *be* an artist. . . . I had a wish to determine what I was. . . . what I wanted to do was find out what I did that other people didn’t, what I was that other people weren’t.” The impetus for the picture that launched his career came from a source that was uniquely his: “One night I dreamed that I painted a large American flag, and the next morning I got up and I went out and bought the materials to begin it.”

Flag was one of several paintings that delivered a still-memorable jolt to the art world during Johns’s first solo exhibition, in New York in early 1958 at Leo Castelli’s new gallery. Of all the puzzling pictures, *Flag*’s cool, painterly appropriation of the Stars and Stripes attracted particular scrutiny. It was, wrote Robert Rosenblum, “easily described as an accurate painted replica of the American flag, but . . . as hard to explain in its unsettling power as the reasonable illogicalities of a Duchamp readymade. Is it blasphemous or respectful, simple-minded or recondite?”



For Johns this icon of American identity was neutral, without polemic, whether political or aesthetic. Explaining his tactics, he said, "Using the design of the American flag took care of a great deal for me because I didn't have to design it. . . . That gave me room to work on other levels." So blandly familiar that our senses register it mechanically, it was the perfect subject for Johns's first full-fledged experiment in the relations between thought and sight. Putting things people had an everyday relationship with into the context of painting could, he believed, prompt a revitalized visual experience. *Flag* not only accomplished that mission, but it prompted critics to designate Johns, along with Robert Rauschenberg, an initiator of Pop art.

In displacing the American flag from life to art, Johns gave equal weight to subject and process. "The painting of a flag is always about a flag," he said, "but it is no more about a flag than it is about a brushstroke, or about a color or about the physicality of paint." In this instance, the slow-drying, dissolving qualities of oil paint drove Johns to encaustic, a medium that would become part of his signature style. Cooling quickly, the hot wax performed the yeoman task of collaging bits of newspaper to the canvas while leaving a cumulative record of its passage in a tactile, optically seductive film over the painting's otherwise dead-on stare. In another move to maneuver the flag from quotidian appurtenance to high art, Johns almost imperceptibly altered the wholeness of the image. To emphasize the painting as a three-dimensional object and stress the persistency of its flat surface pattern, the artist precisely constructed the support from three conjoined panels keyed to its model's compositional

divisions—one for the stars and one for the stripes at the top, and a single horizontal for the stripes of the lower half of the picture. As for the stars against their blue field, Johns did all he could to neutralize their figure/ground effect, setting each star shape *in*, not *on*, the blue field. In brief, this is how the most well-known abstraction in the world was converted to representation.

Flag's equivocal status as representation has often been related to René Magritte's famously provocative 1929 painting of a pipe with *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe) written beneath it (fig. 1), a work Johns had seen in several versions at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in 1954. Magritte's painting points to the boundary between reality and illusion, while Johns's collapses their difference. Commenting on his own image, Magritte pointed out that it has no perceptible material thickness; Johns's *Flag* is three-dimensional, both object and emblem, picture and subject. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when most critics were still trying to distinguish the means from the meaning in Johns's images, artist Donald Judd noticed the accommodating character of paintings like *Flag* in a "curious polarity and alliance of the materiality of objects and what is usually classed as the more essential qualities of paint and color. . . . 'Congruency' is a relevant description." At about the same

time, Rosenblum switched from worrying himself with category questions to a delighted endorsement of the work, which, he said, "assaults and enlivens the mind and the eye with the exhilaration of discovery." That excitement of mind and eye was what Leo Steinberg meant in this summation of his brilliant 1962 analysis of Johns's works: "Seeing them becomes thinking."

Target with Four

Faces (1955) Once *Flag* was made, Johns followed its generative logic with targets—"things," as he famously said, "the mind already knows." Like their predecessor, the target paintings appropriate an instantly recognizable, already-made object—a nonabstract abstraction whose essential structure is flatness. Their differences in connotation and design are, however, considerable. The business of both flag and target is to focus attention, but the action of one is symbolic and tied to a specific culture, whereas that of the other is utilitarian and ubiquitously available. Without Johnsian interference, the flag instructs the mind to observe it ceremonially, while the target invites a stare of single, fixed intensity. However, once Johns had artfully compiled layers of newspaper and encaustic on their surfaces, they were delivered into the specialized zone of art, where both flag and target demand another sort of ritualized looking.

Under reprogrammed scrutiny, the shift from the all-over linear patterning of *Flag* to the target paintings' hierarchical



Target with Four Faces 1955
Encaustic on newspaper and cloth over
canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster
faces in wood box with hinged front,

overall, with box open, 33 ⁵/₈ x 26 x 3"
(85.3 x 66 x 7.6 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull, 1958