Jasper Johns lithographs
An exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York

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Johns, Jasper, 1930-

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JASPER JOHNS LITHOGRAPHS
AN EXHIBITION ORGANIZED BY THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK
"The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by making the spectator's new awareness. In retrospect, his first prints were crucial to this quest: and when he drew his first lithographs in 1964, he began the exploration anew.

He again chose two-dimensional, simply patterned, and well-remembered objects: numbers, targets, and flags. As in his paintings and drawings, in his lithographic crayon delineation that is self-sustaining. A proof of the crayon drawing for this print in white ink on black paper (a method that eventually offered variations for other prints) indicates the beginning of a tendency to depart from the combination of the total surface, the levels of encaustic and newsprint of Johns's black lithographic crayon that it totally cancels out our visual memory.

Johns's first lithograph was a case of numbers above a name (Plate 1 in the catalogue of his art). Although this print was not published until 1963, it precedes the far more complex and larger image of the superimposed numbers in Target (cat. 4). The sequential development of the digits, built from line alone, catches the eye in a waltz trap. The sameness of the curved lines further confuses the mind so that the cognitive game of counting the numbers is fraught with doubts. The element of time is also introduced here—time that progresses or regresses as the numbers grow larger or smaller. The emotive content of Johns's themes becomes more important to them than their objects themselves. The 1961 Coal Tangler (cat. 2) is another familiar object in Johns's art, and it is shot to the cover of this checklist, a special need. The cover of this checklist is a special need. The cover of this checklist is a special need.

Pinion, Hatteras (cat. 17), Skin with O'Hara Poem (cat. 21), and Hand (cat. 18) were begun in 1963. Skin again demonstrates an interest in modeling the surface of the object it is printed on. Pinion has a subtle, subdued aspect, with a poem printed on the lower part of it. Pinion is a composition rescued and given life with a photographed portion of his painting Edwardsville, Passage (cat. 42). On the other hand, this was a reconstruction that placed in proportion many of the classical elements of printmaking. The levels of illusion in this composition, the reproduction of the composition of a color painting, the flatness of the crayon lines, the fact that it is an illusion, are all inherent in the intention to recall the eye to the flatness of the real image. Pinion, Hatteras (cat. 17), Skin with O'Hara Poem (cat. 21), and Hand (cat. 18) were begun in 1963. Skin again demonstrates an interest in modeling the surface of the object it is printed on. Pinion has a subtle, subdued aspect, with a poem printed on the lower part of it. Pinion is a composition rescued and given life with a photographed portion of his painting Edwardsville, Passage (cat. 42). On the other hand, this was a reconstruction that placed in proportion many of the classical elements of printmaking. The levels of illusion in this composition, the reproduction of the composition of a color painting, the flatness of the crayon lines, the fact that it is an illusion, are all inherent in the intention to recall the eye to the flatness of the real image. Pinion, Hatteras (cat. 17), Skin with O'Hara Poem (cat. 21), and Hand (cat. 18) were begun in 1963. Skin again demonstrates an interest in modeling the surface of the object it is printed on. Pinion has a subtle, subdued aspect, with a poem printed on the lower part of it. Pinion is a composition rescued and given life with a photographed portion of his painting Edwardsville, Passage (cat. 42). On the other hand, this was a reconstruction that placed in proportion many of the classical elements of printmaking. The levels of illusion in this composition, the reproduction of the composition of a color painting, the flatness of the crayon lines, the fact that it is an illusion, are all inherent in the intention to recall the eye to the flatness of the real image.
Johns has replaced them with a white silhouette. His sketchbook note that "the watchman falls 'into' the trap of looking," and "leaves his job and takes away no information" certainly may serve as a warning to one who studies this work. Between the execution of Passage and Watchman, Johns worked on his largest stone up to that time, Voice (cat. 46). It has photographed elements derived from the painted composition of the same title—a spoon and fork on a wire—but the component that overpowers the eye is the large, fluid spume that covers the entire area. It is a tour-de-force of lithographic technique, using an elusive wash to evoke the abstract concepts of breath, sound, saliva, throat, voice. Johns had had some bitter experiences with this technique. In 1962 he had attempted a sequential table of letters, Alphabets (cat. 15), but the stone would not retain the image. Recent Still Life (cat. 33), a poster for an exhibition at the Rhode Island School of Design, had a wash background, and the first stone cracked before the edition was printed.

Two other compositions with light bulbs, of 1966 and 1970, again make use of wash. Both are reminiscences of Johns's sculptures, and the 1966 print was even proofed in a bronze ink. The soft, carefully balanced fluidity of the later print is pinned down by a rubber-stamp insert of the statement about watts and volts commonly printed on light bulbs. The overall balance of wash, particularly where it is used to describe form, is most beautifully apparent in the Two Maps (cat. 36 and 38) lithographs. In these prints, the puddling of the liquid as it defines the States of the Union, especially in the upper map, is ingeniously controlled. Proofs for the Maps show the care Johns exercised in manipulating his brush. A discarded crayon-drawn stone that might have overprinted the maps was a superflu-
JASPER JOHNS began his printmaking career at Universal Limited Art Editions. This workshop was begun in the Long Island home of the artist Maurice Grossman and his wife Tatyana. Under the latter’s direction, Universal had published prints by Fritz Glarner, Grace Hartigan, and Larry Rivers before Johns was invited there in 1960. Mrs. Grossman had admired his printmaking in the exhibition “Sixteen Americans” at the Museum of Modern Art and invited him to visit the workshop. During his visit, it was decided to leave some small stones with him to work on at his studio. He eventually saw the potential for the portfolio of 0-9. The subject of alphabets holds the position of a favorite child in Johns’s artistic vocabulary. The 729 different formal arrangements (the number of rectangles in the table) suggest infinite possibilities for interpretations. Numbers, on the other hand, have intrinsic implications (one is a philosophical subject in itself). One of the most interesting aspects of the large-scale Lithographs (cat. 48) of 1968, much larger than any of Johns’s previous or subsequent prints, is the linear movement of the pattern. The subject of numbers has intrinsic implications (one is a philosophical subject in itself). This aspect of numbers is exploited in the large-scale Numerals (cat. 66) of 1968–69, monuments in print to our passive acceptance of symbols.

The measured changes in position are veiled by the embroidering brushwork he carries over each letter form. In the unpublished 1962 version of Alphabets, this is accomplished by black ink alone. The stencil-patterned letters drift in and out of focus as if printed on a curtain blown by the wind, and yet the tautness of the unvarying measured rectangles holds the surface flat and unyielding. Gray Alphabets (cat. 66) of 1968, much larger than any of Johns’s previous or subsequent prints, is printed in four shades of gray. By increasing the size of the tables, the linear movement of the pattern becomes more visible. Much of the subtlety now lies in the muted grays.

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In lithography, it is necessary to roll ink onto the stone many times for one print, and to achieve the effect he sought, several colors on the same ink roller had to be carefully transferred to the stone. After considerable technical experimentation, Color Numerals came into being. A few of the proofs of Color Numerals show the metamorphosis of these signs into agents for a systematic transformation of our color sense. Additions in white, first tried out in white paint on color proofs, provide each image with stabilizing elements. In Figure 7 (cat. 64), the artist's hand laid on the stone in a sort of benediction reminds the viewer that there is only surface here.

Since 1960, 130 of Johns's prints have been published; 91 of these have been lithographs. Although this would not be considered a prodigious production for a ten-year period, it has been an exceptionally influential one. In the field of print connoisseurship, Johns's have been among the first lithographs by an American to have achieved considerable international renown. His was certainly the most prophetic work during the early period of the revival of lithography in America. Now that we can see in trial, experimental, work, and artist's proofs the concentrated devotion he has given to the medium, we no longer wonder at the pivotal role that Jasper Johns has played in contemporary American printmaking. —Riva Castleman
LITHOGRAPHY (WRITING ON STONE)

Lithography is based on the mutual solubility of grease and water. The image may be drawn with a grease-based crayon, pencil, or a resist developed over a varnished limestone, zinc, or specially treated aluminum plates, or they may be printed from a stone or plate by drawing on a special paper. In all cases, the stone or plate will retain the image unless its surface structure has been sufficiently neutralized with gum and acid so that it will accept ink only where the image has been drawn. (Areas that must remain uninked are kept wet to prevent natural inclination of the stone or plate to accept grease.) After the stone or plate has been dampened and ink rolled onto it, damp or dry (waterless) etching ink is run through a flat-bed press under considerable pressure. Normally, one stone or plate will print only one edition; the process is repeated with additional stones or plates, and the reproductive image is repeated. The first print is the proof plate (registration). As an artist changes, embellishes, or simply continues to build his composition on the stone or plate, the printer will make proofs, experimental prints, and/or comprehensive impressions of the stone or plate, and these should be noted. These are the first step in the progress of printing each successive color.

An edition is the total number of prints authorized by the artist and publisher; each print is usually designated by a number in the total edition, e.g., 1/12 indicates the first print among twelve. In most cases, the edition is limited by the ability of the stone or plate to hold the added color. For any number of impressions, a cancellation proof may be printed to record this fact.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Unless otherwise noted, the published lithographs are gifts to The Museum of Modern Art from Mrs. Armand P. Bartos or from The Celeste and Armand Bartos Foundation. With the exception of Alphabets (cat. 15), all works are impressions of published stone proofs for published prints. All work from Universal Limited Art Editions is provided from the blind stamp "ULAE." All work from Gemini G.E.L. (cat. 43) carries the stamp "U.L.A.E." Dimensions given are of the printed image excluding margin. Numbers in parentheses indicate the number within the total edition. * denotes an artist's illustration.

8. Figure 0 from the series Numbers (cat. 60). Lithograph, printed in color, 23 3/16 X 29 13/16" (proof, artist's proof 1/2). Collection the artist, New York.
9. Figure 0 from the series Numbers (cat. 60). Lithograph, printed in color, 23 3/16 X 29 13/16" (trial proof 1/3). Collection Barbara Rose, Madison, Wisconsin.
10. Figure 0 from the series Numbers (cat. 60). Lithograph, printed in color, 23 3/16 X 29 13/16" (29/70). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
20. Figure from the series Numbers (cat. 60). Lithograph, printed in gray, 31 5/8 X 23 1/8" (1/20). Collection the artist, New York.