

Media release

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Jasper Johns—The Artist as Collector From Cezanne to de Kooning

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Curator: Anita Haldemann

Jasper Johns (b. 1930) ranks among the preeminent American artists of the twentieth century. In the 1950s, he revolutionized painting with his pictures of the American flag and of targets, helping pave the way for Pop Art. Far less well known is the fact that Johns is also a dedicated collector, primarily of drawings. The Kunstmuseum Basel now presents an exclusive exhibition that offers the first-ever in-depth insight into this unique artist's collection.

Jasper Johns's collection demonstrates his passion for the medium of drawing in all its manifold facets. Combining an artist's curiosity with a connoisseur's keen eye, Johns over the decades acquired outstanding and distinctive drawings. Among them is an anonymous American young boy's self-portrait from the mid-twentieth century that shares an unexpected kinship with a work in the same genre by Paul Cezanne, one of the most influential French artists of the late nineteenth century. Renderings of hands appear in works created centuries apart by artists such as Bartolomeo Passarotti, Henry Fuseli, Käthe Kollwitz, and Marcel Duchamp.

The collection reflects Johns's perspective on art history and his intuitive recognition of peculiar artistic affinities across the ages. One focus is on French drawings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; another, on American positions of the second half of the twentieth century. Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso, and Willem de Kooning are among the artists whose oeuvres are represented by especially sizable sets in Johns's holdings.

Meanwhile, the collection also stands as a portrait of the social fabric into which Johns's long life and creative career have been woven. Most of the works entered his possession as gifts—sometimes in exchange for his own creations—from artist friends: above all, from Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham, but also from artists of

an older generation such as Louise Nevelson, Barnett Newman, and Franz Kline. These works bear witness to personal encounters, alliances, mutual appreciation, and moments in family life such as birthdays or Christmas parties, as attested by the dedications on many of them.

Focus on the human body

The exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Basel presents a focused selection of 103 drawings by 47 artists from Johns's collection. Its point of departure is the subject of the human body, which figures prominently in the majority of the works; a particular emphasis is on portraiture. Many of them also direct our attention to the creative process. Zooming out, the display gathers a rich variety of modes of graphical expression from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries, including collages, sketches, seemingly incidental doodles, elaborate studies, painterly compositions, and even musical notations.

The Kunstmuseum Basel owes the honor of presenting this exhibition to its longstanding and close relationship with the artist. Curators like Carlo Huber, the museum's directors Franz Meyer and Christian Geelhaar, and Dieter Koeplin as head of the Kupferstichkabinett (Department of Prints and Drawings) built personal rapports with Johns beginning in 1968, assembling an impressive collection of his works. The museum's current director, Josef Helfenstein, has likewise maintained a friendship with the artist that dates back to his years working in the U.S.

Johns, for his part, strengthened this relationship of mutual trust with collaborative projects and extraordinarily generous gifts; in particular, he gave the museum works in honor of his close friends Huber and Geelhaar, both of whom died before their time. This exhibition, too, is a special privilege, for which we cannot thank Jasper Johns enough.

On occasion of the exhibition, we also dedicate an entire gallery at our Neubau venue to Johns's works in the Kunstmuseum Basel's collection. The presentation combines his most important paintings such as *Flag above White with Collage* (1955) with prints from the Kupferstichkabinett's extensive holdings of 224 works on paper.

Biographical sketch

Jasper Johns (b. Augusta, Georgia, 1930) is a key figure in American modernist art. Sustained by a community of likeminded artists such as the painter Robert Rauschenberg, the musician and composer John Cage, and the choreographer Merce

Cunningham, he began in the 1950s to push the boundaries of painting in unprecedented ways. For instance, he chose commonplace motifs such as the American flag, which, when painted on canvas, is a picture first and foremost yet also functions as a national ensign. Paintings of targets, numbers, letters, and maps as well as sculptures representing beer cans achieve a similar effect. Johns's breakthrough came in 1958, when MoMA first acquired his work for their collection. He rose to international fame in 1964 with shows at the Venice Biennale and as part of Documenta III in Kassel.

The interest in the painterly process, as in the use of fast-drying encaustic or fabric or paper fragments, is a defining aspect of his art. Since the early 1960s, he has also dedicated a great deal of creative energy to printmaking. His passion for experimentation is coupled with a solid foundation in European art history, as references to Paul Cezanne, the Isenheim Altarpiece in Colmar, or Hans Holbein suggest.

Jasper Johns now lives and works in Sharon, Connecticut.

Publication

A richly illustrated publication accompanying the exhibition, with contributions by Anita Haldemann, Josef Helfenstein, and Fabienne Ruppen, has been published by Hirmer Verlag.

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Imagery and information on the exhibition

www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/media

Media contact

Karen N. Gerig, tel. +41 61 206 62 80, karen.gerig@bs.ch