

Jasper Johns' work sits in the middle ground between Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Dada, and Pop Art, a rare feat as those movements typically don't mix. He showed up in the 1950s New York art scene and got famous for taking everyday objects—like flags, targets, and numbers—and turning them into these complicated, conceptual, and subversive paintings that offer decipherability. While artists like Jackson Pollock were more about dramatic, emotional splatters, Johns was the opposite: cool, detached, and totally into repetition and odd materials. A lot of people, such as traditionalists, thought of his work as a joke; "Is this even art?" as it didn't fit their idea of what "real" art should be. But then later, Pop Artists like Warhol loved him for it, because he was basically "trolling" the art world before trolling was a thing.

Johns was also gay at a time when homosexuality was highly controversial, and you can see hints of that in his work. Pieces like *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) have these hidden compartments with body parts inside, which feels like a metaphor for staying in the closet. But Johns has never actually come out or talked about it publicly, and today at the age of 94, remains firmly in the closet. so the speculation continues. Even his most famous work, *Flag* (1954–55), is weirdly neutral—it's just the American flag, but painted in this messy, layered way that makes you wonder if it's patriotic or critical or just trolling again. That ambiguity angered some, particularly during McCarthyism when everyone wanted art to pick a side. But that's what makes Johns interesting—he refused to explain himself, and his art is still confusing people (me) decades later.

"Flag" is a deceptively simple painting of the American flag, rendered in encaustic wax over collaged newspaper. At the time, this was radical. The U.S. was deeply engulfed in McCarthyism, where symbols like the flag were weaponized to enforce patriotism. By painting it with such clinical detachment—neither glorifying nor burning it—Johns forced viewers to confront their own assumptions. Neither a celebration nor critique; the layers of wax, with their hidden text and fragile surface, suggested something unstable beneath the flag's idealized image.

In the 1960s as the Vietnam War escalated and Civil Rights activists challenged America to live up to its ideals, the flag became a battleground. Protesters burned it; politicians waved it. Johns' *Flag*, though made years earlier, some saw the piece as prophetic. Its neutrality became its power: by refusing to take a side, it highlighted how symbols are hollow until we fill them with meaning. The newspaper scraps beneath the surface—hinting at forgotten headlines—added to this, reminding viewers that national identity is built on fleeting, even contradictory moments.

Formally, the painting bridges Johns' love of everyday objects (what is a flag but a piece of cloth?) and his obsession with process. The encaustic technique—melted wax mixed with pigment—gave the flag a tactile, almost ghostly presence. As observed by patrons up close, you see the brushstrokes; step back, and it's just "the flag." This duality was classic Johns: the familiar made strange, the political made personal. Unlike the bold statements of Abstract Expressionists or the later irony of Pop Art, *Flag* sits in the uncomfortable middle. As artist Lana Del Ray noted when speaking of the work,; "It doesn't shout; it whispers, and that's why it still resonates today."