

Artist: Jasper Johns  
Title: Map  
Date: 1961

Jasper Johns' *Map* is a modern American piece of art. Painted and premiered in NYC in 1961, it is an abstract representation of a map of the 50 states of America. Born in Georgia in 1930, Johns moved to New York City in 1949 to study at Parsons School of Design for a year. He was stationed in Japan from 1952-53 serving in the Korean War. *Map* was painted about 8 years after Johns was discharged from the US Army. Within those 8 years, he completed his most famous works. In 1958, gallery owner Leo Castelli discovered Johns while visiting Johns' boyfriend and fellow American painter Robert Rauschenberg's studio. Castelli gave him his first solo show at which Alfred Barr, founding director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, purchased four works from his exhibition and commissioned his work thereafter. Johns' field is mostly painting and printmaking. However, he does a lot of sculptural casts and objects as well, some of which are quite important works. His various Flags, Numbers, Maps and Stenciled Words works are considered hallmarks of the movements of Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Dada, and Pop Art. *Map* is the most cohesive and celebrated work of Johns' 1960s career, relating to the themes of flags, maps, targets, stenciled words and numbers he honed at the time.

*Map*'s medium is painting. Johns employed encaustic, oil and collage on canvas. Encaustic painting involves using heated beeswax to which colored pigments are added. He used this technique to create many clumps or what appears as lumps on the painting, which can be interpreted both in a literal and abstract sense. The use of layering and added texture may have been used to literally portray the mountains and elevated land

throughout the country to give the painting a three-dimensional feel (the impression I received upon viewing). On the other hand, because of the technical geographic inaccuracy of some of these raised parts, it may have simply been used with a less concrete and more free flowing, flippant, and abstract motive in mind. Thus, the map displays both an accurate and informative picture of America's landscape and an artist's chaotic and abstract rendering of the banal, flat and familiar map of the United States. The genre of this painting is Abstract, or Abstract Expressionism, but he is really moving beyond Abstract precisely by painting an iconic image, which is why he is a transitional figure from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art. Though based (loosely or not depending on the spectator) on the everyday map of America, this subject can be viewed merely as a cookie-cutter onto which Johns expresses his own abstract and energetic interpretation with his unique form of cartography.

The lines in *Map* are very expressive, and the boundaries between states are loosely marked. He uses a stamp-like type to print each state's name on its territory, though some names are on more than one state, e.g. Colorado, which is repeated in several locations. The expressivity of the lines and overall brushwork are contradicted by the use of stamp-like print. This contradiction forms the heart of the Neo-Dada critique against Abstract Expressionism; by the 1960s, Abstract Expressionism was so widespread and successful on the market that it was no more expressive than using a stamp according to Neo-Dadaists.

Unlike a real U.S. map, which often shows the border of Canada as a separate entity and Mexico as well as larger portions of the Atlantic & Pacific Oceans, Johns' shows strictly one mass of 48 states with no distinct separation of Canada. Though

labeling “Pacific Ocean” with a vertical splash of blue in the left crevice, the 48 states, being so squeezed together with blurred and interweaving borders, offer a congested, claustrophobic and in-your-face representation of the U.S.A. The painting is rectangular in shape and flat, though with a thick texture at points, giving a hint of a three-dimensional feel. The composition is obviously intentionally unbalanced, meant to create an unstable, vibrant, energetic and exploding sensibility. The color palette is slightly limited; Johns sticks to the strong vivacious bright colors of red, light and dark blue, orange, and yellow. In only a couple small areas does he use black, green and white. Johns seems uninterested in chiaroscuro and its effects of light; he prefers the spectator to be drawn to the entire painting as a whole, rather than isolating certain more important areas using shading. His brushwork is very visible; they are rapid, thick, chaotic, energetic, and mostly the same throughout the entire piece, except for when painting narrow straight lines to illustrate state borders. To me, *Map* is both representational and abstract; it represents a map of the United States and does illustrate the country’s general shape and even labels most states, but it is overall an abstract interpretation of said map without catering to accuracy of subject. The subject of *Map* however is not abstract; it is extremely concrete and tangible, a universally familiar image that is copied everywhere and a staple of any book on the U.S.A. Thus, it is historically significant. The majority of Johns’ work is visibly imbued with American icons and culture considering his time and personal absorption in the US Army. At the time, the modern art community, searching for new ideas to succeed the pure emotionality of the Abstract Expressionists applauded Johns’ work. Paintings solely of such things as flags and numbers were a new experience for gallery goers.

His paintings of targets and maps invited mixed reviews of critics however. The simplicity and familiarity of the subject matter attracted viewer interest but also upset critics who felt his work was vacuous and lacked substance. Johns' work is now hailed as a benchmark in American art history and Abstract Expressionism. The function of Johns' *Map* was simply as a painting to view, or in his own words, "There may or may not be an idea, and the meaning may just be that the painting exists." The Museum of Modern Art commissioned his work after purchasing three pieces by him at his first ever exhibition. This move was beneficial to both parties, as it put Johns' work in the proper niche of forward-moving art at a renowned museum, and the MOMA's payoff was the immediate success of Johns' paintings and the relevance of John's work to the modern art world they were striving to develop. *Map* is currently fittingly located at MOMA along with a handful of his other significant and iconic paintings.

